

Africa Fashion Week London 2011-2020: Exploring African Cultural Identities and the Transnational Practices of Nigerian Fashion

Tolulope Olabisi Omoyele

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory work investigates the construction and representation of African cultural identities through the dress and design practices of Nigerian fashion designers at African Fashion Week London (AFWL) 2011-2020.

AFWL was established in 2011 by Olori Aderonke Ademiluyi Ogunwusi, a Yoruba, Nigerian-British entrepreneur. AFWL's emergence counteracts the mainstream media stereotypes and narratives of African fashion cultures and misunderstandings of African cultural identities. This fashion event, which annually attracts Black African fashion designers, models, and creative workers to showcase the diversity of African fashion cultures, provides insights into how fashion serves as a means of challenging stereotypes and asserting cultural identity and aesthetic value in the global creative and cultural marketplace.

The study explores AFWL as one of the major sites for the cultural production and circulation of alternative mediated small narratives and knowledge of African fashions. It also argues that transnational and diasporic African fashion media has offered new opportunities for Nigerian fashion practitioners to challenge and shape industry practices by mediating representations, meanings, and cultural values rooted in African cultural heritage. The study examines how Nigerian diaspora fashion designers are promoting and facilitating cultural exchange, capacity building and the preservation of Nigerian fashion identities in a global context.

My research takes an interpretive, inductive approach of semi-structured informal interviews and incorporates analysis of archival materials/documents and participant observations at the fashion event setting. This thesis aims to contribute to the body of knowledge on transnational fashion practices, networks, and media and sets out how Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners construct and assert contemporary African cultural identities.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is the report of my research and contained as its main content work that has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Signature: Tolulope Omoyele

Date: 30th June 2023

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General Introduction

Aims and Objectives

This doctoral research examines Africa Fashion Week London (AFWL), established by fashion practitioners in the city's African diaspora, and its significance as a commercial and creative arena for the construction and representation of transnational fashion identities. Throughout this research, I aim to interrogate how fashion practitioners in the Nigerian diaspora, who are dislocated from mainstream fashion (Lewis, 2003), negotiate, affirm, and assert cultural identities, images, subjectivities, and collective belongings at AFWL through their transnational dress and design fashion practices. AFWL is named after the homeland – Africa – and the host city – London – to promote fashion designers from Africa to Western mass markets. This thesis reveals how discourses, representations, and practices emerging from the new African (Nigerian) diaspora and African popular cultures have defined Africa Fashion Week London (AFWL) as a counter-cultural transnational formation.

This research also seeks to interrogate the emergence and significance of AFWL in the identity constructions, negotiations, and representations of British-Nigerian fashion practitioners. This reveals their specific and heretofore unidentified role as strategic agents involved in contributing both to their host and their home country economies. The first objective of this research was to examine how African fashion design practitioners, entrepreneurs, and creative workers were mobilising and developing forms of collective identity through their presentations, activities, and interactions at AFWL. The second objective was to discover whether the African-centric event had any significant bearing on practitioners' sense of belonging and incorporation into the global fashion system. The third and final objective was to explore how digital communication technologies allowed African fashion design practitioners to affirm the fashionableness of 'previously excluded or overlooked subject positions, practices and bodies into the visual narratives and representations of fashion media' (Titton, 2015, p. 230).

Although AFWL has become a primary site for bringing together and enhancing the visibility of diverse fashion design practitioners, consumers, institutions, organisations, and people, my

focus in this thesis is on a specific subset within the broader African diaspora: Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners, who are bridging the homeland with the host.

Research Questions:

How and why did AFWL emerge? What are the socio-economic and political implications of AFWL's intervention into the representations and meanings of African fashion, design, and identity and who are its main players?

How are British-Nigerian fashion producers challenging the representations of Africa and African fashion identities through engagement with both home and host country? What role does digital media play in this?

How do Nigerian fashion design practitioners perceive and understand their dress and design practices?

How are fashion designers in the Nigerian diaspora producing, engaging, and contributing to homeland development?

How and why do British-Nigerian fashion designers engage and interact with mainstream hegemonic discourses of African identities and Nigerian fashions through their dress and design practices? Do they resist, conform, reproduce?

Objectives:

Critically interrogate the mission, vision, and strategies employed by the AFWL's British-Nigerian organisers to communicate African fashions.

Understand developments in African fashion and the significant role played by the event's founder, as well as their social and cultural capital in the communication of African fashion.

Interrogate the positioning of Nigerian fashion practitioners as tastemakers and cultural intermediaries of African fashions at AFWL.

Interview British-Nigerian designers and vendors to understand their motives, desires, agency, tastes, production practices, and how they negotiate identities through their

homeland connections/networks. Discover how the Nigerian transnational fashion value chain is produced.

Observe interactions, behaviours, and activities at the AFWL event setting to interrogate how ethnic and national boundaries, as well as class hierarchies, are produced and reproduced.

Analyse media coverage of AFWL and its promotional campaigns to understand the African fashion value chain, the symbolic production of meanings surrounding the Black body, femininities and masculinities, gender roles, and Nigerianness.

This qualitative research employed ethnographic methods to collect data, such as participant observation, informal and formal interviews, and visual and textual analysis of media and promotional materials. As Draper (2004, p. 642) writes, ‘Qualitative research can thus be broadly described as interpretive and naturalistic, in that it seeks to understand and explain beliefs and behaviours within the context that they occur’. The natural context in this study is the AFWL event venue itself, at Freemasons’ Hall, London, where fashion professionals and consumers from diverse racial, ethnic, national, and socio-economic backgrounds converge to produce African fashion. During both the 2018 and 2019 events, I employed participant observation to study participants, their behaviours, their dress and design practices, and social relations in the natural setting. By observing and interrogating these activities and practices *in situ*, I identified the event’s key players and how they constructed and negotiated African fashion, Africanness and cultural identities through narratives of empowerment, cultural pride, and entrepreneurship. I also conducted informal interviews with designers, models, the event’s PR director, exhibitors, and visiting consumers. Within the wider cultural context of Fashion Week, the observation of such micro-level interactions and routine activities of African diaspora fashion producers (whether designers, models, photographers, and other cultural intermediaries) is limited; thus, this study of AFWL provides new insights into the construction and formation of African fashion and Africanness.

Reasons for Research into Nigerian Diaspora Fashion Practitioners

This section explores my interest in Nigerian fashion practitioners within the African diaspora, and the choice to research this area through the Africa Fashion Week (AFW) concept. AFW is a key influence in African diaspora fashion cultures and economy, and the digital media technologies involved in its production heavily inform these meaningful narratives, images, and symbols of African fashion across national and cultural boundaries. Many of my professional and personal experiences have prompted me to consider research into Fashion Week from the perspective of these Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners – whether they are event organisers, designers, models, buyers, or photographers – who produce meaningful representations of Africa, African fashion, and Africanness in their work.

First, the decision to examine the empirical realities of Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners at AFWL is partly based on my own background as a Nigerian and Yoruba woman living away from my homeland. In 2002 I left Lagos, Nigeria for the Republic of Ireland, and later moved to the UK to study in 2015. While I have not since returned home, I remain connected to Nigeria through my interests, for example watching Nollywood movies and reading Nigerian news stories online. I have assumed that my cultural proximity to the study group offers an advantage in researching them from the privileged position of an insider. My tacit knowledge of such a shared culture proved useful throughout the data collection and analysis phases, helping me to map out the developments within the Nigerian transnational fashion economy in the UK. Therefore, both my diaspora background provided promising points of entry into this study.

Second, the focus of this study on Nigerian fashion practitioners is partly in response to the increasingly influential role of Nigerian global designers and brands in African fashion. Among these are Duro Oluwo, Frank Osodi, Kosibah by Yemi Osukoya, Adebayo Jones, Ade Bakare, Tiffany Amber, Jewel by Lisa, and Funlayo Deri, all of whom are recognised in international media as pioneers of African – specifically Nigerian – fashion. For example, in 2005, the Nigeria-based designer Lisa Folawiyo became one of the first African fashion designers to use African-print fabric in her collections, combining these with elegant tailoring and beaded embellishment (Gott *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, the British-Nigerian couture designer Ade Bakare, who began referencing Africa in his design in 2002, is now known for his use of ‘historic Yoruba textiles and textile design techniques to complement gowns and dresses, less African in style than Western’ (Borgatti, 2015:99). These fashion designers are producing their knowledge of African cultural heritage and exporting and circulating them across

contemporary, global mass-consumer markets. While Nigeria has typically been well known for its other cultural exports in the creative industries – Nollywood, Afrobeat, art, and literature – local and regional events such as the Nigeria Fashion Week, Arise Fashion Week Lagos, and Lagos Fashion Week (formerly Lagos Style and Design Week) are now elevating the country’s profile in the global fashion markets.

Finally, Nigeria is characterised by its enormous population in sub-Saharan Africa. Edward Ademolu estimates that one out of every seven Black people on the earth is Nigerian (2018). In the UK’s African migrant community, the Nigerian diaspora is well established as the largest African ethnic minority group (Oxford Business Group, 2013; Ojo, 2013; International Organisation for Migration, 2014; Alakija, 2016; Ademolu 2018; Oboh, 2018). The formation of the contemporary Nigerian diaspora can be traced to the creation of Nigeria in 1914 by the British colonial government. Scholars often describe Nigerian diaspora formation as characterised by three waves of migration: 1) colonial migration, which saw Nigerians travel to the UK as students; 2) the post-colonial wave, beginning with Nigeria’s independence in 1960, which saw the movement of more Nigerians to the UK to study and work; 3) the migration wave of the 1980s and 1990s, when many Nigerians were forced to leave for economic and political reasons, such as military dictatorship and the Nigeria–Biafra civil war. More recently, Nigerians have continued to emigrate to the UK and other parts of the world as highly skilled workers and economic migrants in pursuit of economic and social security. In the new host societies, they have established private businesses and hometown community associations to initiate non-profit projects that collectively contribute to the development of state regions in Nigeria. Furthermore, the presence and contribution of the Nigerian diaspora to both host and home economies have led the Nigerian government to recognise its diaspora as an important instrument of its own economic development. This is reflected in the broad range of government policies and initiatives set up to attract those across the Nigerian diaspora for national economic development (Lampert, 2010). This brief narrative is important in terms of understanding how Nigerian fashion practitioners at AFWL understand and perceive their dress and design practices as contributing to the development of the transnational Nigerian fashion economy, providing links between the UK and Nigerian markets.

Africa's Fashion Industry: Consumption Versus Production

Since 2005, there has been a theme of 'Africa Rising' – a term that connotes the recognition of Africa's growing economies as emerging markets for capitalist expansion (See Martins, 2008). Characterised by a youthful population and a growing middle class with disposable income, Africa is regarded as the next frontier for foreign companies in search of new consumer markets. This discourse around Africa Rising is highly significant, projecting as it does the economic and social potentialities of a continent historically associated with poverty, conflict, corruption, and underdevelopment. In his book titled *Africa Rising*, marketing professor Vijay Mahajan (2009) argues that Africa has long been overlooked in research in this respect because the continent is often perceived as a 'charity case', owing to a lack of knowledge about the continent and the market opportunities it presents. Thus, *Africa Rising* is an effort to rectify the devaluation of 'Africa as a consumer market to understand the market opportunity it presents in all its rich complexity and wealth' (Mahajan, 2009, p. xi). Quoting President George Walker Bush's 2008 speech on corporate investment in five African countries (Benin, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ghana, and Liberia), Mahajan (2009, p. xi) writes, 'This new era is rooted in a powerful truth; Africa's most valuable resource is not its oil, its diamond, it is the talent and creativity of its people'. While Mahajan focused on Africa's developing consumer markets from a Western business perspective, seeking to expand its market shares, my research shifts the focus from consumers in Africa (Iqani and Dosekun, 2020) to fashion producers in Africa and its diaspora.

In contrast to this, the Africa Development Bank (ADB) launched an initiative in 2015 called 'Fashionomics Africa' to foster the development of African textile, apparel, and accessories industries within the continent (ADB 2015). As the AFD explains, its objective is to stimulate regional integration, foster intra-African trade and entrepreneurship, and forge more equal societies (AFD, 2016, See Aninver InfraPPP Partners S.L, 2015). While Mahajan (2009) emphasised Africa as a rising consumer market, the ADB recognises the global importance of fashion as a cultural and creative industry that has the potential to generate and contribute to economic development, entrepreneurship, women's empowerment through self-employment, and job creation within Africa. More importantly, the ADB provides financial support, training, and mentorship to African fashion-clothing producers to help them gain access to both regional and global markets. If we consider that fashion is not merely about consumption, but also the interrelated factors of production and dissemination of cultural objects and commodities, the

ADB's Fashionomics Africa initiative provides a new means for contesting the historical discourse about Africa representing only a consumer market for Western brands. It draws attention to, and gives visibility to, African fashion producers and practitioners *within* Africa where this has historically been neglected.

In his examination of the location of African diaspora fashion in Western culture, Van Dyke Lewis (2003, p. 163) argues that it is characterised by partial situations in both African and Western cultures, a relationship that is 'insecure, encompassing opposing referential territories'. This implies that in their work, Black diaspora fashion practitioners tend to negotiate access and belonging to Africa on the one hand, and mainstream Western fashion structures on the other hand. The author further explains that 'the Diaspora uses fashion objects in social and visual (re)constructions of self' (Lewis, 2003, p. 163), as acts of reclaiming lost identities, expressing agency, self-expression, self-authorship, and rejecting mainstream fashion (p. 164). This politics of visibility is not peculiar to fashion industry practices alone, as Tulloch (2010, p. 281) points out:

[The] issue of the invisibility of Black people has long been discussed in, for example, postcolonial studies. Despite their extensive range of activities in the public gaze that has snowballed over the centuries, the issue of invisibility remains a caustic point in need of address in the twenty-first century.

In this sense, if Black diaspora fashion practitioners are in fact straddling two cultures with opposing referential territories, we might ask whether they play an important role in the development and visibility of African fashion to global markets?

The importance of focusing on the diaspora rather than on Africa alone is based upon two interrelated factors. First, global cities such as New York and London are prominent metropolises and strategic economic centres for globalising advanced producer services in a new space economy (Florida, 2015; Pain, 2017). The Nigerian diaspora communities are largely concentrated in London, where they have created little replicas of their homeland in the UK's urban spaces (Alakija, 2016). Recent scholarship (Botticello, 2009; Ojo, 2013; Alakija, 2016) has paid close attention to the contributions of these contemporary African migrants in

transforming the British cultural landscape (Aspinall and Chinouya, 2016). The second interrelated reason for focusing on the diaspora space is that, owing to their advanced infrastructural amenities and resources, global cities such as London play a crucial role in the development of globalised diasporic networks (Sassen, 2006). Indeed, London has been described as the top shopping destination for Nigeria's elites, and this association in the popular imagination has further enhanced the Nigerian consumer affinity for foreign, imported ideas and commodities. London has thus been symbolically used in the marketing and promotion of commodities in the Nigerian market. Simply put, the city's environmental and resource-heavy structure has shaped the local strategies employed by Nigerian transnational fashion producers. As a result, Nigeria-based businesses seeking internationalisation must establish links with diaspora-based businesses in the global city to tap into that market. For example, in 2008 the Nigerian publisher of *This Day* newspaper and *Arise Fashion* magazine formed the Africa Rising Festival in London and Washington DC. The events sought to promote positive images of Africa by bringing together Black artists and practitioners from across the entertainment, music, fashion, and art worlds (Martin, 2008). What this reveals is that, despite the material realities of the continent's political and economic challenges, Africa's cultural heritage – music, oral tradition, dance, design, and fashion – is vitally important for asserting a people's sense of belonging and identity in a globalised world.

While Africa has historically been excluded in research, as Mahajan (2009) argues above, Western media, NGO organisations, and academia have nevertheless contributed to recreating and perpetuating the racist, stereotypical, and limiting representations of Africa, its people, and its culture (Ademolu, 2018). However, advances in global media technologies and migration have provided new opportunities for African migrants to contest these Euro-Western preconceptions about Africa, including its negative representation in mass media. Today, Nigerian and African diaspora fashion practitioners and producers are not only using their dress and design practices to construct and negotiate their African cultural identities, but they are also contributing their own positive representations of the African continent and disseminating that knowledge to global audiences. In other words, rather than permitting the historical view of the continent as a consumer market for Western brands and commodities, these cultural creators are invested in the branding of the continent as a design and production hub, through the assertion of their indigenous aesthetics and tastes (Brooks, 2015).

The global city, in which multiple diasporas are embedded, is thus important for understanding the contemporary global economy. This is because of the transnational activities of the Nigerian diaspora fashion design practitioners, whose cross-border connections, networks, and markets link the UK and Nigerian markets together. The global city is a place where local, national, and transnational actors compete and/or collaborate to grow a local economy.

Another reason for focussing on Nigerian practitioners at AFWL is to follow the work of researcher Sanya Ojo (2013), who highlights in his examination of diaspora entrepreneurship the absence of scholarship on distinctive Black Africans (e.g., Nigerian, Ghanaian, or Sierra Leonean in the UK). The scarcity of in-depth studies on prominent Black African groups only hinders research interests and inhibits knowledge about the sensibilities of distinct African national and ethnic groups, further erasing the nuanced similarities and differences between them. Thus, rather than aggregating the African diaspora as a homogeneous group, my study specifically examines Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners at AFWL, who produce African fashion.

Finally, while research has examined Black African diaspora cultural production in music, arts, dance, and literature, as well as across diasporic sites such as the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993), my study focuses on the analysis of Nigerian diaspora fashion cultures in the geographical and cultural context of the city of London. Accordingly, this study explores how Nigerian-British fashion producers construct and articulate multiple cultural identities through their design and dress practices. The first study of its kind in scholarly research, this project offers original and insightful contributions to Nigerian diaspora transnational fashion cultures and is aimed at expanding the field of fashion and creating new directions for further research on the subject of African diaspora fashion cultures in the UK. During the past 15 years, African diaspora fashion has emerged as an important area of focus in fashion research, partly to decolonise fashion and challenge the monopolisation over knowledge of fashion by European and American cultures and economies (Lewis, 2003; Tulloch, 2015). More importantly, the emerging field of African fashion has contributed to expanding our understanding of the transnational networks facilitated by globalisation, linking diaspora and continental African fashion systems, its practitioners, its heritage, its practices, and its inter- and intra-power dynamics (Rabine, 2002; Rovine, 2009; De Greef, 2010; Jansen, 2020).

A Brief History of Africa Fashion Week London

The focus of this research is AFWL, which debuted in London in 2011 and was open to the wider public (AFWL, 2014; Jennings, 2011a, 2012; Mkandawire, 2013). Founded by Olori Aderonke Ademiluyi, a British-Nigerian fashion entrepreneur, the two-day event encompassed a catwalk show, trade exhibition, and product display, featuring fashion designers from the African diaspora and Africa. Social media platforms played a pivotal role in swiftly disseminating catwalk images and showcasing clothing collections by African and non-African designers to a global audience. A media report highlighted the significance of AFWL as a groundbreaking platform that 'showcased Africa's talent in fashion design,' underscoring its role in elevating the visibility of African diaspora fashion practitioners. This narrative of AFWL's unprecedented emergence is crucial as it signifies a collective gathering of Black African fashion practitioners navigating their positions within the transnational global fashion economy.

AFWL's scope of activities has expanded since its inaugural launch in 2011, encompassing various events, activities such as fundraising gala and competitions, and strategic partnerships aimed at shaping consumer interests. From 2012 to 2016, AFWL incorporated an annual modelling competition called 'The Face of AFWL' (FOAFWL), exclusively open to female participants. The winner of FOAFWL is granted the opportunity to model at the catwalk shows and participate in a professional photo shoot, with the resulting images utilized for promotional campaigns associated with the event (refer to Chapter Six). Moreover, AFWL has consistently sought the involvement of renowned African artists, businesswomen, and celebrities to enhance the event's credibility and media reception. Notable patrons have included the Ooni of Ife Adeyeye Enitan Ogunwusi, the custodian of Yoruba culture and the 51st King of Ife Kingdom; the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare MBE, the award-winning Nigerian musician Yemi Alade, and the Nigerian philanthropist and businesswoman Princess Fifi Ejindu (Sinem STwoPR, 2013; Oluleye, 2013); the Kenyan fashion producer and presenter Diana Opoti (Capital FM, 2014); the wife of the Nigerian Vice President, the first ladies of Ogun State, and Cross River State, Nigeria. AFWL also engages various Nigerian cultural intermediaries, such as the First Ladies of Ekiti and Kwara states, who actively promote the fashion design identities specific to their respective Yoruba regions. While these elite women themselves are not clothing producers, they hold significant influence as tastemakers, possessing both economic and cultural capital to advocate for and endorse the labourers involved in clothing and fashion production. In this capacity, they play a crucial role in highlighting the significance of fashion

and clothing enterprises in women's empowerment, fostering the preservation of Yoruba heritage, and identity, as well as contributing to the economic development of their states and the nation as a whole. In 2019, AFWL established a partnership with the Henley Business School, offering workshops and training sessions focusing on business-related aspects to African fashion designers. Furthermore, amid the Covid pandemic, the event successfully transitioned to an online format, incorporating educational workshops and seminars conducted by industry practitioners from the African diaspora and the African continent.

The diverse iterations of the AFW concept in Western fashion capitals collectively exemplify the notion of the African diaspora, characterised by dispersed ethnic and national communities that maintain a strong connection to their ancestral homeland. It is noteworthy that these AFW initiatives are predominantly led by women. Traditional theories of the African diaspora often depict men in prominent economic and political positions, while women are often portrayed in caregiving and nurturing roles. The prominence of women in leading AFW events challenges these prevailing gender dynamics within diaspora theorizations. For example, Ojo's study on Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurship overlooks the role of women in diaspora entrepreneurship activities (2013). Contrastingly, Ben Lampert's important study of Nigerian diaspora organisations in the UK (2010) addresses the role of Nigerian women's organisations. Lampert highlights two crucial points, the first being that, although women's roles as mothers and homemakers interlinks with their natural essence as caring and expressing great empathy, they 'generally appear to have little desire to transform established gender roles and relations' (Lampert, 2010, p. 96). The second point made by Lampert (2010, p. 97) is that 'women are widely seen not only to have a particular concern for the ancestral community but also a greater ability to organise and intervene effectively for its benefit'. These qualities and desires are visible at AFWL and in the design practices of Nigerian female and male designers, where they mobilise to transform the homeland through engagement in transnational networks, social ties, and economic activities, linking home with host countries. Unlike Lampert's study, which focuses on Nigerian diaspora women's non-profit associations, my study considers the role of women as economic actors within the transnational field of fashion. While the predominance of women at the event reinforces the view of fashion as a feminine concern and reflects the fact that women make up the labour force in the clothing industries, it also demonstrates how fashion production is a means by which women in the Black African diaspora 'have been able to achieve self-expression' (Wilson, 2007b, p. 395) and become 'subjects of the female gaze'

(Partington, 2007, p. 228). The emphasis here is on the fact that the fashion industry offers women opportunities for economic empowerment and by extension the redefinition of gender roles.

Rooks argues that (2015:4) ‘the significance and meaning of fashion are nowhere more visible than in how it manifests and functions at the site of the collision between identity and race in the African diaspora’. The creation of diverse AFW events by different organisers may stem from varying motivations, also reflecting the collective relationship to globalisation. However, a common inference can be made regarding the materialisation of AFW, namely, to reclaim Africa’s image, and African cultural heritage as a wellspring of artistic and creative inspiration and economic wellbeing for Africans in the diaspora. Furthermore, the activities of AFW organisers signify a belief that, with appropriate support, historical and contemporary obstacles impeding the development, visibility, growth, and sustainability of entrepreneurial African fashion and design can be overcome, thereby enriching the global fashion landscape (Africa Strictly Business, 2013). This support may encompass mentoring in business management, assistance with promotional strategies, provision of commercial platforms, and facilitation of networking opportunities for African designers in global cities. To achieve these objectives, organisers draw upon global resources and expertise from various sectors such as the arts, entertainment, film, music, publishing, and environmental domains.

However, an area that has received limited academic attention is the social construction of AFWL, particularly from the perspective of British-Nigerian designers. The rationale for this research stems from the dearth of scholarly discourse on the socio-cultural context of African fashion production and the role of fashion practitioners in the diaspora in the symbolic production of contemporary African designer fashion. Thus, this study contributes insights into contemporary Nigerian transnational fashion, African, aesthetics, and dress practices, adding to the growing body of scholarship that disrupts dominant narratives and advances the decolonisation of fashion and African fashion studies.

Notions of representation and cultural identity are therefore hugely important to this study. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1997, p. 3) describes representation as a process and system: ‘The production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between [these] concepts and language which enables us to refer to either the “real” [material] world of objects, people, or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fiction’. In this regard, Hall suggests that meaning – for example, the meaning of ‘Africa’ or ‘African fashion’ – is created

and produced through shared language. Much scholarship has been written about how in the diaspora, consumers utilise their dress consumption practice to negotiate ethnonational and supranational identities, as well as their links with the homeland (Botticello, 2009; Hansen and Madison, 2013). If materials such as textiles, clothing, dress, and the body constitute key elements in the system of representations used to produce and communicate meanings, so too do activities and events such as fashion shows, as well as images generated from the catwalk shows and disseminated via fashion media (Hansen and Madison, 2013). What is less examined in the literature is how Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners use the AFWL event to assert their professional roles as tastemakers of fashion, and in the process subvert Eurocentrism in fashion.

Theoretical Framework: Fashion System and Fashion Week

My view of fashion is informed by the sociological definition of fashion proposed by Yuniya Kawamura (2018), Professor of Sociology, who argues that fashion is a symbolic product, ‘a manufactured cultural symbol in an institutionalised system’ (p. 43). From a sociological perspective, fashion is not the creation of a single individual, but rather a system constructed through the collective actions and shared values of the cultural intermediaries of fashion. These include individuals and institutions, buyers, bloggers, celebrities, ‘designers, journalists, editors, advertisers, marketers/merchandisers, and publicists’ whose ‘individual goals are met by participation in the system’ (Kawamura, 2018, pp. 72, 58). I appropriate this definition to the context of AFWL and argue that African fashion is a symbolic product created through the routine activities and interactions of the participants at AFWL. These fashion players are crucial in the perpetuation of African diaspora fashion cultures, the reproduction of consumer belief in fashion, and the promotion and marketing of Africa’s fashion image. The aphorism that ‘unity is power’ poignantly describes how AFWL has been constructed by individuals within the African diaspora as a countermeasure to resist their marginalisation in the global fashion market. My approach to AFWL highlights the micro-level processes of fashion as a cultural form, a collective activity and a business involving real people working together to construct the idea of African fashion. AFWL is thus both a space in which identities are constructed, and a vital institution in ‘bringing together the key people whose work constitutes the wider field of fashion’ (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006, p. 736). For my purposes, I argue that other cultural figures including Nigerian government agencies, traditional authorities such

as Ooni of Ife, as well as Nigerian First Ladies (State Governors' wives) are also key intermediaries, using fashion as a means of cultural diplomacy. These intermediaries add to the symbolic production of Nigerian, and Yoruba-African, fashion.

Fashion weeks, originating from events like 'Press Week' in 1943, organised by Eleanor Lambert to showcase American fashion to global buyers and press, have evolved into institutionalised industry fixtures in major cities worldwide. National fashion trade organizations like the British Fashion Council (BFC), the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), the French Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture, and the Italian Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana lead these events. They serve as platforms to promote a region's cultural and national design identity to international press and buyers, reflecting a strong sense of national confidence. London Fashion Week highlights British fashion, while Milan Fashion Week showcases Italian fashion designers and industry. These events, collectively known as the "big four," emphasise territorial boundaries and transnational network linking these western cities

Fashion weeks promote national brands and the design identity of a nation, fostering knowledge exchange among fashion practitioners. However, the diaspora context has seen fashion weeks challenge the idea of national identity and geographical boundaries. Scholarly research on fashion weeks has explored various aspects, including their social organization, framing, business function, and aesthetic elements such as showcased clothing collections (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Weller, 2008; Skov, 2004; 2009; 2010). In her exploration of the Caribbean Fashion Week (CFW), which emerged to contest and subvert the Eurocentric definitions and narratives of Jamaican identity, Carolyn Copper (2010, p. 403) argues that CFW 'is a stage on which black models can confidently strut their stuff. Visibly affirming the beauty of the black body in full adornment, these indigenous models now displace the "out of many, one" phenotype of ideal beauty in Jamaica'. In her further analysis of black beauty aesthetics and the dominance of Black models on the CFW catwalk, Copper (2010, p. 403) adds that 'the staging of the elaborately dressed black body acknowledges the longevity of remembered aesthetic traditions that have their origins in continental Africa, and which have re-emerged in the contemporary period, for example in dancehall excess'. The Caribbean is a diverse region shaped by migrations, colonization, slavery, and the settlement of various racial, social, and cultural groups (Hall, 2001; Kirkland, 2012). Despite a black majority population, Jamaica's cultural identity, particularly in Kingston where the CFW is held, has been significantly

influenced by its minority White European settlers. As Copper (2010) explains, the motivation for the CFW partly stemmed from this very fact – that official representations of Jamaican nationality tend to erase Black African cultural identities and practices. As such, the CFW offered increased visibility for Black models to assert Black beauty aesthetics, rooted in Africa, and advance Caribbean fashion culture, tastes, and designers. Copper's analysis applies to the UK's African diaspora context, where design participants reject a singular White British cultural identity and navigate multiple identities tied to their original home countries. The concept of diaspora as occupying a space between 'here and there' is useful for understanding fashion as a transnational concept, and for analysing the AFWL event's role in ongoing cultural identity negotiations.

In her development of the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora (CIAD), researcher Teleica Kirkland explored national dress in seven Caribbean islands. Kirkland (2012) highlights the diverse histories and oral traditions that have shaped the complex formation of national dress, influenced by colonial contact and multiple African cultures. While funding and education are recognized as challenges for the region's fashion systems, Kirkland emphasizes the emotional and mental hurdles stemming from limited knowledge of cultural histories and the devaluation of indigenous knowledge by Euro-American hegemony. These issues can be attributed, at least in part, to the dominant influence of the Euro-American knowledge system, which dictates, from Paris and New York, what is considered fashionable and cool, shaping the self-identity of young individuals. The hegemony of the Euro-American knowledge system undermines indigenous knowledge and practices, devaluing their significance. These issues extend to the African continent, highlighting the importance of AFWL as a platform for African diaspora fashion practitioners to assert and control narratives about African indigenous cultural heritage and knowledge.

As an industry, mainstream fashion is historically stymied by its marginalisation of minorities, its racial exclusion, its Eurocentric beauty standards, and the underrepresentation of Black and African-descended fashion models and designers (Lewis, 2003; Mears, 2011; Pham, 2017). Lewis (2003, p. 177) provides an important paper on why Black diaspora fashion designers have been obscured in mainstream fashion culture:

Black fashion designers who attempt to achieve recognition in the mainstream have never been successful. Commercial failure in the mainstream system does not appear to occur at the conceptual, design or manufacture stages of apparel development. Instead, difficulties occur in the stages where marketing and promotion take place. The existing structures of the fashion system are found to be so incompatible with Diaspora fashion creators that in terms of both number and type, Diaspora fashion creators found acceptable and promoted within the mainstream are disconcertingly rare

The account above highlights the fact that the lack of commercial success of Black fashion designers in the diaspora context arises within the marketing and promotion of these design innovations, which tend to be regarded by the mainstream as ‘too African’ or engaging in Black identity politics. Lewis (2003, p. 165) argues that, because of this, diaspora fashion comes to represent a political entity used by Black consumers and designers ‘in social and visual (re)constructions of self’. This view of fashion is reiterated by Carol Tulloch, Professor of dress, diaspora, and transnationalism, who argues in her examination of the African diaspora, that ‘style–fashion–dress’ is useful for addressing ‘the issue of black people and their construction of self, and/or the use or production of garments and accessories in that process’ (2015, p. 275). The significance of this is that material objects such as clothing, dress, and the body become instruments for creating self-identities and expressing subjectivities. Diaspora fashion, as Lewis (2003) explains, is characterised by a dual aesthetic: on the one hand, it is rooted in African traditions; on the other, it must maintain a European standard.

However, the absence of Black diaspora fashion designers in mainstream representation does not mean that these Black African design practitioners are unsubstantial in their contributions to the global fashion economy, nor that they are not instrumental in shaping consumer culture. As the cultural and fashion anthropologist Angela Jansen (2019, n.p) explains, fashion is long assumed to be a European concept, and thus non-Western fashion and indigenous fashion is ‘set apart as ethnic, which not only diminishes it as not real fashion but also confirms French, Italian, American or British fashion as real or the norm’. Further, professor of African art history Victoria Rovine (2009, p. 136) argues that ‘while Africa’s profile in international fashion circles has been heightened by its appearance as a source of inspiration for Western designers, the many African designers who are themselves engaged in innovative transformations of African style receive little attention in the international fashion press’. Importantly, Rovine’s work draws attention to certain contradictions inherent in fashion

discourse, for example, when Black designers in diaspora reference and invoke Africa in their design practices and clothing collections, they are regarded as exotic and thus relegated to an ethnic group; when European designers borrow and appropriate African motifs as a source of inspiration, however, these creations are celebrated in the mainstream media. As several scholars (Lewis, 2003; Jansen, 2019; 2020) have pointed out, fashion is underpinned by a struggle over power between two poles: those who employ fashion to subvert and reject Western definitions of identities and standards, and those who seek to maintain the privilege of defining those realities. Lewis's argument, based on observations of diaspora fashion in Kingston, New York, and London in 2003, provides valuable insights for my research on AFWL. I examine how AFWL functions as a contemporary diaspora production, focusing on the marketing, promotion, and communication of Nigerian designs and practitioners for commercial success globally.

Importantly, major fashion cities maintain their dominance through the collective imagination created and diffused within the press media. Media representation is thus critical to fashion because it shapes and influences public opinion. Heather Akou (2007), Reina Lewis (2013), Agnes Rocamora (2013), and Kawamura (2018) have each noted how new media communication technologies and digital media platforms have offered new opportunities for decentralising the mainstream fashion structures. For example, in her examination of fashion blogging, Rocamora (2013) explains that until the advance of the internet in the early twenty-first century, fashion writing was reserved for journalists and editors associated with institutional publications such as *Vogue* magazine. With the internet came independent bloggers, who contributed hugely to the disruption of old media and the gatekeepers of fashion, generating news, objects, and discourses that are more typically excluded from mainstream media (Rocamora, 2013, pp. 157–158). Internet technologies have emerged as a significant catalyst for the formation and manifestation of individual and collective identities within the African diaspora, particularly in the context of design. These technologies have not only provided avenues for self-expression but also facilitated the establishment and maintenance of global networks. The establishment and framing of the Africa Diaspora Fashion Week by its organisers of Nigerian descent exemplify their endeavours to address historical exclusion and institutional obstacles that have impeded their participation and acknowledgement in the global fashion economy.

Fashion Weeks have expanded globally in the twenty-first century, encompassing cities across Asia, Africa, America, the Pacific, and Europe. However, mainstream media and academic discussions often concentrate on the Fashion Weeks held in the four major cities of New York, London, Paris, and Milan because these global cities are ‘switching centres’ (Sassen, 2006) for the diffusion of ideas harvested from a variety of sources. Several writers have highlighted the importance and cultural significance of Fashion Week; for example, scholars Joanne Entwistle and Agnes Rocamora (2006, p. 736) explain that the event is an ‘important moment in the life of the industry’ because it brings together key people, buyers, press, ‘agents and institutions whose work constitutes the wider field of fashion’. Professor of Geography at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, Norma Rantisi (2011, p. 263) also argues that, along with the boutiques, ‘Fashion Weeks are another intermediary institution that can promote relations among actors within the fashion industry and aid in the construction of a fashion identity’. These views of Fashion Week prove useful to my own exploration of AFWL, which enhances the visibility of the Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners and the constructions of their cultural identities.

Outside the big four, scholars such as Professor of Transcultural Arts and Design, Wessie Ling, have examined new models of fashion week to ask whether a reordering of the hierarchy of fashion cities across the globe might be occurring. Ling highlights that there are salient differences between the fashion weeks held in New York and London compared to the new-rise events held across cities such as Shanghai, Moscow, Jaipur, and Tunis (2011). Breward and Gilbert (2006) argue that the status of the established fashion cities has in fact been destabilised with the emergence of these new-rise fashion weeks. While these new events continue to be named after a host city, they are organised to “foster a positive image of the city on a global stage, develop global partnerships and pursue the institutional agenda of cultural policymakers’, businesses, and politicians” (Ling, 2011, p. 85). Ling argues that another key difference between the new-rise and the established fashion week is that the former seeks to promote the design tradition and the skills of its practitioners, while the latter is tourism-led, promoting consumption and driving the economy of a city. The author concludes that the new-rise fashion weeks offer an ‘alternative route to succeed in the fashion industry but they do not override the power of the major fashion weeks’ (Ling, 2011, p. 92). Several scholars (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Weller, 2008; Skov *et al.*, 2009; Skov, 2010) agree that one of the functions of fashion week is that it makes fashion practitioners more visible – whether designers, models, brands, editors - to the international press. However, participation in

mainstream fashion events is expensive and thus dominated by large fashion houses and brands with the economic capital to partake fully in these promotional activities.

Ling's work on new-rise fashion weeks can also be applied to the several fashion weeks held in Lagos, Nigeria, established to promote the image of Lagos on the global stage as a design centre. Although these Lagos-based fashion weeks are increasingly attracting international buyers and media coverage, in the global hierarchy of cities, the traditional global fashion weeks are still revered as consecration sites for legitimating designers and endorsing new creations and innovations. The dominance of these Western cities as sites of consecration is still largely sustained by the image of these cities produced and circulated in the European-owned media conglomerates, which hold fashion to be a European and Western phenomenon. As a result, foreign designers must seek recognition through participation in the fashion systems of these global cities to be recognised by the gatekeepers – namely the mainstream fashion magazines through which fashion ideals are disseminated to global audiences. While Entwistle and Rocamora, Rantisi, and Ling have focused on fashion weeks as they have materialised within traditional and new-rise fashion cities, their ideas are useful for my work in examining the AFW concept, which has emerged from within the Western centre of global fashion – London and New York. Fashion Weeks, such as AFWL, serve as a vital diffusion strategy for Black Africans to assert their presence and cultural heritage in modernity.

In the UK, various regional fashion week events take place in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and England. Within England, major cities like London, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, and Newcastle have hosted regional fashion weeks. Immigrant communities in these cities are increasingly capitalising on the cultural significance of fashion weeks, connecting their home regions to the host country. This is evident in the diaspora fashion events held across UK cities, such as Indian Fashion Week, Congo Fashion Week, Pakistan Fashion Week, Asian Fashion Week, Sierra Leone Fashion Week, South Africa Fashion Week, Zimbabwe Fashion Week, Global Asian Fashion Week, Chinese Fashion Week, Oriental Fashion Week, and Dubai Fashion Week (Fashion Capital, 2017). These events are registered businesses operated by British citizens in the UK. They serve as a means for migrant transnational economic activities, bridging the gap between their homeland and host country. Scholarly examination of these diasporic fashion weeks is scarce, and much of the more mainstream work (Kawamura, 2004; Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Skov, 2006) was

published over a decade ago, and so my research seeks to remedy this by focusing on the Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners at AFWL with very recent data.

Organisation of the Thesis

This General Introduction is followed by six subsequent chapters. Chapter One provides a detailed historical and geographical account of Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora. Chapters Two and Three cover the relevant theoretical framework and literature on fashion, diaspora, and transnationalism, from which this research draws. Chapter Four provides an account of the methodological approach and the instruments of data collection and analysis employed in the study. This is followed by three interrelated empirical chapters that discuss the findings and analysis of the research objectives. Chapter Five examines the formation of AFWL UK Ltd as a diaspora business and examines the significance of the event from the perspectives of its key players. Chapter Six provides a critical discussion surrounding how Nigerian fashion practitioners at the event describe their dress and design practices, foregrounding engagement with their home country, and constructing representations of African femininities. Chapter Seven examines the discourse of 'Made in Nigeria', and how Nigerian designers make sense of their design practices as a means of engagement with their ethnonational regions in the homeland. In the final chapter, the Coda summarises the research findings, areas of contribution to knowledge and future research.

Chapter One

Nigeria: Historical, Political, and Cultural Background

“God did not create Nigeria, the British did”

Nigeria’s first Prime Minister, Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa

Introduction

This chapter contextualises Nigerian diaspora fashion producers and AFWL, providing a concise overview of Nigeria's historical and contemporary context. The first section focuses on the colonial construction and formation of the Nigerian state by the British Empire, which disrupted indigenous life and introduced new forms of migration and exploitation. The second section outlines Nigeria's demographic profile, its three largest ethnonational groups and the question of Nigeria’s democracy. The third section highlights the phases of migration that shaped the Nigerian diaspora, from the colonial era to the present global era, emphasizing the role of trade in facilitating transnational connections.

Indigenous Subordination: The Invention of Nigeria and the New Nigerian Identity

Valentin-Yves Mudimbe (1988, p.19), a Congolese philosopher, critically examines the invention of Africa and its people through Western anthropological ethnocentrism, colonial epistemologies, and ideological systems. According to Mudimbe, Africa's consolidation was achieved through the domination of physical space, the reshaping of native minds, and the integration of local economic histories into the Western perspective’. In the case of Nigeria, it emerged as a British colonial construct in 1914 when the Northern and Southern parts were merged into the unified Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria to serve British expansionism and imperialism (Benjamin, Dan Suleiman, & Anyaduba, 2018). These regions consisted of complex ethnocultural, religious, and linguistic groups, which were then integrated into a single sovereign territory. This consolidation, as Professor Toyin Falola (2013) explains, not only transformed the territories themselves but also redefined pre-colonial relations, material

conditions, and interactions among the various peoples and regions. It imposed a new national identity on the colonised population, positioning them as extensions of the British Empire and British subjects.

The arbitrary merger had both material and symbolic implications. Materially, the vast territories came to be internationally recognised as British colonies. Symbolically, the amalgamation meant that distinct social, political, and religious practices, as well as ancient institutions and civilisations, such as the Sokoto Caliphate and the Bornu Empire, city-states, and communities, were brought together under the umbrella of Nigeria. As a result, Nigeria is characterised as ‘a conglomeration of hundreds of ethnic groups [...] with diverse indigenous languages, historical memories, traditional lifestyles, and social frameworks that trace back to the distant past (Falola and Heaton, 2008, p.18). Nigeria is thus a creation aimed at protecting British commercial interests in the vast territories, with the relatively prosperous South expected to support their less-developed counterparts in the North under the overall imposition of British colonial rule (Le Roy & Saunders, 2006).

Before the establishment of the Nigerian colony, in the late 1800s, the British Empire had already delineated the vast territories along regional lines through violence, thereby restructuring the political and economic framework of the three regions: Northern, Western, and Eastern (Ukiwo, 2005; Falola, 2013). For example, under the precolonial system, each group maintained separate social, cultural, and political structures, shaping their collective identities (Anderson, 1983). In the Yoruba regions spanning vast geographical territories power was decentralised, and multiple powerful states such as Ife, Oyo, and Egba coexisted but competed politically, despite sharing cultural mythology centred around Oduduwa as the creator and Ile Ife as the cradle of life (Falola, 2013; Mayowa, 2014; Udo, 1980). In both the Yoruba and Hausa regions, the concentration of power and authority was vested in a single ruler, either the oba or the emir, deriving their power from traditional customs and the consent of the people (Iweriebor, 1982). On the other hand, the Igbo regions lacked a centralised political system, instead male elders played a significant role in political organisation (Udo, 1980). The intervention of the British into the Igbo political structure can be seen in its creation of warrant chiefs who derived their power from the colonial state. However, under colonial rule, the British colonial administrators were not only the apex authority in decision-making and resource distribution but more importantly they administered British laws across the jurisdiction. As colonialism administered these regions as homogeneous political units under British colonial hegemony, it resulted in fractured communities, distorted histories, fragmented

identities, and contested nationalism amongst the historic communities forced to co-exist as a nation (Fadakinte, 2013).

This brief historical context illuminates the complex interplay of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods in the formation of the Nigerian state, highlighting the enduring legacies of colonialism on the social, political, economic, psychological, and cultural landscapes and structures of the multi-ethnic country. It is essential to consider the influence of the West, which introduced the European economic capitalist system to the African socio-political landscape, redefined social relations amongst the people through colonial boundaries and anti-colonial nationalism, and established a new social class composed of Western-educated elites and the regional bourgeoisie (Oyewumi, 1997). While this research does not delve into all these factors in detail, it acknowledges their significance within the socio-political backdrop of contemporary Nigeria.

The colonial origins of the contemporary Nigerian state warrant further exploration, providing evidence of how colonialism is deeply intertwined with the accumulation of capital and European capitalist expansion driven by imperial companies backed by the colonial government (Benjamin et al., 2018).

[Nigeria as a Transnational British Corporation and Consumer Market](#)

The creation of the Nigerian state is in part the result of the intense competition among European powers including France, Spain, Germany, and Britain over the control of the Niger River and the Chad trading routes. The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 resulted in the division of African territories among these European imperial governments, shaping the continent's economic, political, and psychological landscape (Sadre, 1987; Maathai, 2009). British imperialism in particular played a significant role in the formation of Nigeria on January 1st, 1914. The British government commissioned the Royal Niger Company (RNC), led by George Taubman Goldie, to establish control over British-controlled West African territories. Similar to the East India Company, the RNC was granted concessions, exclusive rights, and privileges to govern and trade on behalf of the British government. Disregarding local structures, the company established a network of trading posts, enforced import tariffs, and controlled the market for products such as palm oil. To maintain its dominance, the RNC employed both violent and diplomatic means, including the establishment of the Royal Niger Constabulary, a military force, to subjugate the activities of indigenous traders and incorporate precolonial

kingdoms into its capitalist monopoly. The RNC's trade treaties, written in English and imposed on the indigenous population, facilitated the acquisition of land rights and market domination. These treaties, often viewed by local leaders as commercial agreements rather than transfers of sovereignty, allowed the RNC to control trade and determine prices, limiting the indigenous population's ability to engage with other foreign traders (Amujo, Cornelius, and George, 2013). The RNC signed numerous treaties, totalling over 400, with indigenous rulers in resource-rich areas such as Niger, Benue, and Rivers States. While the RNC claimed to offer British protection in exchange for territorial sovereignty, indigenous leaders saw these treaties as mere agreements for peaceful commercial coexistence and safe passage for English traders (Amujo, Cornelius, and George, 2013).

As Benjamin, Dan Suleiman, and Anyaduba (2018, p.3) the British colonial amalgamation policy of 1914 did not create a Nigerian nation or civil society,

the colonial project administered Nigeria as a corporatized entity [...] the colonizer imagined colonized peoples more as corporate “entities” than as national groups. The net effect of this colonial corporatization of political, economic, and social life was that Nigeria as a corporate colonial creation has remained imagined and governed not as a nation but as an industrial corporate entity.

From the above, Nigeria is a colonial invention to serve the corporate interests of the British. This notion elucidates the radical nature of diaspora-led initiatives like AFWL, which seek to foster a pan-African consciousness and establish an independent ethnonational identity separate from Nigeria's colonial history and ineffective governance.

Contending with the radical view of Benjamin, Dan Suleiman, and Anyaduba (2018), Falola (2013, p.91) points out that ‘the countries created by European conquest and violence have struggled to generate contested nationalities and nationalism such that a Ghanaian may not have any sense of identification with a Zimbabwean, or a Nigerian may think he or she has nothing in common with an Egyptian’. Falola highlights two significant points. Firstly, the arbitrary boundaries established during the Berlin Conference fragmented ethnic groups and created separate countries. For instance, the Bornu Empire was divided into Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon, and Chad, scattering the Bornu people across these nations. Secondly, British colonialism not only separated communities with shared identities but also imposed European values, including

education, Christianity, capitalism, and economic rationality. This led to new national challenges such as resource disputes, state coercion, infrastructure development, and the establishment of administrative bureaucracies and organisation of services such as military, police, courts and prisons (Fadakinte, 2013, p.279). The colonial-imposed geopolitical boundaries have resulted in competing nationalisms within and between nations, as demonstrated by incidents like the xenophobic attacks in South Africa (See Roth, 2019). The Nigerian state's inability to foster national unity can be attributed to its invention by external forces and the institutionalisation of foreign social and political organisations structure on the African people. The implications of this colonial framework vary, importantly, it has denigrated African cultural heritage and sensibilities, led to regional and economic instabilities, ethnic and religious conflicts, and disunity, corrupt political elites and neoliberal policies stagnating the economies. Colonialism also impacted indigenous dress practices, as Utoh Ezeajugh (2012) points out, Western religion imposed on African communities contributed to their effacement and abandonment. Although, AFWL attempts to address these differences by promoting Pan-African unity through fashion and providing a commercial site for the production of indigenous fashion styles and textiles. These historical divisions and competitions within Nigeria continue to play out in contemporary cultural phenomena like AFWL. At AFWL, the organisers attempt to use fashion as a means of bridging the colonial division by proclaiming and marketing the event in Pan-African terms. These historical forces of division and competition within Nigeria are still visible in modern diaspora cultural phenomena such as AFWL.

Despite Nigeria's attainment of independence in 1960, British hegemony continues to exert influence in the country's economic and political spheres. The British government and multinational corporations have consistently resisted Nigerian government efforts to indigenize enterprises and resource sectors. Consequently, Nigeria is often regarded as an 'artificial state' (George, Shadare, and Owoyemi, 2012) created through coercion, violence, and imperialism to serve British commercial interests (George, Shadare, and Owoyemi, 2012; Heerten & Moses, 2014; Heerten & Moses, 2014). The Nigerian government's challenges in realising a sustainable economy committed to the collective well-being of its people can be attributed to the institutionalisation of Nigeria as a property of the British Empire.

Decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo (2020) points out that Western globalisation continues to shape the current global order because the underlying logic of coloniality is to legitimise colonial expansion. In the British Nigerian colony in the early 17th century, privately owned

commercial British firms such as British East India and Dutch East India Companies played a crucial role in legitimising British colonial expansion and the interests of the British over the colonised population. In this vein, the physical presence, and activities of non-state agents in trade, and commerce administration are historically conduits not only for plundering raw material and natural resources from the colonies, but importantly for the transnational and global flow of capital, information, and commodities. Today, transnational migrants and African diasporic actors, through their creative practices have emerged as powerful entities and agents driving the globalisation of capital, information and commodities across multiple diasporic sites challenging the central role of nation-state governments (see Chapter 3 for a discussion on globalisation and transnationalism).

British private firms played a significant role as agents of imperialism, benefiting at the 'expense of several African nations' (Falola, 2013, p. 356). This colonial legacy is evident in contemporary Nigeria, where British transnational companies continue to dominate not only the oil and gas sector but also the consumer markets, enabled by neoliberal and free market policies that have disastrous effects on the competitiveness of local industries (Sadre, 1987). Examining the impacts of multinational corporations in postcolonial Nigeria, Bade Onimode (1978, p. 207) argues that these firms serve as 'the basic units of imperialism in its contemporary neo-colonial era', prioritising their interests over the country's development priorities. This is exemplified by practices such as the mass cultivation of tobacco for foreign companies on fertile land, while food shortages persist, and the neglect of essential industries in favour of luxury goods and imports (Onimode, 1978, p. 228). The profits generated by these companies, which are repatriated out of Nigeria, further contribute to the country's underdevelopment, reflecting the transnational nature of capital (Onimode, 1978).

Further, Onimode (1978, p. 231) explains that a new relationship emerged between the new political class and imperialist foreign corporations,

Past colonialism and post-independence collusion of the privileged classes with imperialism have combined to secure Nigeria as a continuing veritable citadel of neocolonial domination and brutal exploitation by multinational corporations. In such key sectors as petroleum, manufacturing, banking, insurance, transport, construction, and distribution, transnational enterprises still dominate capital investment, technology, and management

From the above Nigeria remains under neocolonial domination and exploitation by multinational corporations due to a combination of past colonialism and collusion between the Nigerian privileged class - the new bourgeois. The observation is relevant to the current study as it highlights the important role of the diaspora not only in challenging the corrupt practices of the Nigerian state but its important role in facilitating access to resources and contributing to the economic development of the home country. While globalisation is often driven by governments and multinational corporations, AFWL demonstrates how contemporary processes such as migration and digital media technologies empower African diaspora and Nigeria-based fashion practitioners to challenge historical subjugation and reclaim their identity, creativity, labour, and industries from the control of multinational corporations and the Nigerian political class. As Wangari Maathai (2009, p.185) writes, the ‘African elites and leaders from the different ethnonational groups have utilised the colonial state structures to downplay indigenous traditional cultures and practices, perpetuating division amongst the citizens to control, oppress and accumulate power’. In the post-colonial era, the political leaders inherited these structures of power and utilised them for their own financial benefits – domination and subordination. This legacy of imperialism has deeply impacted African people collectively, mentally, psychologically, emotionally, physically, and in the organisation of their societies. As Fadakinte (2013, p. 279) argues the British colonial state – Nigeria- functioned as a servant of imperialism, and the institutionalisation of colonial rule served in maintaining and protecting ‘all those metropolitan interests which owed their existence to the continuance of imperialism’. In Nigeria, the political parties and elites employ the colonial state structures to suppress indigenous cultures – either through economic neglect, political representation, and removal of indigenous histories in the educational curriculum - or the politicisation of ethnicity. The consequences of imperialism include the loss of indigenous cultural identity which has been supplanted by superior Western knowledge. Even in the post-independence era, these colonial structures continue to shape social, economic, cultural, and political experiences in African societies.

The Contemporary Nigerian State: Demography and Geographical Composition



Fig. 1.1 Nigerian Map depicting the six geopolitical zones

Commonly referred to as the ‘giant of Africa’ owing to its thriving economy, large population, and influential position on the continent (Akpome, 2015), Nigeria encompasses a vast geographic expanse, rich biodiversity, abundant natural resources including crude oil, coal, agricultural products, gold, and cobalt, as well as a diverse cultural fabric, youthful population, and pluralistic societal composition (Dunne, Crossouard, Agbaire, & Bakari, 2020). The Nigerian state is comprised of a population of 184 million people, with three major ethnonational groups, namely the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa/Fulani, constituting 60% of the total population (Table 1.1). Further analysis of the population composition reveals the following breakdown: Hausa/Fulani (29%), Yoruba (21%), Igbo (18%), Ijaw (10%), Kanuri (4%), Ibibio-Efik (3.5%), Tiv (2.5%), Edo (Bini) (less than 1%), and Nupe (less than 1%).

Contemporary Nigeria is composed of 36 states and a federal capital, Abuja, with more than 700 local administrative councils spread across six geopolitical regions (see Fig. 1.1). It is characterised by cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, encompassing over 500 ethnonational groups and 350 languages (Nnoli, 1978, p. 35-105; Sklar, 2004). While English serves as the official national language, other commonly spoken languages among Nigerians include Pidgin, Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, and Ijaw. The prominence of the English language in Nigeria’s non-Northern regions not only reflects the country’s integration into the global economy but also underscores how the British colonial legacy shaped Nigerian identity. For example, the colonial encounter resulted in the stratification of African communities into different classes: the literate, semi-literate, and illiterate (Chimezie, 1973). The literate class was considered educated, superior, and civilised and held important roles in public

administration in society and residing primarily in urban areas, while rural dwellers, educated in their local customs and traditions, were viewed as less civilised and illiterate. In some parts of Nigeria, the English language is a status symbol reflecting one's social class, because a Western-educated individual is perceived as superior in contrast to someone not educated in British culture.

States and Capital in the Southwest	States and Capital in the Southeast	States and Capital in the North
Ekiti - Ado Ekiti	Anambra – Awka	Kaduna – Kaduna
Ogun - Abeokuta	Abia - Umuahia	Kano - Kano
Oyo - Ibadan	Imo - Owerri	Jigawa - Dutse
Osun - Oshogbo	Ebonyi - Abakaliki	Katsina - Kastina
Ondo - Akure	Enugu – Enugu	Sokoto - Sokoto
Lagos – Ikeja		Kebbi - Birnin Kebbi
		Zamfara - Gusau
		Bauchi - Bauchi
		Gombe - Gombe
		Yobe - Damaturu
		Taraba - Jalingo
		Borno - Maiduguri
		Adamawa – Yola

Table 1.1. Nigeria's three largest ethnonational groups and regional states occupied

Despite its status as a resource-endowed nation, Nigeria has primarily relied on revenue generated from the export of crude oil since the 1960s. However, with the implementation of government policies and initiatives aimed at diversification, there has been a growing emphasis on fostering the cultural and creative industries (informal sectors), resulting in increased

investments and the attraction of foreign stakeholders and diasporic engagements. Today, Nigeria is home to Nollywood, the second-largest film industry in the world, and the second-largest labour employer after agriculture (Sasson 2023). The success of Nollywood not only reflects the role of cultural and creative industries as a major economic driver in the country, but more importantly how the world has become integrated. As Diana Crane (2014) explains, the creative industries, and cultural policies formulated constitute an important economic site, both for indigenous practitioners and national industries to resist [Euro-American] cultural dominance.

Nigeria is a heterogeneous country, with distinct regional characteristics shaped by a variety of factors: regional identity, history, religion, language, traditional institutions, cultural practices, complex interethnic relations etc. The four major ethnic nations are geographically distributed across three primary regions: the Yoruba in the Southwest, the Igbo in the Southeast, and the Hausa and Fulani in the North. Among these regions, Lagos stands as Nigeria's commercial hub and the most populous city on the African continent, attracting migrants from various parts of Nigeria, Africa, and the world. In the Southern regions, there is a mixture of indigenous Yoruba practices and European influences spread through Christianity and Western education introduced by European missionaries. In the Southeast Igbo regions, Christianity and animism are dominant. While there are cultural similarities, such as the practice of Islam in both Yoruba and Hausa/Fulani states, variations exist. For instance, religion in the Yoruba regions incorporates Islamic, Christian, and animist practices. The Northern regions have strong Fulani and Arabic influences, with the spread of Islam from the 12th century. Sharia law was employed in 1999, prioritising Qur'anic education and de-emphasising Western-style formal education. The Fulani and Hausa ethnonational groups, hold significant political influence and constitute an estimated 29% (or potentially 50%) of Nigeria's population. Since 2009, the northern regions have faced lethal Islamist fundamentalist insurgencies, notably perpetrated by the group known as Boko Haram. Founded in 1995, Boko Haram emerged as a Sunni Salafist organization defending Islam against Western domination. This resistance stems from the belief that globalisation, associated with Westernisation or Americanisation, threatens ideological and cultural distinctiveness and is a danger to local customs, traditions, and polity. Despite government efforts to counter the attacks, the insurgent group persistently pursues its holy war against the Nigerian state, destabilising the local economy, terrorising communities and displacing women and children (Nwigwe, 2019). The patriarchal context of Nigeria further curtails women's activities due to the influence of religion and state politics. Some critics have

argued that the Muslim North is practising its form of regionalism while the rest are bound to centralisation and the 'one Nigeria' rhetoric.

The post-independence Nigerian economy has been largely shaped by the ongoing tensions arising from the intersection of ethnic and religious differences, resource distribution, and land disputes, which in turn influence social, economic, and political dynamics (Udo, 1980). While Nigeria's three dominant groups comprise a significant portion of the population and have generally provided political candidates for higher office, numerous minority groups across the country have been subjected to subjugation, and oppression by the dominant cultures. For instance, the Itsekiri, Ogoni, and other minority communities are indigenous to the Niger Delta region and constitute the dominant group in Delta State. Similarly, the Bini community in Edo State, representing the ancient Benin Kingdom, holds a dominant position in the region but remains a minority within the broader Nigerian state. Additionally, the Ibibio-Efik and other smaller groups have proposed the establishment of a new region between the Niger Delta and Calabar to address Igbo domination in the Southern region (Minority Rights, 2018). Furthermore, since the 1970s, various factions within the dominant ethnonational groups like the Igbos and Yorubas have advocated for secession due to factors such as regional marginalisation, cultural erosion, multidimensional poverty, insecurity, kidnapping, terrorism, destruction of land and economic underdevelopment. In response, the federal government has taken measures to suppress calls for self-determination and maintain the unification of Nigeria as a federation (Ihonvbere, 2000[2010]). The demand for self-determination by marginalised minority communities within Nigeria reflects their resistance to the colonial legacy that forcefully amalgamated linguistically and historically diverse peoples into a 'mega Nigeria' without a shared identity to unite them (Mazrui, n.d.).

The realities of ethnic and religious differences, as well as regional disputes over land and resources, pose significant challenges in a multiethnic and multicultural nation like Nigeria, which must be addressed for the success of a democratic society. As Will Kymlicka (2001, 2004) argues, the presence of some shared identity or sense of commonality is crucial for sustaining a deliberative and participatory democracy. The absence of such factors hampers the progress of democracy in Nigeria. This brief historical overview shows that the Nigerian state is characterised by colonial and imperialist influences – Westernisation/ Christianity, and Arabic culture/ Islam, which provide the people with a sense of belonging, and collective definition and contribute to their division.

According to Richard Sklar (2004, p. 42), Nigeria ranks as the world's fifth-largest federation, thereby signifying its significant global stature. Sklar's perspective categorises Nigeria as a postcolonial nation and posits that its triumph as a multiethnic democracy holds paramount importance not only for Africa but also for multinational societies across the globe. However, despite this external estimation of the country's multiculturalism, Nigeria confronts formidable challenges, encompassing pervasive corruption, human rights violations, embezzlement of public funds by governmental authorities, and a deficiency in accountability (Transparency International, 2005; Kalu, 2013; Akpome, 2015). Critically, Nigeria's federalism model has been censured as a system that centralises political power, rather than ensuring an equitable distribution among constituent regional units (Babalola, 2013).

The question of Nigerian democracy has sparked debates across academia and social media, with the prevailing discourse highlighting those democratic principles such as free and fair elections, individual freedoms, protection of civil rights and liberties, justice, and respect for the rule of law are often mere rhetoric lacking empirical validity or enforcement. For example, after 25 years of military dictatorship, power was transferred to a civilian government in 1999. However, the Nigerian constitution of 1999, which was drafted by the military, instituted a unitary system characterised by the concentration of power in the federal government, marginalisation of regional subnational units, abuse of power, unnecessary bottleneck etc. This constitution remains a subject of dispute and a challenge to democracy as it replaced the nationalist federal arrangement of 1963, which had guaranteed regional sovereignty for the three dominant ethnic regional groups (Iweriebor, 1982; Ihonvbere, 2000[2010]; Fadakinte, 2015). Critics argue that the 1999 constitution, serving as the legal basis for Nigeria's multinational and regional union, was not a mandate of the Nigerian people but rather imposed on the nation by the ruling political elite in pursuit of their vested interests and continued oppression of the indigenous people (Ihonvbere, 2000[2010]).

Further, empirical evidence suggests that for approximately 49% of the population conditions of extreme poverty are a daily experience (Omotola, 2008; Otaha, 2012; Akpan & Isihak, 2020), and the postcolonial Nigerian state has struggled to articulate a cohesive national agenda that adequately addresses the fundamental needs of its people and diverse communities (Ihonvbere, 1996). As Akpome (2015, p. 62) contends, it is imperative to contextualise the current portrayal of Nigeria within a historical framework. Before the mid-1980s, the nation's economy enjoyed a relatively stable trajectory. However, the contemporary depiction of Nigeria, characterised by pervasive narratives and representations of dysfunction, corruption,

and criminality (Akpome, 2015, p. 70), is largely the product of a series of media and literary discourses that present a biased perspective. The author posits that notwithstanding the prevailing representations of corruption, among Nigerians themselves, there exists a palpable sense of disillusionment with the state of the nation, particularly concerning political leadership, poor governance, and economic malfeasance (Akpome, 2015, p. 69). Notably, for the establishment of successful liberal democratic societies, as contended by Nigerian political scientist M. Fadakinte (2017, p. 8), cohesive state political parties and a productive, autonomous economy are prerequisites. Moreover, Fadakinte asserts that African states, including Nigeria, ought to revisit the boundaries imposed during the colonial era and redefine democratic values in consonance with African realities and cultural contexts rather than reproducing ineffective colonial policies (Fadakinte, 2017, p. 10). In other words, in a functioning democratic state, the interests and will of the people should be the basis for government decision-making.

[Nigerian Fashion Cultures: Regional clothing clusters and cloth production in Nigeria](#)

The pivotal roles of textiles, dress, and fashion in the growth of economies, social change and construction of national identity are well-established in the literature (Byfield, 1997; 2003). Any examination of the development of Nigerian fashion must consider how the indigenous people have used their dress and clothing as a tool of resistance, self-affirmation, and maintaining cultural heritage. Among Nigeria's ethno-national communities - the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo - the dressed body serves many distinct functions, including decoration and communication of status, rank, and membership to the nation. For example, in her examination of body adornment practises in Nigeria, Tracie Utoh Ezeajugh (2009, p. 117.) explains that the 'body is the material vehicle for representing an individual's sense of self and for communicating meanings and belongings to an in-group'. With external influences – colonialism and foreign religious conversion – many indigenous dress practices such as tattoos or scarification as body designs were denounced in many parts of Africa. Consequently, Utoh Ezeajugh argues that the emergent Nigerian dress culture is a combination of transmutations, adaptations, and adoption of African cultural idioms and foreign cultural influences, which is useful in communicating social, ethnic, and aesthetic values. In other words, Nigerian fashion is a hybrid fusion and combination of styles, textiles, garments, and dresses, including Western, Asian, Arabic–Islamic–inspired modest wear, and indigenous fashions. In the construction of

Nigerianness through dress, salient elements from these diverse sources and distinct cultures are incorporated into clothing and dress practices.

The engineering of Africans as a consumer market for European commodities began with the institutional framework of colonial trade and financial system which contributed to devaluing the indigenous textile and dress systems (Byfield, 1997). For example, colonialism introduced new foreign dress styles, and synthetic materials, and imposed colonial tax on locally produced products, opening the Nigerian market to global trade and commerce controlled by the British. In the Yoruba regions, textile production of decorative patterned dyed cloths in several hues was well integrated into the Yoruba regional economy before the colonial encounter (Byfield, 1997). The importance of this is that cloth production was an integral part of the culture and cultural heritage, and for the Yoruba artist was a medium to express their worldview, philosophy, cosmology, and beliefs about aesthetics through their creativity and designs. The Southern Yoruba regions - Osogbo and Abeokuta -, are traditionally known for the indigo-dyed clothing economy. Southwestern Nigeria States like Oyo, Oke-Ogun and Ilesha were important clusters of skilled craftsmanship in the production of Aso Ofi also known as Aso Oke – woven cloth (Zakaree, 2013; Oyeniyi, 2015). In their examination of the symbolic meanings of the Adire cloth as a 'facilitator of the people's culture' (Areo and Rasaan Kalilu, 2013, p.30). Margaret Areo and Rasaan Kalilu explain that the Yoruba 'Adire tradition has been able to and continues to reflect the tenacity of and the worldview of the Yoruba culture (2013, p.25). The Yoruba people are renowned for their artistic traditions in sculpture, carving, weaving, cloth dyeing and 'contributions to world visual artistic culture [...] in painting, sculpture, printmaking, and textile art. Of all the artistic traditions, the textile art of Adire remains, perhaps the most decorative' (Areo and Kalilu, 2013, p.22).

As Byfield points out, 'The Adire was produced by a method known as resist dyeing in which portions of the fabric were covered with paste or raffia thread made from palm fibre to resist the penetration of the dye solution' (1997, p.79). An example of the rootedness of cloth in the culture of the Yoruba people is reflected not only in the Adire cloth production but also in the specialised nature of the cloth as practised across the regions of Yoruba land in several primary centres including Abeokuta, Ibadan, Ede, Oyo, and Oshogbo (Byfield, 1997; 2003; 2004; Areo and Kalilu, 2013). The word Adire is a combination of two Yoruba words, 'Adi meaning to tie and re which means to dye. Adire is descriptive of both the process of cloth dyeing and its product [...] the name encompasses a sense of artistic creativity and denotes the process of production and the products, respectively as art and artistic objects' (Areo and Kalilu, 2013,

p.22). Among the Yoruba people, linguistic distinctions are made between Adire as a ‘process of production of the art and artistic object’. These distinctions are evident in the linguistic descriptions of the production process of the art – ‘aro dida, indigo dyeing, pa aso laro, cloth dyeing, and aso alaro, dyed cloth’ (Areo and Kalilu, 2013, p.22). As an art form, the creative processes such as dying, design patterns, motifs and symbols transform cloth from a blank canvas to an art object discernible to the ‘makers and those with cognate knowledge about the art’ (2013, p.22). The decorative motifs on Adire, make the cloth both an artwork and a product to be consumed. The decorative elements: motifs are deeply rooted in the traditional Yoruba worldview and provide a glimpse into the worldview, cultural and religious beliefs, and culture of the Yoruba. They write, 'The Yoruba are traditionally deeply religious people. Their thinking is greatly influenced by their history, legends, myths, proverbs, folklores, and deep observations of their natural environment and from all of which most of the traditional decorative symbols have been drawn' (Areo and Kalilu, 2013, p.22). Thus, Yoruba artists derive the symbols, and patterned designs imbued on the locally-made fabric from oral traditions, Ifa religion, and folktales of the Yoruba people. For the Yoruba people, the Adire cloth is both an artistic medium for the expression of beliefs, and philosophy and a commodity.

Areo and Kalilu (2013, p.22) argue that ‘Adire is therefore a creative and artistic form and creative patterned dyed cloths. It is the creativity and the designs in Adire that make it significant both as a process and object of communication in the world of the Yoruba and perhaps beyond. To the Yoruba people, culture plays an important role in determining its designs and uses, and locally produced cloth textiles are an economic activity. In Yorubaland, Abeokuta (Ogun State) is the capital city of Adire production in Nigeria. The cloth production provides employment and a source of livelihood for its local producers, predominantly women and their families who work in roles including artisans, weavers, and dyers. This focus on the local Adire textile producers as well as the processes of cloth production is important for several reasons, foremost, it reveals that the cloth-making processes – methods and materials are ‘deeply rooted in place and history’ (Rovine 2015, p.129). The rapid decline of the local textile sector in Nigeria is underpinned by several factors including the absence of government support, and global economic and capital restructuring.

In the multiethnic Nigerian nation, Adire is not exclusive to the Yoruba people as a product of consumption or production. While its origins are tied to the Yoruba people and culture, discursively, it is deemed a Nigerian textile, and consumed in everyday routine activities and on special occasions. There have been varied reactions in terms of the consumption of cloth in

Nigerian society. For example, in the 1960s, Adire was perceived by the uninitiated ‘elites and urban dwellers as the cloth for the poor, the non-literate and rural women’ (Areo and Kalilu, 2013, p. 22) who expressed their preference for imported European fabrics and styles. The association of adire with the uneducated class reflects the mental colonisation of the Yoruba-educated class at the time, whose Western education had inculcated the belief that European-style clothing was a mark of civilised subject and modern identity (Oyedele and Obisesan, 2013). Paradoxically, in the postcolonial era, a fraction of the Yoruba educated elite class revived the adire, as it became a visual sign of asserting Yoruba ethnic nationalism and self-rule in resistance to European thoughts and values which degraded and subordinated Yoruba cultures and traditions (Eicher, 1976). Cloth production is not only a creative process, the design process, motifs, and decoration imbued on cloth act as a visual language across different situational contexts.

In her examination of the clothing manufacturing clusters in Southeast (Igbo region) Nigeria, Kate Meagher argues that rapid liberalisation, poverty, political instability, state neglect, and Nigerian structural adjustment policies (SAP) not only expanded informal economies as a form of economic organisation outside the framework of the state but also affected “the organisation of production, supply, and marketing network’ (2010, p. 56). SAP refers to a range of microeconomic policies including currency devaluation, trade liberation, downsizing of the public sector as well as fiscal as well as government reforms initiated by the Nigerian government in 1986 under IMF recommendations (Meagher, 2010, p. 57). In the 1980s, neoliberal globalisation forces engendered further crises in the newly independent African countries through ‘global governance tools such as multilateral trade agreements and environmental regulations contributed to an intensification of global hierarchies and worsening inequalities of labour conditions’ (Gaugele and Titton, 2014, p.170). The rationale presented and sold to African leaders who adopted these West-centric rules, was that the sale and privatisation of state-owned industries, deregulation of finance and industry, cuts in public funding and liberalisation of international trade were ‘mechanisms for increasing wealth, eliminating poverty, raising living standards, increasing choice, and providing competitive prices’ (Tseelon, 2015, p.145). The consequences of the SAP for African communities and people were that it further enlarged the inequalities between the educated elites and rural poor masses. SAP created a condition for state governance in which its political elites were unaccountable to its citizens, but rather to corporate interests. The informal fashion economy in Nigeria is an expanding phenomenon characterised by the production, distribution and

consumption of goods and services that are “usually not recognized, regulated, or protected by legal or regulatory frameworks” (Onyemaechi 2013:62). This sector is characterised by the economic activities of self-employed, highly skilled, micro-entrepreneurs who employ the services and labour of other workers, including family members, and, for whom informality provides a financial opportunity, means of survival, and expression of creativity and innovation. The impact of SAP in the present should not be understated. However, advances in communication technologies and social media platforms have created new possibilities for creative and cultural producers in the informal fashion sector to develop and expand new networks and market reach beyond the confines of their respective nation-states. This shift towards digitalization and globalisation has provided informal sector workers in Nigeria with unprecedented opportunities to establish connections and partake in the global fashion economy (See Chapter 5).

In the 2000s, African producers ‘re-entered the global economy culture as an informal import/export network’ (Rabine, 2002, p. 15) through migration and the diaspora linkages they established. Since the 1980s, Igbo traders in the Southwest regions expanded their trading networks through migration outside Nigeria and the cultivation of trading ties with Asian companies. Meagher’s case study on the Aba manufacturing economies comprising two clusters: garment and shoe producers, is perhaps one of the most comprehensive studies on Nigerian clothing clusters or garment districts in the Igbo region. As local manufacturing capacity declined under SAP, the ‘non-state manufacturing activities in the Igbo south-east of the country attracted increasing national and international attention [...] dubbed as the Taiwan of Africa’ (Meagher, 2010, p. 60) due to the establishment of trading ties with Taiwan in the 1970s. Meagher continues, ‘By the end of the millennium, the Aba shoe and garment clusters had emerged as two of the largest and most dynamic small-enterprise clusters on the continent [...] generated an impressive level of employment and economic turnover despite their informality’ (2010, p. 60). The annual turnover in the 1999–2000 season amounted to 160 million dollars and 12 million dollars in the shoes and garments sectors (Anudu, 2019).

This expansion of the Aba clothing clusters developed without the support of the government (I discuss Made in Aba in Chapter 7). Made in Aba encapsulates all types of economic activities such as machinery, agriculture, garments, and shoes (see Ofurum, 2021). The expansion of Igbo trading networks through the migration of Igbo traders across West and Central African countries facilitated the circulation of Aba-made commodities beyond Nigeria and government control. The Aba clothing economy remains dominant as an informal sphere and domain for

economically marginalised groups from ‘diverse class backgrounds and communities’ (Meagher, 2010, p. 89) who contribute to the globalisation of Nigerian fashion cultures and economy.

As Meagher explains, informality based on social ties is ‘much about global as about local processes’, and these commercial social networks play an important role ‘in integrating Africa into the global economy (2010, p. 21). This is achieved through daily activities and practices of ‘indigenous ethnic and religious trade networks’ (Meagher, 2010, p. 21). Meagher continues ‘It [informal sector] is an impressively efficient network for organising economic activities outside the state [...] these informal economic networks are [...] often worked at cross-purposes with the formal economy’ (2010, p. x - xi).

Historical processes in the global and local environments have transformed African cultures, and these processes shape the economic behaviours and actions of African fashion producers and clothing manufacturers and their performance and outputs in the globalised capitalist framework. While capitalism demands workers to perform their tasks in a ‘rational and methodical manner’ (Swedberg, 2003, p. 231), capital structuring of African economies through the SAP has long excluded African workers from full participation in capitalism. Despite these drawbacks, indigenous artisans and workers engage in creative practices through transnational connections and networks made possible by globalisation: transport and communication technologies.

While attention has been paid to the structure of clothing production and the local fashion and clothing industry on the African continent (Rabine, 2002; Meagher, 2010; Rovine, 2015), none have examined the place of fashion weeks as a promotional mechanism for contemporary African designer fashion. In doing so, I want to suggest that enterprises like AFWL provide an avenue for amplifying both the visibility of African diaspora fashion design practitioners as key transnational actors in global fashion as well as the transnational supply chain.

Contemporary Nigerian fashion culture is influenced by imported textiles from multiple sources including Britain, India, Italy, Germany (stiff brocade/damask), Switzerland, and Austria (lace also known as industrial embroideries), thereby integrating Nigeria into transnational and global production networks (Rabine 2002; Roving 2009; 2015). As Barbara Plankensteine (2013) points out, these European-manufactured textiles exported to African countries during the colonial trade period are now solidly perceived by African consumers as African. In her examination of the African lace manufactured in Austria and sold to the West

African markets in the post-colonial period, the author points out that unlike the colonial trade relations established by British merchants in West Africa, the industrially produced African lace textile developed as a Nigerian-Austrian creation. Highlighting international trade and cross-national relations, Plankensteine describes the relations between Nigerian importers and Austrian manufacturing firms as 'an expression of global intertwining and questions conventional perceptions of tradition and authenticity. Yet, as in Austria or Switzerland, it is largely unknown that an entire branch of the textile industry in these two countries survives primarily because of exports to West Africa' (2013, p. 1). The production of textiles is a worldwide economic endeavour that nations and businesses depend on to achieve their economic objectives and results. Distinguishing between the colonial and postcolonial epochs of trade relations is crucial, as it reveals significant continuities that demand our attention. The colonial era, defined by British imperialism's monopolistic control over the West African market, inflicted severe damage by importing commodities, undermining local producers, and stifling indigenous progress. In contrast, the postcolonial epoch fostered international cooperation and collaboration, exemplified by partnerships between Austrian manufacturers and Nigerian textile importers. Unfortunately, while Austria benefited from proactive government support for textile exports, the Nigerian economy languished under the SAP mechanism, which cruelly barred any government funding or assistance. These disparities call for a critical examination of the trade dynamics and the urgent need to rectify the imbalances faced by nations like Nigeria.

Trade exports under the free-market system crippled Nigeria's local woven-cloth industry but introduced consumers to diverse foreign textiles. Lace, as an authentic Nigerian material, represents a fusion of tradition and contemporary, blending African and European influences (Plankensteine, 2013, p.27). Similarly, Jansen's research confirms that the adoption of synthetic and industrially produced fabrics drives changes in traditional dress (Jansen, 2020). These insights emphasize the profound impact of international trade on Nigeria's cultural evolution. In the post-colonial era, successive Nigerian governments have made efforts to safeguard and revive indigenous textile production by implementing import restrictions, which critics have arguably posited as unfair (Treichel et.al, 2012). However, despite these measures, entrepreneurs and traders, whose livelihoods depend on the importation of foreign textiles, continue to smuggle industrially produced imported fabrics. Additionally, some entrepreneurs import raw materials for local production, a practice inherited from the colonial period. The

cultural significance of imported Western commodities persists, symbolising class distinction and modernity (Plankensteine, 2013; Owoseje, 2019).

The Nigerian Diaspora Identity and Nigerianness

Nigerian identity encompasses various markers such as ethnicity (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and Fulani), religious affiliation (Christianity, Islam, or indigenous religion), and regional ties (Southern, Southeastern, and Northern). As Ademolu writes (2018, p.56)

significance is accorded to the pre-colonial, hereditary-traditional, ascriptive and the titular, such as kinship systems (primarily patrilineal), blood relationships, ethnicity, and language. In addition, identities based on chieftaincy, kingship, and localised conceptions of nationhood. Social class, gender, and age, as non-territorialised identities, are necessarily subsumed in these umbrella categories, all of which are situated and historicised by Nigeria's experiences of colonialism.

The aforementioned points underscore that despite the government's attempts to foster national allegiance to the modern Nigerian nation, Nigerians on the continent and in the diaspora primarily identify with and affiliate themselves with their ethnonational groups and shared customs, values, territories, and language. In contrast, the modern African state is seen as a superficial construct, as Maathai elucidates, stating that many Africans did not comprehend or resonate with the nation-states imposed by colonial powers, instead remaining attached to the physical and psychological boundaries of their micro-nations, 'they understood, related to, and remained attached to the physical and psychological boundaries of the micro-nations' (Maathai, 2009, p.184). In other words, the project of the post-colonial state, by the government involves the attempt to construct and foist a monolithic national identity on the diverse population.

Concerning women and the contemporary Nigerian State, Amina Mama explains that the racial hierarchy and gender politics of nineteenth-century Europe were reproduced in Africa, manifested in the indoctrination of 'all-male European administrative systems, and the insidious paternalism of the new religious and educational systems [...] that has persistently affected all aspects of social, cultural, political, and economic life in postcolonial African

states' (Mama, 1997, p.47). Further, in her book *The Invention of Women*, Oyeronke Oyewumi argues that colonialism, characterised by Christianisation, the missionary education curriculum, and the European economic system, brought gender discrimination into Yoruba society. The author posits that in the pre-nineteenth century Yoruba world, kinship terms denoting gender that focus on the biological body did not exist because the people defined their social relations with each other based on 'chronological age' or seniority (1997, p.14). The colonial construction of gender supplanted Yoruba's historical social relations. Oyewumi (1997, p. 31) explains that 'gender was not an organizing principle in Yoruba society prior to colonization by the West' but rather the new gender system imposed was not based on Yoruba empirical realities but derived from Western Eurocentric interpretations and documentation of the world. In pre-colonial Yoruba societies, the distinction between males and females was not based on biological differences, and there was no hierarchical ordering or binary opposition between the sexes. However, the imposition of gender roles, rooted in biological disparities, brought about changes to the existing social structures of the Yoruba people. This transformation is evident in the capitalist economic system that granted land rights to men, separated them from their families for labour, and relegated women to the domestic sphere, where they became dependent on men and were excluded from the public political arena.

In the post-colonial era, elite Nigerian women have navigated their positions and roles within the State, often through entrepreneurial endeavours and initiatives associated with the role of first ladies. It is noteworthy that despite constituting fifty per cent of the labour force, no woman has ever reached a high-level position within the Nigerian government. Instead, Nigerian women have achieved success in executive positions and leadership roles outside of Nigeria. For instance, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a Nigerian American of Igbo descent, made history in 2021 as the first woman and African to be appointed as the Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Before that, Dr Okonjo-Iweala, an economist, and financial expert who worked at the World Bank for over 25 years, served as Nigeria's Finance Minister, becoming the first woman to hold that position (2003-2006 and 2011-2015).

Although women are active in civil society and the economy, their representation in Nigerian state politics and governance remains disproportionately low, primarily due to a political culture characterized by male patronage and traditional gender roles. Once again, the legacy of the colonial state structure, which confined women to the private sphere, persists in Nigeria, despite the government's commitment to international agreements on women's political representation (Omotola, 2008). The colonial state, created by the colonialists not as a nation

but to exploit raw materials, has been unable to institute comprehensive measures to incorporate women in the modern state governance structure.

Colonial intervention which imposed foreign cultural norms and devalued indigenous traditions and is sustained by neocolonialism continues to shape people's perception of reality through a colonial lens. In the contemporary postcolonial period, access to global markets and economic activities is increasingly organised outside of state control by African artisans, clothing producers, and fashion designers. The private sector and non-state actors often assume the functions of the State in many African nations, as the state fails to provide essential services and employment. As a result, individuals and groups establish private enterprises and informal businesses, bypassing the state to meet their daily needs. As Swedberg points out 'all economic activities have a cultural dimension [...] they are embedded in culture just as they are embedded in social structures' (2003, p.241). Also, Falola points out that, 'many African nations are aggregations of former precolonial nations and have their own established cultural practices. The modern states created by European conquest and violence, have been struggling to generate development and stability' (2013, p.326). Several reasons are attributed to this, as Wangari Maathai explains, 'one of the tragedies of postcolonial Africa is that the African people have trusted their leaders, but only a few of those leaders have honoured that trust' (2009, p.25). The author argues that the lack of principle and ethical leadership rooted in culture and history and motivated by a sense of service to the people is one of the challenges facing Africa. I would argue, the construction of a Nigerian identity is a complex negotiation.

Nigerian Diaspora in Britain: Form and Composition

Nigerian migration to the UK can be viewed as both involuntary and voluntary, with historical nuances. Scholars note that some Nigerians were forcibly transported as slaves to the New World, highlighting the pre-colonial identification of people based on ethnicities like Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and Fulani (Alakija, 2016). The creation of Nigeria as a nation-state amalgamated these distinct ethnic groups, resulting in a continuously reproduced and negotiated Nigerian identity shaped by the people, state, and media. Additionally, Nigerian migration to the UK can be understood through three waves: student migration in the 1950s, refugee migration

during the civil war and military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1980s, and skilled migration driven by economic factors such as employment opportunities, security, and well-being. Various factors motivate Nigerians to emigrate, including poverty, insecurity, lack of government accountability, and aspirations for better living conditions, encompassing social, economic, political, and cultural considerations.

The Nigerian diaspora in the UK is recognized as one of the fastest-growing black ethnic minority populations (Office for National Statistics, 2017; 2019). Studies on the African diaspora in Britain often treat ethnic minority populations, including Black Caribbean, Black Africans, and West Indies, as a homogenous group (Nwankwo, 2005; 2013; Nwankwo, et.al 2011). To align with the focus of my research, I specifically examine the experiences of British-Nigerian fashion practitioners in London. However, there are conflicting reports regarding the size of the Nigerian diaspora in the UK. Estimates vary widely, ranging from over a million Nigerians (including undocumented migrants) residing in the UK, in contrast to the census figures that report estimates between 800,000 to 3,000,000.

The formation of the Nigerian diaspora in the UK is a topic that sparks conflicting perspectives. One viewpoint traces the earliest Nigerian presence back to the accounts of Olaudah Equiano, a liberated slave who published his memoirs in English in 1789, describing his homeland in the Benin Kingdom of present-day Southern Nigeria. Before the existence of the nation-state Nigeria, which began in January 1914, people identified themselves according to their ethnonational groups, such as Yoruba, Igbo, Fulani, and Hausa, who were originally organised into numerous distinct nations (Falola, 2013, p. 6). Over time, these groups have undergone transformations, with former Yoruba nations now referred to as Yoruba regions within the geographical boundaries of Nigeria, exemplified by the transition from the Oyo Empire to Oyo State. In the postcolonial perspective, the formation of the Nigerian diaspora is associated with the movement of Nigerian nationals since the country gained independence in the 1960s. For the purpose of my discussion, I focus on the postcolonial era in examining the formation of the Nigerian diaspora. The Nigerian diaspora in Britain primarily consists of highly skilled professionals from the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups, accounting for 36% of the workforce. Lampert (2010) conducted a case study on Nigerian diaspora organizations in Britain and observed that although Nigerians form the largest single African national group among Africans living in Europe and America, there is a scarcity of scholarly research specifically focused on Nigerians in the UK. Lampert's work contributes to the understanding of the significant contributions made by Nigerian diaspora organizations to the development of both

their homeland and the host country. However, it is worth noting that Lampert's analysis does not delve into the realm of Nigerian diaspora fashion organizations, which is the specific area of investigation in this study.

Systemic scholarship on the transformation of the Nigerian diaspora in the UK is crucial to 'unravel their histories and lived experiences' (Arthur, 2010, p. 1), and the reasons behind their migration, identity formation, and strategies for integration into British society and the global economy. Recent studies on African migrants in the UK (Oyetade, 1993; Botticello, 2009; Lampert, 2010; Ojo, 2013; Alakija, 2016) not only shed light on the socio-economic activities of Nigerian immigrants but also highlight their ability to construct new identities that transcend national boundaries through their cultural, social, and economic engagements. While cultural industries like Nollywood and the black churches, religious gatherings, and diaspora associations have received significant attention (Akyeampong, 2000; Harris, 2006; Onuzulike, 2007; Arewa, 2012; Adogame, 2013), the research on the fashion cultures of the Nigerian diaspora remains an underexplored area. Urgent attention is needed to fill this gap and gain a comprehensive understanding of the Nigerian diaspora's fashion cultures.

Conclusion:

In the postcolonial era, Nigeria's development reflects the reproduction of power, drawing parallels between the colonial administrators and the Nigerian political elite class. The Western-educated Nigerian nationalists who succeeded the British colonialists inherited and perpetuated the structures of power and state apparatus. Instead of dismantling these structures, they have evolved, further marginalizing traditional and indigenous practices and values. The state apparatus remains a potent tool employed by the political elites to enforce the unity of diverse ethnonational communities, such as the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, under the project of the nation-state in the postcolonial era. This has significant implications, as nationalism manifests in political parties competing for state power and is subtly reflected in the internal divisions within Nigeria's communities and their cultural and creative endeavours, including the realm of fashion.

Chapter Two

Definitions and Approaches to Fashion, Dress, and Clothing

Introduction

Definitions of the concept of fashion vary – a fact that reflects the complexity of fashion as a historical, cultural, economic, and social phenomenon. An interdisciplinary approach to the subject of fashion must also acknowledge its significance in a globalised world (Davis, 1994; Almila and Inglis, 2017). For example, in their examination of fashion studies in a globalised world, Anna-Mari Almila and David Inglis (2017) argue that fashion is a ‘world-wide phenomenon’, describing the globalised world as a new ontological object – a highly connected world condition – that is characterised by complex global connectivity and ever-arising new problems. The globalising conditions of the world today, as Almila and Inglis suggest, imply that the Euro-American perspective no longer dictates what fashion is, how it operates, nor where it operates. Rather, fashion is a cross-border phenomenon, defined by specific contexts of space and time.

The study of fashion as a global phenomenon is not limited to the socio-economic role of fashion in society; it is also driven by conditions engendered by globalisation, including transnational supply chain, labour, migration, postmodernist consumer culture, and digital media technologies (Lillethun, 2007; Ling, 2015). Kawamura (2018, p. 114), for instance, writes about the democratisation of fashion enabled by technology, since social media ‘as a global democratic tool allows anyone to freely produce, reproduce, adopt, spread, acknowledge, and/or reject fashion’. The author points out that this has led to the creation of alternative fashion systems alongside the Western fashion system that has traditionally structured and governed dress. As Saskia Sassen (2000, p. 512–513) writes, the ‘growth of a global economy has brought with it an institutional framework that facilitates cross-border flows and represents, in that regard, an enabling environment for these alternative circuits’. In this vein, contemporary fashion discourse must account for alternative fashion systems which operate alongside, and often in competition with the mainstream Western system.

This project draws especially from Victoria Rovine’s (2015) interdisciplinary approach to fashion studies, which itself incorporates scholarship from art history and anthropology. In her conceptual framing of the term, Rovine identifies fashion as a global visual medium, with garments, fashion/runway shows, and fashion magazines serving as key elements of its visual

culture. On the importance of mass media within fashion, Rovine (2015, p. 235) writes that ‘most people encounter fashion on an everyday basis primarily through mass media’. By highlighting this fact, the author draws attention to various communication mediums such as TV, radio, internet, and newspapers, and the role that media images play in our understanding and perception of the body, its cultural values, and society as a whole. Following the work of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, Rovine (2015, p. 248) draws on the concept of cosmopolitanism, defined as ‘participation in a universal human community, reaching beyond conventional identities based on citizenship in a single community’. In turn, the author argues that fashion (specifically African fashion design) is characterised by contact and influence rather than difference. ‘Contact’ and ‘influence’ are crucial terms for understanding fashion as the changing styles of dress across cultures. The concepts describe how ‘the absorption of new fashion influences across cultures exemplifies the process of “contamination”. Contamination enriches cultures, offering a mode of cultural change that values transformation rather than preservation’ (Rovine, 2015, p. 26). Fashion ‘encourages borrowing, invention and imagination’ and is characterised by ‘complex networks of influences and inspiration’ (Rovine, 2015, pp. 25, 27). This conceptual framing of the processes of fashion as ‘contamination’ demonstrates fashion’s capacity for manifestation beyond the branding centres of European fashion systems and, more importantly, shows how places and spaces are transformed through cultural encounters.

Several other theorists (Bhachu, 2002; Rabine, 2002; Dwyer, 2006) have also examined fashion as a global cross-cultural exchange, as well as a form of transnational culture that is characterised by influence, inspiration, networks, flows, and linkages. My intention in this thesis is to draw together an understanding of contemporary British-Nigerian transnational fashion cultures and a recognition of the contemporary diaspora, identifying this connection as something central to the branding and portrayal of Africa’s modern image and identities.

My research also draws upon the recognition by Rovine (2015, p. 15) that the study of African fashion is undergoing a de-centring away from Paris or the ‘European-centred fashion design and marketing system’. She recognises that Paris is only one among many sites to produce fashion that reflects images, stories and ideas about Africa, African histories, cultures, and identities. If technology is, as Kawamura (2018) argues, a democratic tool that facilitates the de-centring of conventional boundaries and allows for wider diffusion, absorption, consumption, and production of fashion from diverse sources, then the field of fashion studies

must engage contemporary fashion through such sources. It must understand these networks to analyse the influences, inspirations, and overlapping identities characterised by the fluidity of these social and cultural boundaries. In sum, fashion studies must increasingly recognise the diversity of styles and flow within global culture, and my research contributes to this ongoing effort.

As such, the following chapter explores and surveys the ongoing debates in the emergent study of transnational fashion culture, focusing specifically on the Nigerian diaspora fashion system. The discussion is divided into three parts. The first part considers the treatment of fashion as a postmodern and post-colonial phenomenon in which normative conventions are challenged and put into question, focusing on the interdisciplinary body of work that situates fashion in geographic, historical, and cultural contexts. The second part of the review further develops an approach that is centred around the trends and theories within the study of dress, clothing, and fashion. The third part examines the idea of fashion and globalisation, the challenges facing Eurocentrism, and the sociological analysis of fashion culture.

Fashion: Definitions of Cloth, Dress, and Body

In tracing the geography and history of fashion studies, several scholars have argued that the Western concept of fashion was facilitated by the industrial revolution, urbanisation, and mass consumer culture (Wilson, 2005). Early writings about fashion conceived a hierarchical ordering of dress style, with Western-tailored clothing at its ‘pinnacle’ and other non-Western dress occupying the lower end of the scale (Lillethun, 2007, p. 79). For instance, Kawamura (2018, pp. 116–117) writes that the modern fashion system (as a system that legitimises creative artists and their creations as fashionable) developed in the modern West, where ‘fashion became an institutionalised system in Paris in 1868 with the establishment of the first fashion trade organisation’. The history of the institutionalisation of fashion is well established in the literature as a system that situated itself in the urban city – a key site for its spectacular displays – and highlighted the work and innovations of well-trained, professional designers and couturiers (Kawamura, 2005; 2018). In this manner, the cities of New York, Milan, and London became established as such centres of fashion innovation, from which fashion spread to other parts of the world (Beward and Gilbert, 2006; Ling, 2015). Today, Western cities are no longer the sole sites and places of fashion innovations, however, they are still revered in the

media and popular culture as sites for the production, consumption, and dissemination of fashions. My research addresses this by examining how Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners exploit and capitalise on the city of London's reputation in the global market.

This conventional understanding of fashion as the preserve of Euro-American industrialised societies and economies has attracted debates from researchers who argue against such historical and geographical confinement of the phenomenon to the West (Finnane, 2007; Riello and McNeil, 2010; Entwistle, 2015; Almila and Inglis, 2017). For instance, Joanne Finkelstein (1996, p. 23) writes that 'fashion is a versatile social and psychological mechanism that lacks a fixed point of origin'. The author continues, that fashion 'figures as a contested cultural site. Fashion in the twentieth century is big business. The production, marketing and consumption of fashionable items creates a vast economic colossus employing millions of people and generating billions of dollars in revenue' (Finkelstein, 1998, p. 3). This underscores both the role of the fashion industry in driving economic activities and supporting livelihood and the status of fashion as a profitable commercial venture. Furthermore, fashion figures as a contested cultural site, precisely because not only is it a medium for the expression of cultural identities, but treatments of fashion also posit that it is the reserve of the West. In this vein, contestation -over the normalisation and hierarchical positioning of Western/European fashion as the norm - occurs when marginalised cultural groups with differing cultural perspectives, identities and power dynamics compete for representation and expression of their worldview. Consequently, Jennifer Craik (1994) points out that as an object of study, fashion needs revision for its elitist associations with European high fashion, she interrogates the terminology itself to highlight the difference between culture and the phenomenon of fashion. She writes, 'fashion is specific to European culture – the term has been used since the fourteenth century to refer to a particular mode or manner of dress or style, deriving from the Latin *facio or factio*' (Craik, 2009, p. 21). But, Craik (2009, p. 21) continues, 'fashion is not a phenomenon that has only existed since the fourteenth century. Nor has it been confined to Europe'. Thus, for Craik, fashion as it manifests in behaviour and acts is 'the expression of individual identity, shaped and modified through social comparison', and it is therefore common to all cultures, whether pre-modern or contemporary (2009, pp. 22–23).

Entwistle, by contrast, writes that fashion does not exist in all systems of dress, pointing out that to 'argue that fashion can be found everywhere and at other historical moments is Eurocentric; it is a view that imposes particular Western characteristics onto non-Western

places, flattening out regional variations and differences and alternative systems of dress production, distribution and consumption' (2015, p. 8-9). Instead, Entwistle appears to see fashion as a trans-historic and transcultural phenomenon, which takes into consideration the fact that fashion is an economic and collective socio-cultural activity involving a diversity of places, people, activities, and processes involved in the production, consumption, and distribution of fashion clothing. This definition usefully disentangles and uproots fashion from its rootedness in Western civilisation and modernity, as well as the dominant understanding of it as something that is actively produced by the fashion industry.

Different theories exist in the literature regarding the functions, uses and meanings of cloth, clothing, and dress (Bari 2020). Susanna Harris (2018, p. 228) points out that 'Cloth materials are something human societies seek out' and desire, not only for their utilitarian purpose in providing protection against the elements, but in concealing nakedness, protecting modesty, and adorning the body. Harris (2018, p. 228) continues, 'the way societies choose to fulfil their need for cloth-type materials is something rooted in their culture, influenced by established traditions, innovation and change'. This suggests that the culture of a people, along with its social, political, economic, and technological factors, influence the adoption of cloth materials. Further, Harris (2018, p. 228) argues that 'the selection, appropriation, and meaning of particular forms of material culture' are not dictated arbitrarily but are significantly shaped and influenced by several factors including culture, economy, technology, the social value of materials, and 'wider culturally held beliefs based in appropriate aesthetics of structure and surface' (p. 230). With this understanding, we should not examine cloth simply as a material object, but rather, as Rovine (2017) argues, as something that takes many forms: as clothing that is worn, as trade goods, and as symbolic images. Importantly it reflects a people's history, values, and culture.

The subject of clothing as a cultural signifier and system of meaning has been examined by several scholars (Eicher, 1995; Comaroff, 1996; Allman, 2004; Masquelier, 2005; Rovine 2015; Tulloch, 2015). As Craik (2009, p. 5) writes, 'clothes are not just neutral garments and apparel but rather structured into social processes and meanings by how their details and rules about wearing them construct cultural symbols and messages'. For example, clothing in the colonial era served as an instrument for enforcing social norms of superiority and inferiority, as well as demarcating and maintaining differences across racial groups. In Africa and the diaspora, 'clothing styles were employed as cultural barometers used to assess the advancement

of colonial subjects in an evolutionary progression from primitive to civilised status' (Rovine, 2015, p. 73). Today, much of the clothing and material regarded as African by many African communities and sold in local markets were developed from within such a colonial relationship characterised by the exploitation of people, natural resources, coercion, and racial hierarchies. Because clothes are not simply material objects, but a record of a people's past, it seems to me that the valorisation of the African print and other material fabrics once imposed on African consumers in the colonial era constitutes a record of colonial intervention.

Clothes are therefore material objects that individuals and groups adopt not only to present a certain appearance but also to participate in a 'medium that represents genders, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, psychology, society, culture, business, politics, philosophy and so forth' (Reilly, 2014, p. 9). But these meanings fluctuate, precisely because individual usage and clothing practices differ in terms of the symbolic meanings they communicate (Bovone, 2006). For instance, in her examination of the uses of cloth in West Africa, Edoh writes that cloth is leveraged 'not only as dress and adornment but also in the making of kinship ties, and in the celebration of important life events such as births, marriages, and funerals and as a form of currency and wealth' (2019, p. 82). In Oboh's (2018, p. 66) exploration of traditional wax cloths worn by the African diaspora in Manchester, the author points out that these are fabricated into a variety of styles with different meanings, both Western and African, 'controlling the extent to which they fit in or stand out in a given situation'. In the African diaspora, individuals dress to manage their identity, body, and selfhood in different social contexts, such as social events -parties- and public spaces of work. The locales such as African markets and social events where these wax textiles are bought, sold, and consumed provide 'opportunities for building social relationships amongst family and the diasporan community' (Oboh, 2018, p. 68). This aspect of dress draws attention to both the materiality and sociality of textiles and clothing, serving as a means for African diaspora members to negotiate and express their cultural identity and create a sense of belonging. In the context of the diaspora, then, cloth is a 'commodity culture and clothing is a vehicle for performing ethnic identity' (Mani, 2003, p. 119). As the introduction already described, indigenous fabrics used among the Yoruba people in Nigeria include Adire and Aso Oke which are used to express cultural identities. The uses of these cloths, textiles, and clothing are as diverse as the meanings the individual wearers and groups choose to convey.

As has already been established, the concepts of clothing, dress, and fashion tend to vary. In their conceptualisation of dress, Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992, p.1) explain that it is a medium for the non-verbal communication of identities, emphasising the social significance of dress in establishing identity and developing an individual's sense of self. Thus, rather than separating dress from the body, the authors' treatment of both presents them as mutually dependent, indicating that dress fulfils a social function and produces alterations in the body itself. The fashion discipline has traditionally examined how clothing, dress, and the body play a role in the order of various societies and cultures (Lewis 2013; Jansen and Craik 2018). The research has thus focused its attention on the practical functions and symbolic meanings of dress and clothing as social practices, which in turn mediate social relationships between individuals and groups. This is exemplified within the analysis of the dress practices of subcultural group identities, whether that be Black, hippy, punk, or goth (Hebdige, 1979; Polhemus, 1994).

For Entwistle, dress is central to defining social identities, gender, and sexuality. She defines dress as a 'situated bodily practice' (Entwistle, 2015, p. xi), and by doing so positions the body at the centre of fashion and dress theory to account for individual agency expressed through personal preference over what to wear. However, what we wear is shaped and influenced in turn by the social situation and 'particular context which often sets constraints as to what is and what is not appropriate to wear' (Entwistle 2000, p. 328). Dress is a practice that is performed on the body for specific situations, and the relationship between the two (dress and body) is critical to understanding how identity and social order are reproduced. For instance, Entwistle (2000, p. 327) writes, 'the body and dress operate dialectically: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning, while the body is a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to dress'. For Entwistle, the fashion system governs dress practices through an array of discourses about the appropriate image of the body it produces, constructs, and circulates in the media. Dress is also dictated by institutions and corporations through dress codes, which workers and employees subsequently internalise. The significance of Entwistle's contribution to the topic of the body and dress, however, is that it considers subjectivity and experience to be pivotal to individuals' everyday encounters with dress and fashion. This is relevant to my research in that since dress practices are in part governed by fashion systems, I wish to uncover how Nigerian designers conceive of their dress and design practices. Also, imperative to note how the particular context of colonialism and imperialism, with the persistent structures and thought patterns, continues to influence the adoption of African or Western/European fashions.

For Kawamura (2018, p. 5), on the other hand, the concepts of clothing and fashion are significantly different. Clothing is a material object, whereas fashion is a concept that ‘signifies additional and alluring values attached to clothing, which are enticing to consumers of fashion’. In this vein, when consumers purchase items of material clothing, ‘they imagine they are acquiring these added values’ or lifestyles advertised in fashion media discourse (Finkelstein, 1996, p. 4). Various scholars have examined precisely what these values are and how they are produced and marketed, with Rovine (2015) identifying them as cultural values, and Entwistle (2009) identifying them as aesthetic and commercial values. Taken together, these views demonstrate that fashion can be contradictory, and can mean many different things at the same time: ‘in its various guises as a practice, an industry and social force [...] any analysis of it needs to recognise these complex and paradoxical influences’ (Finkelstein, 1998, pp. 4, 7). In this study of African fashion production by Nigerian practitioners at AFWL, both the aesthetic and cultural values of African fashion make them so desirable among consumers and significant to the formation of Nigerian diaspora identity.

Trends and Theories in the Study of Dress, Clothing, and Fashion

I would suggest that three trends in fashion studies have sought to improve the understanding of fashion studies: theorisations of globalisation; criticism of Eurocentrism, emerging from post-colonial and decolonial theory; and the sociological study of globalised fashion culture. I want now to consider these trends of globalisation, anti-Eurocentrism, and the sociological approach to global culture, to suggest that they are still open to further development through engagement with contemporary theories of the diaspora.

Decolonising Fashion Globalisation

In setting out the relations between fashion and globalisation, Rovine (2015, p. 16) writes that ‘fashion is particularly difficult to define in a global context because the term is tightly bound to modern Western culture’. For example, Lipovetsky (1994, p. 4) provides one such rigid definition of fashion that limits and confines the subject matter to European epistemologies when she writes, ‘fashion is a socio-historical reality characteristic of the West and modernity itself’. Dosekun (2019) argues that many studies even of non-European fashion are influenced by this definition, for example when they search for the West in non-Western places or see non-Western places as mirrors or imitators of Western practices. As discussed in the previous

sections, this conceptual framing of modernity is often assumed to be defined by the Industrial and French Revolutions (Wilson, 2005), however decolonial theorists assert that modernity refers to a particular time in European history – the fourteenth century – in which the European hegemony over Africa, Asia and the Americas began (Mignolo, 2020).

In her decolonial analysis of modernity and its relation to fashion, Angela Jansen uses this lens to problematise the notion of contemporaneity on which fashion has been established. First, in her analysis of contemporary fashion writing, the author notes that fashion can be defined both as a noun and a verb. The latter encompasses the act of body fashioning; more pertinent to my discussion here is the first definition: ‘fashion as a noun, a system of power and a capitalist industry that was conceived in Europe and exported to the rest of the world through European imperialism and globalization’ (Jansen, 2020, p. 2). Jansen argues that the problem with such a definition is that it erases and renders the diversity of fashion invisible, all the while establishing the Western system as central and universal.

Furthermore, Jansen (2020, p. 12) writes that ‘the notion of contemporaneity is the very essence on which contemporary fashion’s definition is established, while other ways of fashioning the body are defined precisely by their exclusion from it and their conviction to a conceptual “timeless” past’. One of the reasons for my research on African fashions is attributable to exactly this kind of devaluation, marginalisation, and misrepresentation of African fashions, design practices, African fashion practitioners, and Black bodies. As Jansen explains (2020: 18) non-Western genealogies of thought and notions of existence’ in the Western fashion canon have been denied and devalued through the very concepts on which fashion as newness is based. In other words, as a result of globalisation and imperialism, the European fashion system was exported to other parts of the world, which then contributed to creating the conditions for the devaluation of the aesthetic practices, histories, cultural practices, and traditions within those colonised cultures. Fashion becomes associated with Europeanness and newness precisely because the colonialist can exert power and dominance by exploiting non-Western cultures for resources, ideas, and labour, while simultaneously rendering invisible the creativity and cultural productions of the colonised. Despite the denial of ‘longstanding, often globally interconnected and dynamic fashioning histories’ (Jansen 2002:2) in academic fashion discourse, increasingly the media has provided new opportunities for African cultural producers to create, disseminate, and consume African images and aesthetic elements in ways that restore dignity and meaning (Pinho, 2006).

Nevertheless, the concept of the epistemic violence of modernity is useful for understanding Eurocentrism and its impacts. It ‘is grounded in the possibility of discriminating other knowledge as being non-existent, backward (i.e., belonging to the absence of the past), or mythical (i.e., not pertaining to objectivity) and thus denying their role as legitimate sources of experience’ (Vazquez, 2010, p. 7). Similarly, for Jansen (2020, p. 18), contemporary fashion is a materialisation of modernity/coloniality, which imposes a time that ‘dismisses the past’ and the various fashions associated with it and turns the future into a utopic promise of endless progress. The notions that characterise modernity – newness, temporality, novelty, and newness – drive consumerism and the consumption of life as a commodity on the one hand, while devastating the earth, cultural heritage, and the environment on the other. Yet ironically, as Rovine (2009) points out, European fashion tends to derive its newness through the borrowing and appropriating of other rarely acknowledged sources. In this sense, the commodities produced by the Western fashion system to satisfy our unending desires and pleasures are illusory, because in the search for newness, the consumer ‘is subjectified in the image of the colonizer, of the corporation, of the “human” that reigns over life, over nature and subjugated others’ (Jansen, 2020, p. 13). In other words, for Jansen (2020, p. 14), fashion goods and commodities acquire their status as important signifiers because contemporary fashion, as a materialisation of modernity, produces their magical appearances through its discourse, media, and advertisement. This applies to the AFWL context, where discourse, media and advertisement are deployed in the construction and making of meanings of African fashion to global audiences.

The portrayal of African, Asian, and other cultures and histories as peripheral and inferior to Euro-American cultures and histories has been the focus of much debate in the literature (Nuttall, 2006; Pinho, 2006; Iqani and Dosekun, 2019). For instance, the collection *Beautiful Ugly* (2006), edited by Sandra Nuttall, features a series of essays drawn from contemporary African writers on the topic of beauty. As Nuttall points out, the concept of Africa has been constructed from the outside, and the discourse surrounding Africa has therefore been inscribed in dominant Western aesthetic terms of beauty and ugliness. Thus, ‘both Africans and that which they have made have frequently been viewed in damaging, fundamentally racist, ways’ (Nuttall, 2006, p. 1). From art histories to anthropological studies on African cultures and practices, a series of stereotypes long associated with backwardness, inferiority, and savagery have come to signify Africa, African artists, and cultural producers. In her writing about the impacts of these negative portrayals on Afro-Brazilians, Pinho (2006, p. 269) writes, ‘the

dominance of Eurocentric standards of beauty in the Brazilian media, and the cruel forms of racism that associate black bodies with ugliness, stench, and criminality, have contributed to an ongoing stigma and sense of low self-esteem, especially among black youths’.

The contested issue of fashion’s European origin is further addressed in Rovine’s 2015 examination of African fashion, which argues that individual innovations also constitute the basis for the introduction of new styles of dress, thus, the author draws attention to cross-cultural influences and motivations beyond the conventional understanding of the fashion process as a means of class distinction. With this, Rovine (2015, p. 15) defines fashion as ‘the impulse to innovate, rather than simply change that may be motivated by other factors such as the availability of materials, or adaptation to climatic conditions’. More importantly, Rovine asserts that the influences and sources of inspiration in fashion are varied, and thus the dominant perception of fashion as a European export to the rest of the world is incomplete because non-Western places have their distinct fashions and dress systems that circulate and travel across and within cultures.

Leslie Rabine’s 2002 work examines how African fashion circulates through the transnational networks of African producers and consumers from Los Angeles, Kenya, and Senegal. She argues that African fashion producers and consumers contribute to the story of transnationally disseminated, globalised cultures whose ‘modes of production, exchange and signification differ from those of mass-mediated culture’ (Rabine, 2002, p. 3). Drawing attention to the shadow circuit or informal African fashion network defined as ‘a network peopled by suitcase vendors who transport their goods with them in suitcases and trunks’ (2002, p. 3), Rabine’s contribution reveals the modes of circulation of African fashion from the ‘centres of global economy and culture [...] to the peripheries and through connection among various peripheries’ (p. 23). These results, however, are based upon data from over 21 years ago, and it is unclear how these informal African fashion networks have expanded with the proliferation of digital media.

Increasingly, digital media technologies have been recognised as a vital mechanism facilitating global flows, opening up new opportunities for greater movement, exchange, de-centring, and reorganisation of cultures across space and time, outside of the control of the state and corporations. This means, in addition to travelling in suitcases and trunks, taking ‘symbolic objects, ideas and images back and forth from one African community to another’ (Rabine, 2002, p. 24). Within this framework of global media, contemporary African fashion has

expanded its avenues for the transmission, consumption, and dissemination of its commodities and ideas in complicated ways. For the purposes of this research, I consider contemporary communication technologies as offering fashion producers within Nigerian diasporas and Nigeria new opportunities to engage in transnational fashion practices, connecting them to multiple sources, sites, centres, and peripheries. That new media and digital communication technologies such as blogs and websites have engendered new sites of fashion discourse is not surprising, as several scholars have argued. For example, Manovich (2001, p. 333) proposes that with new media, ‘cultural possibilities that were previously in the background, on the periphery, come into the center’ (333). Similarly, Agnes Rocamora (2013, p. 158) points out that digital media has led to the decentring of fashion, ‘in contrast with print fashion magazines, the fashion blogosphere allows a wide range of places to become visible, extending the boundaries of the geographies of fashion’. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how other transnational cultural intermediaries – namely Nigeria-based fashion producers – connect Nigeria to London and vice versa through their dress and design practices. The focus on the Nigerian diaspora addresses the methodological limitations of classical definitions of fashion, which were based largely on Eurocentric narratives of history and social development (Almila and Inglis, 2017) rather than on any empirical basis.

As Wessie Ling and Simona Segre Reinach (2018, p. 6) point out, contemporary research must now consider the fact that while the ‘production of textiles and apparel has historically been underpinned by the global context’, today, systems of clothing production are characterised by ‘transcultural and transglobal exchanges and networks’. The textile trade played a key role in increasing global interconnectivity, beginning with the development of the eighteenth-century transatlantic economy, and continuing with the subsequent rise of the West in the following century (Kobayashi, 2019). Research on fashion within the framework of globalisation has examined the political economy of the fashion industry, clothing manufacturing, workers, and the transnational supply chain that was central to creating the global economy (Ross, 2008). Research on cloth itself has been explored and examined from the perspective of raw materials and production techniques to textile industries, manufacturers, labourers, production, and the transnational supply chain (Hannell, 2006; Shabbir, 2019). In 2020, market analysis research estimated the value of the global textile industry at 993.6 billion dollars (Grand View Research, 2020). In all its diverse manifestations, the global textile industry supplies raw materials for multiple sectors, particularly for the production of clothing and garments within the fashion industry. In the mass-mediated world, globalisation has altered the nature of the production of

cloth and textiles and, in doing so, has altered the relationships people have to cloth. Clark (2016, p. 165) therefore points out that textiles themselves are caught up in transnational relationships: ‘Poetically, we might think of textiles wrapping the globe and linking together cultures, peoples and nations, through manufacture, trade, use and disuse’. As objects of trade in the cross-cultural exchanges between regions, nations and cultures, cloth, textiles, and the design of textiles have played a great role in exposing and integrating regions of the world. Cloth is more than a material object – it is also a visual medium with cultural, social, and physical dimensions (Tilley *et al.*, 2006).

Contemporary research in this field recognises the unevenness of globalisation across different regions, as well as the strategies employed by non-state actors to negotiate the terms of their entry into such an economy. For instance, in her examination of the informal economy in West Africa, Meagher (2010, p. 11) points out that, although these tend to be represented in terms of ‘criminality and cultural dysfunction’ by international organisations and academics, they only hold these views because the informal economy is so ‘deeply intertwined with formal economic structures’. The cultural turn provoked by ‘processes of deregulation, globalisation and weakening states’ (2010:11) paved the way for the cultivation of cross-border social networks, a concept adopted by scholars to explain unofficial forms of economic organisations in Africa. Meagher (2010, p. 11) defines this concept of social network as ‘the organisational role of social ties that shape economic behaviour outside the state through embedded relations of solidarity and trust’, as it provides an opportunity to examine the role of social ties and kinship networks in the production, consumption, and dissemination of fashion commodities in Nigeria. She continues, ‘I found out that these networks are linked into a pre-colonial history of business systems and indigenous commercial institutions developed to enhance predictability and economic efficiency’ (Meagher, 2010, p. 11). They then became ‘informalized, disrupted and reconstituted [...] but not destroyed by colonialism’ (Meagher, 2010, p. xi). This is important to note because, the social networks instituted for the organisation of economic, social and cultural life in ancient African societies, have not been destroyed but transformed despite colonialism’s intrusion. As Falola (2013, p. 94) argues, the prevailing ideologies that guided the actions of Africans were ‘kinship and kingship’, where ‘the long history of precolonial Africa revealed the ability of the people to relate to the environment to create the basis of production and reproduction’. This implies that, while colonialism instituted new socio-economic structures, pre-colonial African communities and nations already had a developed cultural economic framework linking trade and culture.

Encounters with colonialism not only inserted Africans into a global economy but also crucially redefined their established practices and social economic organisation.

The effects of this early-stage imperialism and globalisation on the socio-economic structures of African communities still play out in the fashion spheres, with some scholars highlighting the continuing struggle between indigenous pre-colonial and Western colonial practices and worldviews. For example, in his examination of the West African adoption of and preference for Indian guinée textiles in the nineteenth century, Kobayashi (2017, p. 29) writes that this peculiar demand in Senegal was conditioned by ‘the global trade networks that extended from South Asia through Western Europe and reached Africa in the early nineteenth century’ and that ‘social and ecological factors underpinned the continued demand’. The guinée was a cotton fabric manufactured in India and transported to the West African colonies and markets by French merchants. Today, however, guinée is regarded amongst the Senegalese as a traditional Senegalese fabric and an expression of their identity. Similarly, in Kelly Kirby’s examination of the uses, wearers, and shared engagement with another colonial-era imported fabric, bazin riche (also known as English **brocade**), she argues that ‘clothing presents a means for forging meaningful relationships within and between Africans in diaspora’ (2014, p. 1). Now, Bazin Riche provides a means of self-presentation for Senegalese immigrants living in the diaspora in Michigan. Kirby also notes that bazin riche is a prominent African textile cherished for its social relevance in Dakar and worn by elite Senegalese women as a means of distinction from the locals and identification with the colonial culture (Kirby, 2014). Bazin riche is produced in diverse bright colours, purchased by consumers, and later fabricated by a tailor into a garment style that reflects personal preferences and tastes. This process of purchasing a textile and then co-authoring its creation with the tailor is seen as an expression of consumer agency. This is one of the distinctions between Western and African dress systems, as Delhaye and Woet (2015, p. 86) point out in their examination of the consumption of wax cloth textile: ‘fashion is personally tailored in Ghana and created bottom-up in the interaction between consumers and tailors’. Similarly, Oboh (2018) shows in her study that within the West African diaspora community in Manchester, the tailor remains a relevant actor in the production and consumption of African dress practices.

While the above emphasises the cultural meaning of the textile amongst its wearers, Tunde Akinwumi explores its economic dimensions, as well as the resultant demise of cultural heritage when imported foreign textiles are sold and marketed to African consumers as African. Despite the colonial origins of the cloth, the African print textile is also considered an African

textile for the expression of African identities (Akinwumi, 2008; Osuanyi, 2017). In his examination of African print as a hoax, Akinwumi argues that this and other foreign textiles have overshadowed authentic indigenous African textiles such as adire, Aso-oke, Adinkra, Mud cloth, Korhogo, Kente, and Dogon cloth. The author writes that the term ‘African print’ was deployed when marketing the industrially produced fabrics of European and Asian textile firms for African consumer markets, misrepresenting the machine-printed fabric (Akinwumi, 2008, p. 179). These marketing efforts have, in effect, blurred ‘the sharp distinction between authentic African prints and European and Asiatic wax prints’ (Osuanyi, 2017, p. 37). Consequently, Osuanyi (2017, p. 48) argues that ‘Africa’s common image in textiles in the globalised fashion is actually Asiatic and European Dutch wax print’. These views not only draw attention to the prevalence of these textile fabrics – bazin riche, guinée, and African print – as markers of African identities but also to how their acceptance amongst African consumers has been orchestrated through marketing and promotional campaigns. However, as Rabine (2002, p. 2) points out, clothing in Dakar, Senegal is

a sea of sartorial opulence where currents and eddies swirled in layering and overlapping of styles, fabrics, dyeing techniques, and embroidery designs from different moments in Senegalese history. The sense of cultural richness was heightened by the coexistence of multiple dress codes, also from diverse historical moments marking the same garment.

The above highlights the fact that, in one single African nation, clothing and dress become a hybrid concept, a mixture of indigenous and foreign textiles and dress styles. The significance of this is that the very concept of African fashion has been shaped by the forces of globalisation. As Almila and Inglis (2017, p. 64) write, ‘Globalization has been a topic of discussion within fashion studies, especially as concerns the emergence of new centres of fashion outside of the “Western” cultural sphere’. In our increasingly interconnected world, the production and consumption of cultural goods and commodities are mediated through diverse formal and informal networks and organised around economic, commercial, and cultural values. In the present study, AFWL provides an avenue for the visibility of indigenous textiles in addition to the imported fabrics that now dominate the ‘African’ market, despite having been colonially imposed.

Challenging Eurocentrism in Fashion Scholarship

Eurocentrism – ‘the supremacy of white standards as universal, the idea that whiteness is the norm from which all other representations deviate’ (Pinho, 2006, p. 270) – is one of the most frequently stated problems within fashion studies and popular culture. Some scholars posit that the contestations stem partly from ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions about the differing contexts of fashion and the social theory of the world. As already mentioned, the study of fashion as a phenomenon has been enriched by an interdisciplinary approach. Almila and Inglis (2017, p. 64) argue, however, that the ‘field’s remit has not gone together with sufficient consideration of the epistemological challenges that are created by globalization and increasingly complex forms of transnational connectivity’. They contend that, while the study of fashion now captures fashion’s global nature as it spans space, time, cultural and economic systems and relations, our analysis must yet consider the ontological, methodological, and epistemological precepts underlying and informing our fashion theorisations. For Almila and Inglis (2017), globalisation has created a new ontological object – a highly connected world condition in which locales and relations are linked in complicated ways – and this requires a new epistemology. One of how Eurocentrism arises in fashion scholarship concerns the consciousness of change (Almila and Inglis, 2017; Jansen, 2020). For instance, Lise Skov (2011, p. 146) suggests that by interrogating the ‘conventional history of fashion [...], rather than fashion being seen as a single instance of universal strategies of change, it has been perceived to have originated and developed exclusively in Europe, embodying cultural superiority’. She adds that this conventional fashion history has taken shape in two ways, ‘firstly, the perceived civilised appearance vis-à-vis the uncivilised primitiveness that non-Western dress was supposed to represent [...]. Second, in its association with dynamism and progress vis-à-vis the perceived stability and slowness of non-Western dress’ (Skov, 2011, p. 146). This echoes Jansen’s (2015) point that the Western colonial/modern order has presented, normalised, and created our vocabularies for thinking and speaking about fashion, which is predicated on binaries like change/static and modernity/tradition. It is commonly assumed that the materialist-oriented culture of the West makes rapid fashion changes possible, and is thus a defining characteristic of Western fashion. In their examination of the development of fashion scholarship, Almila and Inglis (2017, p. 70) point out that, ‘since other civilizations—the Oriental, for example—did not invent the steam engine, the spinning jenny, et al., they never achieved a sufficiently materialistic-oriented culture to make possible the extravagance of fashion behavior’. This is,

of course, a deeply Eurocentric understanding of technical capacities and inventions. In this regard, Mustafa (2017) extends our understanding of technical capabilities in her examination of fashion innovations and creativity in Dakar, demonstrating how local Senegalese tailors, businesswomen, and consumers reconfigure and re-articulate local and global hierarchies through their creative inventions in material culture, values, and practices. Fashion behaviour in Dakar is therefore as complex as behaviours found in Western cities, and Dakar fashion expresses socio-economic realities, cosmopolitan global identities, and local tastes.

Scholars have increasingly challenged Eurocentrism in fashion studies, as well as descriptions of fashion as an expression of Western modernity and civilisation, and non-European dress as an expression of static tradition (Hollander, 1975; Craik, 1994; Rabine, 2002; Niessen, 2003; Mustafa, 2006; Lillethun, Welters and Eicher, 2012; Rovine, 2015; Jansen, 2020). In her contribution, Jansen introduces a decolonial framework to interrogate the very foundation of Western fashion – modernity. According to Jansen (2020) despite the blurring of the disciplinary boundaries between dress and fashion studies, much of fashion theorisation remains Eurocentric and underpinned by the modernity/colonial theoretical framework. She writes, ‘The critique of Eurocentrism in fashion studies has been predominantly focused on symptoms such as inequality, discrimination, and exploitation, while the actual disease the modernity/coloniality conceptual framework, persists’ (Jansen, 2020, p. 2). Jansen (2020, p. 3) then sets out the significance of a decolonial framework that provides a

radical redefinition of fashion by delinking it from modernity—the very core of its constitution—and therefore from coloniality by redefining it as a multitude of possibilities—in and outside of modernity—rather than a normative framework falsely claiming universality. It critiques the denial and erasure of a diversity of ways to fashioning the body due to unequal global power relations based on modern-colonial order, the Euro–American canon of normativity and the exploitation and abuse of culture, human life, and Earth.

Drawing on the decolonial critiques formulated by Vazquez (2018), Jansen further problematises one of the core assumptions of modernity: namely, the universalistic arrogance of the Eurocentric episteme that insists there is no modernity without coloniality. The decolonial perspective, by contrast, does not seek to impose itself on others, but rather, to understand how

contemporary fashion has been and continues to be built on (the denial of) the exploitation and abuse of natural resources, human beings and cultural heritages. As such, decolonizing fashion is not so much about ‘taking contemporary fashion out,’ as it is about uncovering, enabling and reexisting what has been deliberately, structurally and consistently denied, erased and de-futured. (Jansen, 2020, p. 10)

The quotation above continues from Jansen’s earlier contribution to the subject, Jansen (2004, p. 372) points out that the examination of African clothing and dress as fashion has been marginalised by ‘the distinction between fashion in the West and the traditional clothing of much of the rest of the world by scholars who explain fashion’s origin in terms of the development of the capitalist production system in the West’. Capitalism is one of the core components within the narrative of modernity, and the economic system is one of the defining characteristics of fashion as modern (Almila and Inglis, 2017). Eurocentrism, in turn, perpetuates the idea that non-European and non-Western regions have been untouched by capitalism (Rabine, 2002; Mustafa, 2006) and are thus more traditional, primitive societies fixed to a distant past. Several scholars have challenged this assumption, demonstrating how much of the world has, to a varying extent, been connected through some form of capitalist trade for millennia (Rabine, 2002; Rovine, 2010; 2015). Contemporary fashion, therefore, is a transcultural phenomenon whose visibility is sharply enhanced by digital media technologies and transnational migrations.

Rovine (2015, p. 16) observes that ‘fashion has been used as a shorthand tool for cultural classification in the interaction between African and Western cultures, an index of the attainment of civilised (read: Western) status’. The dual concepts of tradition and modernity are often employed in the discourse and scholarship on fashion, ‘to classify cultures, people, practices and objects [...] classification in one category means exclusion from the other’ (Rovine, 2015, p. 18). As mentioned above, these concepts emerged with European colonisation and social theory in the nineteenth century, which associated tradition with a timeless, prehistoric, and unchanging past. Recent scholarship problematises these cultural associations and their designation of African practices, forms, and styles as local, indigenous, and historical cultures as contrasting with modern, white, Western societies. The association of fashion with the level of civilisation of a people or society therefore performs an ideological function: it becomes a tool of oppression by Euro-American elites over the indigenous Other (Elias, 2000 [1939]; Wilson, 2005; Niessen, 2010). This supposedly ‘common-sense’

understanding of fashion belonging to the West and traditional clothing belonging to the Other has, in turn, produced a pervasive misunderstanding of dress cultures around the world. Rabine (2002) is one such scholar who troubles this traditional/modern dichotomy in her examination of the global circulation of African fashion. The author argues that through their production, consumption, and exchange practices, African fashion producers confer diverse meanings on garments that may be understood as being both modern *and* traditional, as well as authentic. The multiple meanings of these garments can also vary according to the wearer and location. As such, these practices challenge the Western-centric, narrow definition of fashion, which not only relies upon the traditional/modern dichotomy but also the opposition between Western fashion and other forms of dress. In the present study, we also see African diaspora fashion designers showing that fashion production is not specific to the West. AFWL provides a stage for the visibility of these African fashions to global audiences.

As several scholars have argued, in a postcolonial and globally connected world, cities in the West can no longer lay claim to being the sole reference for fashion trends (Rabine, 2002; Banerjee and Miller, 2003; Niessen, 2010; Craik, 2009; Skov, 2011; Oberhofer, 2012; Jansen, 2015; Ling, 2015; Pool, 2017). While Skov (2011, p. 147) highlights the progress made by smaller European nations who have been ‘dwarfed by their dominant neighbours’, other scholars have worked to further interrogate the hegemony of European fashion centres altogether. More specifically, they have argued that the centre-to-periphery framework and dominance of the Western fashion capitals ‘as being the only leading-trend-setting places for global fashion design’ occludes the variable geographical power structures and local transformations across cultures (Oberhofer, 2012, p. 67). As Mustafa (2006, p. 182) argues, global cities are ‘shaped through webs of unequal exchange, dependence and shared imperial history with cities of the South – Mumbai, Dakar, Lagos, Mexico City, in a polycentric world’. Similarly, George (2019, p. 70) also draws attention to fashion practices in the UAE, ‘illustrating how locally-based fashion systems create alternative, internal forms of economic, symbolic exchange and design practices’ informed by local taste and conventions. She challenges the understanding of fashion perpetuated by media channels particularly when fashion is seen as exclusive to Western industrialised nations and particular economic systems. George (2019, 71) also highlights the failure of Western scholarship and media to ‘accommodate the many parts of the world in a pre-industrial period with heterogeneous populations and complex sartorial systems’. Adopting a mixed-method approach of participant observation, interviews and media analysis, George examines the design production,

consumption, and circulation of the abaya (an Islamic style of dress). Her work troubles the ‘West-versus-the-rest’ paradigm, arguing that abayas are not ‘merely “traditional attire” [...] but contemporary fashion garments with new locally situated approaches to design and marketing’ (George, 2019, p. 72). On a related note, Oberhofer (2012, p. 85) argues that fashion is influenced by a location’s ‘specific, historical, social, cultural and political contexts and dynamics’. In her examination of African fashion production across Johannesburg, Lagos, and Douala, Oberhofer (2012, p. 66) challenges the prevailing view of ‘Africa as a source of aesthetic inspiration and backdrop for the Western imagination about the exotic other’. She argues that these three metropolitan African cities possess distinct cultural and aesthetic characteristics, all of which shape interactions in different ways: ‘vibrant and diverse fashion scenes of local and global importance have developed in Africa [...] and [are] sought after by young Africans and consumers in diasporas’ (Oberhofer, 2012, p. 66). In these cities, we find numerous fashion weeks, fashion shows, and fashion designers, whether designing haute couture or streetwear, and infusing their fashion practices with local arts, entertainment, politics, historical events, and a wider framework of pan-African identity. Oberhofer (2012:85) continues, ‘to analyse contemporary fashion in Africa, long established dichotomies of traditional and modern, local, and global, or Africa and the West [...] are not useful to understand the dynamic involved’. This view aligns with the work of Hannah Pool (2016, p. 14), who states in *Fashion Cities Africa* that ‘there is no such thing as African fashion any more than there is European fashion or North American fashion. But there are vibrant African cities, each with different influences, inspirations, and priorities, all reflected by their designers.

Fashion Cities Africa is a visual narrative – a series of street-style images of African designers dressed in African fashions in Nairobi, Casablanca, Lagos, and Johannesburg that ‘challenges the stereotypes about what constitutes African fashion and [...] the visual narratives of the African aesthetics’ (Pool, 2016, p. 14). Together, these examples show that outside the ‘big four’ dominant fashion centres, the Western structures, representations, and ‘truths’ about fashion cultures and practices are being destabilised; these African cities reveal fashion realities and cultures in specific contexts outside the West, presented in the context of globalisation. Skov (2011, p. 150) argues that this polycentrism and pluralism within modern fashion ‘constitutes a transformation of the fashion system’ away from the classic centre-to-periphery model. This implies that contemporary fashion sources are diverse and wide-ranging, a global cultural phenomenon that manifests across diverse cultural circuits and markets. My research builds on this idea by examining the transnational spaces of African fashion produced by

Nigerian diaspora fashion designers in London. This study explores AFWL as one such instance of the fashion system's transformation described above – specifically created to communicate the transnational field of African fashion from the switching financial centre of global capital. This work asks how African-descended fashion producers – who are both 'here' and 'there' – construct and express meaning through their dress and design practices, and thus reconfigure the meanings of contemporary fashion and identities. It also asks what divisions we might discover between dress and fashion.

African Diaspora Fashion

The growing field of study that explores how fashion has been influenced within the specific context of the African diaspora – a context in which identification is an ongoing negotiation between here and there. An important aspect of African diaspora fashion is engagement in resistance, political activism, social protest, the challenging of stereotypes, and promoting cultural pride and representation. Increasingly, marginalised groups within Western cultural spaces are challenging conventional Eurocentric aesthetics, beauty practices, and discursive misrepresentations circulated in the mainstream media which constructed acceptable bodily practices. Much scholarship has already focused on the discursive practices in Western media that have portrayed and reproduced negative representations of Black bodies (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1992; Ifekwunigwe, 2004), as well as the resistance to such misrepresentations. As bell hooks (1992, p. 5) writes, the representation of the Black body in dominant media, 'determines how blackness and people are seen and how other groups will respond to us based on their relations to these constructed images'. Media representations, especially in the form of racial stereotypes, shape attitudes and behaviours towards Blackness, Black bodies, and Black beauty aesthetics. In this regard, the issue of systemic racism in the fashion industry has attracted heightened attention, particularly the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of African, Black, and Asian models and fashion creatives in mainstream fashion culture (Sadre-Orafai, 2008; Mears, 2011).

As mentioned in the General Introduction, Copper's work notes that Caribbean Fashion Week (CFW) emerged in part owing to the 'marginality of blackness in official constructions of Jamaican national identity' (2010, p. 388). Copper (2010, p. 389) also writes that CFW is a major platform for the display of glamorously dressed Black bodies, 'embodying subversion of old-fashioned notions of their appropriate place – on the margins of aesthetic discourse'. The dressed body in this African diasporic setting 'comes to signify the ideological: both the

deprivation and the reclamation of humanity [...] a metonym for the re-aestheticization of blackness itself” (Copper, 2010, p. 389). In this case, dress, body, and fashion become resources for resisting systemic marginalisation and reclaiming Black aesthetics. While historically the Fashion Week platform has been used by the fashion industry to showcase and present new clothing collections to the international press, over time the event has expanded beyond its original focus of sales promotion to that of branding a city, attracting tourism, etc. (Ling, 2015). This has presented a media-saturated opportunity for marginalised groups to assert and affirm their visibility – in this case, the visibility not only of the designers and their clothing collections but more crucially, Black bodies. In this vein, AFWL is a major platform for the visibility and celebration of black models, designers, and other creative and cultural workers who are invisible in mainstream Fashion Week events.

As already mentioned, the disciplinary divide between dress and fashion studies has been historically rooted in anthropology and ethnography methodologies, where dress studies sought to study so-called ‘primitive’ and non-Western regions for their unchanging, geographically fixed and localised clothing and dress traditions (Eicher, 1975). Fashion studies, on the other hand, was concerned with the Western world’s rapid style transformations (Wilson, 2005). This disciplinary divide has been addressed by scholars like Carol Tulloch (2010), whose conceptualisation of ‘style–fashion–dress’ argues for an interconnectedness that is necessary for the study of dress in the African diaspora. Tulloch (2010, p. 275) writes that ‘style–fashion–dress [...] constitutes a system of concepts that signifies the multitude of meanings and frameworks that are always “whole-and-part” of dress studies’. This concept is therefore an attempt to bridge the disparate fields of dress studies and fashion studies since both are ‘hybrid subjects because they bring together different conceptual frameworks and disciplinary approaches’ (Skov and Melchior, 2008, p. 3).

Transnational Fashion Lens

The global phenomenon of fashion is shaped by the exchange of ideas, styles, and influences between different cultures, regions, and spaces (Maynard, 2004). In her examination of the expressions and constructions of postmodern transnational femininities through fashion, Simidele Dosekun (2020) examines the hyper-feminine style of class-privileged, already-empowered, and educated young women in Lagos, Nigeria. The author argues that the dress consumption practices of these young Lagosians are neither to ‘express feminine frivolity nor traditional domesticity but rather stylised freedom’ (Dosekun, 2020, p. 23). Elsewhere, she

notes, ‘hyper-feminine style is the spectacular use of elements such as cascading hair extensions, long and manicured nails, heavy and immaculate makeup, false eyelashes, and towering high heels’ (Dosekun, 2020, p. 22). For these Nigerian women, globally produced and circulated fashion goods are tools for such self-fashioning, signalling success and individual freedom. Importantly, Dosekun shows that this representation of an urban elite subset of privileged cosmopolitans within African society exists alongside so-called ‘poverty porn’ – Western perceptions and media representations of Africa as a pitifully impoverished place. This aligns with Giles Lipovetsky’s (1987) view that fashion is a tool for social renewal, insofar as it is the mechanism that frees people from the authority of traditions and rigid class structures. Here, for Lagos women, in the Nigerian transnational context, globalisation has opened new avenues for individuals to pick, mix, and choose whatever they wish to participate in or portray. Within this realm, contemporary fashion consumption is seen to enable the maintenance of class identities as well as providing freedom for those women who are already in possession of economic and cultural capital to search and seek pleasure. While these studies redirect the focus from Western, elite white women to African women, they emphasise consumption rather than fashion production; in other words, they do not focus on dress design and clothing collections.

Anthropological and ethnographic studies of African societies have typically been concerned with the material culture of traditional dress in particular communities, or of individuals in non-Western societies (Jansen and Craik 2018). Although these studies are useful for gaining a broader view of global dress, some of this research has proved unsatisfactory in that it reproduces the colonial gaze or circumscribes and stresses collective and regional ‘timelessness’ rather than individual and historical dynamics (Jansen, 2020). Dosekun (2015, pp. 2–3) challenges the widely held view that post-feminism in Western culture, ‘understood as a contemporary cultural sensibility proclaiming that women are “now empowered,” and celebrating and encouraging their consequent “freedom” to return to normatively feminine pursuits’ is for ‘white girls only’. The hegemonic West, perceived as the site of progress and modernity and denies, and trivialises the manifestations of post-feminism in African spaces. Dosekun (2015, p. 11) also argues that post-feminism is better understood as a transnationalised culture enabled by the ‘media, commodity and consumer connectivities that today crisscross more borders more densely and rapidly than ever before’. By drawing on this concept of transnationalism, Dosekun challenges the tendency to perceive and understand non-Western cultures from a predominantly Euro-American or White perspective. As Dosekun (2015, p. 2)

writes, it is imperative to hold the transnational lens up to culture and post-feminism in order 'to recognise that the culture reaches and hails not only women in the West but also others elsewhere'. Within the present study, a transnational lens is crucial for understanding AFWL, allowing this work to capture multiple circuits, overlapping spaces and identities, and to understand how media globalisation and transnational commodity culture allow Nigerian fashion design practitioners to maintain cross-border fashion activities and practices. Another import of taking a transnational lens to understand AFWL is that it allows an examination of how fashion design practitioners in the Nigerian diaspora construct a sense of belonging and identities, shaped by the connections and interactions they maintain across national borders (Levitt, 2004). With this understanding, the AFWL event situated in the Western global city, provides a site for the consecration of African designs and dress in the minds of both African and non-African audiences.

Sociological Analyses of Fashion Culture

In her examination of research methods in fashion and clothing studies, Efrat Tseeleon (2001, p. 436) points out that one of fashion research's greatest challenges is that the methods - including opinion pieces in newspapers, and fashion magazines - used in fashion studies are contradictory and comprises a mixture of unempirical and overtly technical applications. She argues that fashion as a lived phenomenon must be examined in the specific context of its production and consumption. Thus, the study of fashion within the sociology of culture is grounded in empirical research methods including interviews, archival documents such as biographies, reviewed newspaper and magazine articles, and observation (Blumer, 1969; Kawamura 2004; Dwyer, 2006; Rocamora, 2015). Using these methods, researchers have examined fashion within many diverse cultural contexts: local, regional, international, and every day (Crane and Buckley, 2000). Their explorations have included fashion cities as sites of consumption, fashion weeks as place-making and branding for cities, cultural clusters as innovative and creative hubs, and shopping, and streets as spaces for the expressions of individual creativity. In addition, also important are pop music culture, media images produced in films, movies, and museums as important cultural sites to produce fashion cultures (Bruzzi and Gibson, 2000). As a cultural context for the transnational production of fashion cultures, the diasporas have attracted extensive research among scholars (Bhachu, 2002; Crang *et al.*,

2003; Dwyer, 2006; Botticello, 2009; Derrington, 2014; Ford, 2015; Oboh, 2018; Rovine, 2015; Tulloch, 2015; Morsaini, 2019).

As is already established, the study of fashion has been accused of Eurocentrism. One way in which fashion studies have been enriched and expanded to combat this, however, is through the examination of fashion cultures within ‘specific historical, geographic, and cultural contexts’ (Breward and Evans, 2005, p. 3). In this regard, Craik (2009, p. 1) argues that fashion is a global social phenomenon that is constantly expanding, which ‘occurs everywhere and touches the lives of everyone [...] for fashion is not just confined to the catwalks, collections and curators, but exists everywhere in multiple forms and experiences’. Rovine (2015, p. 16) also argues that ‘changing the style of dress [fashion] must be explored beyond the geographic and chronological boundaries of one’s own culture’. As Rovine demonstrates in her examination of dress innovations in West Africa, such explorations tend to reveal the role of individuals, small-scale producers, artisans, and consumers as key players in the fashion process. Also important is the view that global fashion and clothing production systems present opportunities for ‘contemporary African fashion designers’ to challenge the Western dominance of the global fashion markets (Rovine, 2015, p. 104). Osuanyi (2017, p. 48) illustrates how this challenge presents itself within the design activities of fashion designers in Ghana:

Many of the student designers prefer to design and produce their own fabric prints and use them for their collections. Some of the renowned fashion designers based on their collections, prefer to produce their own printed fabrics; use local fabrics or a blend of local fabrics and foreign fabrics. From the design point of view, creating unique designs in making collections is awesome.

Several factors are involved in inspiring these designers to produce their fabric rather than use available fabric such as African print. These include technological innovations, the global supply chain, and greater concern for the importance of production and consumption as a productive activity for self-presentation in the postcolonial and postmodern age.

In contrast to the definitions of fashion as a cultural industry and economic activity of market actors (Braham, 2007; Bovone 2012). Professor of Sociology of Communication, Laura Bovone defines fashion as cultural production. She writes that fashion ‘refers to the numerous artefacts we use in our everyday life which mostly have a function connected to our needs –

namely subsistence, home, work – but are specifically chosen and appreciated by us because they enrich our lives by giving them meaning’ (Bovone, 2012, p. 79). This definition conceives of fashion as material culture, highlighting the materiality of objects that consumers use in everyday life, whether they be clothing, body, dress, or other meaningful items. This aligns with Tulloch’s conceptualisation of fashion as a form of ‘style–fashion–dress’ and helps to reconcile the disciplinary and binary divide between the fashion industry and fashion as an everyday consumer material (Kaiser, 2012; Tulloch, 2015). Further to this, Bovone makes distinctions between modern and postmodern cultures to extrapolate how, in an era of mass consumption, consumerism offers new opportunities for the construction of multiple selves. Fashion changes at an even faster rate in the postmodern age than it did in the modern age. As a result of this, consumers exercise stronger reflexivity, ‘reflecting on occasions and tools that he/she can use to enhance her/his identity’ (Bovone 2012, p. 90). For Bovone (2012, p. 86), the postmodern is characterised by fragmented identities, individualisation, pluralism, reflexivity, new opportunities, uncertainties, and objects having multiple meanings and diverse uses for different social groups. In this postmodern age, with its greater accessibility, broader choices, and increased global interconnectivity between people, ideas, and cultures, the consumer becomes the key actor (Bauman, 2001).

In this regard, as consumers of globalised fashion cultures, individuals, and groups within the Nigerian diaspora and on the continent, both use and appropriate elements from diverse sources in meaningful ways (Bovone, 2012). Situated as they are in a globalised consumer culture, these consumers can utilise the myriad opportunities available to them to construct different parts of the self, not only through clothing consumption practices but also through dress and design practices. Fashion editor and author Helen Jennings (2001) writes of young African designers who have trained and studied abroad and later returned to their home countries to establish a fashion business. While most of the diaspora returnees studied other subjects abroad, often these emerging designers have no background in fashion design but are motivated to design garments because, as consumers, they found that they were unable to find suitable African ready-to-wear fashion on the market. In the postmodern age, therefore, fashion emanates from diverse sources, with fashion styles and trends being influenced by cultural, political, and economic factors. As a result, the classical diffusion or ‘trickle-down’ theories of fashion are no longer applicable in today’s globalised world (Crane, 2002; Braham, 2007; Gonzalez and Bovone, 2012).

In her work on the British rag trade, Angela McRobbie (1998, p. 22) writes that fashion is a field of cultural importance because it is ‘a place of livelihoods’. McRobbie’s definition of fashion as a cultural industry relies upon sociological and cultural studies and regards fashion as a cultural practice that is produced and circulated by cultural intermediaries such as ‘fashion editors, fashion writers, fashion buyers...array of stylists, photographers, models’ (2000, p. 259). She also argues that this poses several critical questions for government policy. Further, McRobbie (2000, p. 259) writes, ‘through the repertoire of available fashion discourses’ such as the new fashion design star, these various intermediaries and their promotional strategies produce and circulate ideas about the designer’s occupation that are the antithesis of their real lived experience. On the other hand, fashion designers themselves employ various promotional strategies to sell their talents, skills, and brand, while retaining an inner desire and commitment to passion and imagination. These views align with Rocamora’s (2009) exploration of the construction of Paris as a fashion city through the discourses produced and circulated by the French fashion press. McRobbie’s understanding of fashion as a cultural industry is especially relevant to my study of African diaspora designer fashions, in that it recognises the collective activities, practices, and discourses of government, industry, press, and institutions, as engaged in the production of fashion’s symbolic meanings. Her framework allows me to examine the lived experiences of African fashion designers working in the fashion labour market, as well as the discourses and narratives produced about African designer fashions by the event organisers, the media, African governmental agencies, and the public. These perspectives are all useful for understanding the context that led to the emergence of AFWL as a space in which Nigerian diaspora fashion designers can operate. Like the fashion designers examined in McRobbie’s study, who struggle for commercial viability and global visibility, the upcoming and emerging British-Nigerian fashion designers I study experience similar issues. These include precarity, having to manage two or more jobs, racial discrimination, and exclusion. However, unlike the fashion designers in McRobbie’s 1998 study, contemporary British-Nigerian designers have access to new communication technologies, providing them with greater opportunities to engage in transnational fashion practices and bring together multiple places and consumer markets far beyond the host land and homeland.

For contemporary African fashion producers, then, these increasingly new digital media platforms have become sites for those previously marginalised by mainstream fashion culture to explicitly position themselves as offering alternatives to the established fashion producers who have traditionally used fashion shows, fashion magazines, or boutiques. Although focused

on consumers rather than producers and fashion designers, consumer culture theorists Craig Thompson and Diana Haytko (1997) point out in their study that consumers are not cultural dupes who simply follow the dominant established fashion discourse. Rather, in the construction of self-identities, consumers rework undesirable fashion discourses such as the notion that 'Black models don't sell'. This applies to designers, whom Bovone describe as 'consumer-producers' (Bovone, 2012, p. 82) who identify with the commodities that they produce. Thus, the democratisation brought about by digital media offers this study an opportunity to examine and explore the experiences of African and Nigerian fashion designers as producers of meanings at AFWL.

In contrast to McRobbie, who sees fashion as a cultural practice, Rocamora employs Bourdieu's field theory to examine fashion as a field of practice that produces field-specific fashion discourse. She defines this as

a conglomerate of discourses whose coming together is structured by the particular field they appear in as conveyed by its members – designers, museums, for instance, but also media [...] who by sharing the same ensemble of discourse are able to define their reciprocal belonging' (Rocamora, 2015, p. 58).

Rocamora also refers to the sociological concept of field theory in her previous work on London Fashion Week (Entwistle and Rocamora 2006) and in her examination of the French fashion media discourse through which Paris has been glamorised and ascribed a mythical status (Rocamora 2009: (p. xiv). In her analysis of the settings in which fashion practices including media production and representation take place and the relations within the setting Rocamora appropriates Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field – defined as "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:97). For instance, Entwistle and Rocamora (2006, p. 743) write that the field of fashion has its players, all of whom are responsible for making, marketing, or selling clothing. This field can be mapped out in terms of the relationships between key institutions and agents and is a useful theoretical position for my study in terms of establishing how the field of African diaspora transnational fashion is created and who its key players are. In this regard, I shall be asking who its main players are, what positions they play, and how they go about doing this.

The approach in the study of fashion concerned with the sociology of culture often connects culture and commerce as indivisible rather than separate domains. For instance, in her

examination of the systemic nature of fashion production, Kawamura (2018, p. 31) writes that the sociology of culture approach ‘recognises the importance and pays much attention to the social-structural processes of cultural production and consumption’. Here, the author draws attention to the production-consumption relationship by situating it within the cultural contexts through which products/commodities are given meaning. This perspective sees culture as ‘the means through which people create meaningful worlds in which to live [... and these] are constructed through interpretations, experiences, and activities whereby material is produced and consumed’ (Kawamura, 2018, p. 32). Kawamura (2018, pp. 31–32) further defines fashion as ‘a cultural practice’ and a ‘symbolic product’ created by a collective group of people rather than one single genius. She sets out fashion as a production of symbols, arguing, ‘fashion is not visible or tangible, and therefore uses clothing as a symbolic manifestation’ (Kawamura, 2018, p. 32). Fashion weeks, of course, form part of that symbolic manifestation, though this role has changed over time (Skov, 2006; Ling, 2015). Ling notes that while fashion weeks initially emerged as a way for post-industrialised cities to promote their cultural and creative industries and grow their local fashion industry, its role is now characterised by established design traditions and highly skilled manufacturing clusters. Fashion weeks were traditionally exclusive to trade professionals within the fashion industry, and fashion show collections presented designers who were endorsed by key industry players such as fashion magazine editors, who constructed and disseminated discursive representations of the designers, their work, and their lifestyles.

As discussed above, Ling identifies a new feature of fashion week termed ‘new rise’, which reflects increased diversity in fashion styles and trends in a more global context. Unlike the traditional fashion weeks associated with Paris, Milan, New York, and London, the ‘new rise’ fashion weeks serve to promote consumption rather than encourage local fashion industries or legitimate designer creativity. In response to this, my study of AFWL focuses on the comparatively underexplored domain of fashion production, rather than consumption. I consider the phenomenon of fashion week in the context of the African diaspora and its transnational fashion economies as a resource for transforming Africa’s image on the global stage, legitimating African fashion designers and disseminating knowledge of African aesthetics as ‘visibly global and resolutely local at the same time’ (Hansen and Madison, 2013, p. 9).

The study of fashion in the context of globalisation identifies the circularity of capital, culture, information, and ideas as moving horizontally and vertically and emanating from multiple sources (Braham, 2007). This implicates designers, firms, and workers spread across different geographies, both local and regional, all of whom are plugged into the global fashion industry through transnational networks of activities and circuits of production (Rovine, 2015). As Rantisi (2011, p. 261) argues, ‘in the global context, fashion depends on networks of relationships that filter and circulate information, including the key industry activities of production, design, marketing, and distribution’. This statement proves contrary to the conventional and prevailing ‘centre-to-periphery’ formulation of fashion as originating from one usually Western source (Jansen, 2020). It is worth remembering, however, that globalisation is not a synonym for transnationalism (Scholte, 2003).

In her analysis of fashion as a transnational culture, Claire Dwyer (2006) draws on the idea of the circuit of culture, extrapolating and highlighting the interrelated elements of representation, production, articulation, identity, regulation, and consumption as processes in the creation of transnational fashion. In doing this, Dwyer (2006, p. 217) points out how in the practice of fashion, companies including designers and marketers mobilise discourses and ideas about transnationality in the ‘stylization and marketing of clothing’. In her examination of transnational British-Asian fashion cultures, Dwyer examines the history of Asian fashion in Britain, British Imperialism in Asia, and key urban centres in her analysis of the different ways in which transnational fashion cultures of Britain and the Indian subcontinent are linked. Cultural studies theorist Hall (1997, p. 2) also argues that culture is ‘not so much a set of things – novels, paintings, or TV programmes or comics [...] it is a process, a set of practices. Primarily culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the giving and taking of meanings – between the members of a society or group’. One of the key practices in the production, exchange, and circulation of meanings is representation, where meanings are produced and communicated through images, gestures, social behaviours, body, dress, and clothing. All of these function as forms of language in a system of representation. The sociological perspective is relevant to this present study for several reasons, the foremost being that it focuses on fashion as a system through which symbolic meanings and values are produced through material culture, such as the body and clothing materials. More importantly, a sociological perspective suggests moving analysis beyond the old conception of society, relations, identities, and places, not as fixed and static but fluid and continually changing.

The adoption of such sociological methods to assess the diverse uses and functions of fashion across different cultures, communities, and societies has helped to establish fashion as a legitimate and important discipline.

Chapter Three

Approaching the Literature: Globalisation, Diaspora, and Transnationalism

Introduction

This chapter aims to review the literature on globalisation, diaspora, and transnationalism, providing a discussion and overview of the extant empirical studies and theories on these concepts. The three concepts represent the organising principles behind the social context in which contemporary Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners negotiate and express their transnational fashion practices, social interactions, relations, and identities in the digital, globalised age. The chapter begins by looking at the broader literature on globalisation – an important first step because twentieth-century globalisation differs significantly from the current era of globalised digital media technologies and the unprecedented rapid transfer and flow of ideas, commodities, people, capital, and information it provides (Appadurai 1996). In the next section of this chapter, I review the scholarship on diaspora and the debates and key issues pertaining to diasporic formation, maintenance of links between home and host societies, and identity constructions. Rather than aggregating the African diaspora into one monolithic group, this study conceptualises the nature and characteristics specific to the Nigerian transnational diaspora in the age of globalisation. Last, the chapter examines the literature on transnationalism and transnational media and practices.

This project is influenced by the scholarly legacy of Claire Dwyer in the field of transnational fashion and extends Dwyer's work by exploring migration, global commodity culture, transnational circuits, and identity within the African diaspora context. Dwyer's work on the South Asian transnational fashion circuits in global commodities aligns with my study's exploration of transnational African fashion through the practices of designing, marketing, and promotion. Building on this, my research draws on Dwyer's brilliant work to provide new insights into transnational diaspora African fashion cultures, and the formal and informal circuits and networks through which African fashion commodities are produced, marketed, and circulated. It fills the gap in knowledge on Nigerian diaspora fashion and transnational

commodities through the interrelated processes of designing, marketing, and promoting in the digital age.

The Age of Globalisation and Inequality

Sassen (1998) describes globalisation as being constructed through processes such as migration, consumption, production, the internet, and the media. However, Zygmunt Bauman (2001, pp. 8–9) argues that the network of forces that determine the conditions of globalisation ‘are purely and simply, incomparable and widely disproportionate’. This implies that, while processes of globalisation have led to greater worldwide interconnectivity, it has also created unequal economic relations between core nations such as the UK, America, and China, and the peripheries in Asia and Africa (Wallerstein, 1989). An illustration of the class and racial inequalities between nations in the global fashion industry is summed up by Smelik (2006, p. 154) who points out that ‘Globalisation results in cheap clothing and enormous profits in the West, but also protests against exploitation, such as against Nikes made by small children in Pakistan’. Western firms that outsource garment manufacturing to low-wage, non-Western workers – people who are often unable to afford the garments they are making – are examples of a global capitalist economy that links India, China, and other parts of the world. Beck (1992) also asserts that the processes through which humans are interconnected in the contemporary world have created a global risk society. The author describes the various consequences of human scientific and technological advancements on nature and human life as ‘manufactured risks’ – for example in ecological crises, climate change, pollution from mass industry, the consumption of genetically modified foods, and poisonous chemicals used in clothing manufacturing.

Andersen and Taylor (2006) examine the different positions of countries within the globalised capitalist market economy. They argue that, with the increased interconnectedness of world economies, rich and poor nations are not independent of the ‘global system of stratification of which they are a part [... which] involves nations in a large and integrated network of both economic and political relationships’ (Andersen and Taylor, 2006, pp. 246, 250). On this subject, Paul Zeleza (2005, pp. 4–5) argues that inequalities can also take the form of knowledge, for example in the ‘cultural and economic hegemony of the United States’ as it manifests in ‘asymmetries in knowledge production about African diasporas in different world regions’. In this example, African American experience is imposed on African diasporic discourse in the form of a generic model on themes of slavery, race relations, and racialised

Black American identity. As Falola (2013, p. 276) further explains, ‘knowledge circulated about Africa in the United States’ [is] framed in relation to preconceived notions of Africa and the received knowledge of Africa in relation to Africa invented by Europeans in the contexts of slavery, racism, colonialism, and neocolonialism’. This suggests that knowledge production manifests in hegemonic cultural representations of Blackness, the body, and culture, particularly from the perspective of Western writers, who view beauty sensibilities and practices as exclusively Western phenomena. On a related note, Dosekun (2015, p. 964) points out that ‘The West has long represented itself as the site of “progress” and “modernity” for women, casting diverse Western actors as saviours of “other” women’. This suggests that, while globalisation is often lauded because of its ability to gather the world’s regions into a single global market economy, the reality is that globalisation creates inequalities and contradictory socio-economic outcomes. The import of this for my study is that AFWL provides an avenue for Nigerian and African diaspora design practitioners to produce their own knowledge and narratives about African fashion.

Globalisation and Culture

Kevin Robins (2003, p. 242) argues that, in relation to culture and identity, ‘global shifts - associated with the creation of world markets, with international communication and media flows and with international travel – has profound implications for the way we make sense of our lives and of the changing world we live’. On one hand ‘common cultural references across the world’ have led to greater cosmopolitan ideals and ‘cultural encounters across frontiers that can create new and productive kinds of cultural fusion and hybridity’. On the other hand, globalisation is increasingly ‘transforming our apprehension of the world in sharply contrasting ways. It is provoking a new sense of disorientation and orientation, giving rise to new experiences of both placeless and placed identity’.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2009, p. 240) points out that one of the consequences of the evolution of culture engendered by globalisation is the freedom ‘to constantly reinvent ourselves’. The implications of this process are that, with the ‘expanded range of available worldviews and affiliations’ and ideologies available to people, globalisation creates conditions for both the ‘softening and hardening of identities’ (Rosenmann, Reese and Cameron, 2016, p. 203).

The need to constantly reinvent the self is thus a feature of modernity (Giddens, 1991) since, in premodern societies, identities tended to be fixed and socially prescribed (Bauman, 2001).

The socio-economic order of global interdependence ushered in by globalisation has also brought with it many new forms of identification (Bauman, 2001; Kennedy, 2001; McFarland, 2010 Buchan *et al.*, 2011). Bauman (2001, p. 11) defines ‘Identification, as a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged’. In other words, human social life is influenced and shaped by globalising forces, which alter and redefine ideas, forever raising new tensions and anxieties. Nevertheless, Bauman (2001, p. 8) posits that, because ‘our actions are local’, interconnectivity and global flows facilitated by capitalism, migration, and the internet do not negate the localities in which human relations are developed and enacted.

Globalisation as an ongoing and dynamic process of the interdependence of human societies and interactions has provoked a ‘crisis of identities’ (Kennedy, 2001) as well as presenting new opportunities and contexts for new identities to emerge, given that individuals re-evaluate their self-identifications within a global context (Giddens, 1999; Arnett, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). In one example of this, McFarland (2010, p. 1760) points out that globalisation processes have fostered a greater identification with all humanity, encouraging the belief that ‘all humanity is “family”’. This attitude is characterised by prioritising collective action, commitment to human rights, engaging in behaviours that would benefit others, feeling concern for the welfare of the world community, and taking on environmental actions and sensibilities (McFarland *et al.*, 2012; Buchan *et al.*, 2011).

Anthony Giddens points out that the term globalisation is largely synonymous with modernity (2003, p. 60). For Giddens (2002), the drivers of globalisation are modern institutions and forces such as industrialisation, capitalism, militarism, and the nation-state. Giddens (2002, p. 10) also suggests that we understand globalisation from political, technological, and cultural perspectives, which have been influenced by the development of modern communication technologies dating back to the late 1960s. One particular characteristic of the modern era, argues Giddens (2003, p. 60), is ‘time-space distanciation’ – a phenomenon defined as a series of ‘complex relations between local involvement (circumstances of co-presence) and interaction across distance (the connection of presence and absence)’. Such a view of globalisation emphasises the interdependence of social relations and societies across space, time, and distance, thus moving beyond a conventional understanding of society – the nation-state remaining ‘a bounded system’ in which social life is ordered. For Giddens (2001), human social lives and relations, whether physical, material, or imaginary, are experienced in and

extend across space and time. Contemporary scholarship characterises individuals in modern societies and nation-states as hyper-mobile and super-diverse, thanks to advances in social infrastructures such as transportation and telecommunications that have magnified global interconnectedness (Held *et al.*, 2003).

Sassen argues that, while processes of globalisation tend to be examined in relation to its impacts on the market, society, political, and economic system, scholarship ought to engage in the deconstruction of the ‘economics of globalisation’, with a focus on the ‘economics of place in the global economy’ (1998, p. xxi). The aim of this is to understand its ‘non-corporate components’ and to address a new type of transnational politics: ‘a politics of those who lack power but now have “presence”’ and the claims made possible by globalisation (Sassen, 1998, p. xxi). For Sassen (1998, p. xxv), the ‘global economy materialises in a worldwide grid of strategic places, from export-processing zones to major international business and financial centres’. One of these strategic ‘transnational spaces for the formation of global capital’ is the global city, where ‘immense economic and political power’ is concentrated (Sassen, 1998, p. xxxiv). These global cities within the post-industrialised nations include major international financial and business centres such as London, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Los Angeles, and Bombay. They are ‘central to many of the circuits through which economic globalisation is constituted’ (Sassen, 1998, p. x).

The internationalisation of capital often overlooks the most disadvantaged and marginalised populations, including poorly paid female workers, women and children in poor nations, Black people, migrants, and other minority workers in low-skilled roles (Ward, 1990; Sassen, 1998). Directing readers’ attention to rich nations, Sassen (1998, p. xxi) argues that these global cities are a marketplace for ‘global capital as well as a strategic site for the economic and political operations of’ the disadvantaged transnational actors [...] whose political sense of self and whose identities are not necessarily embedded in the nation or the national community’.

In this sense, the global city through which world economic interdependence is fostered both marginalises people and simultaneously provides an opportunity for those who are marginalised, despite their omission in globalisation discourse. It plays a significant role as a ‘strategic site’ for new transnational politics, claims, and engagements by enabling ‘disempowered actors [...] to gain presence, to emerge as subjects even when they do not gain direct power [...] in a way that they are unlikely to do in a suburban context or small town’ (Sassen, 1998, p. xxi). For diasporic migrant communities, global cities like London play

important roles in the ‘development of globalised diasporic networks’ (Sassen, 1998, p. xxi). precisely because immigration remains a constitutive process of globalisation and for the development of transnational fashion cultures and identities.

Pertinent to this study, then, is the notion of the global city, the emergence of which is the ‘outcome of various historical and economic factors’ (Thompson, 2003, p. 254) including imperialism, industrialisation, capital mobility, urban development, and migration. As already mentioned, the global city is a ‘strategic site for the transnationalisation of labor and the formation of transnational identities’ (Sassen, 1998, p. xxx) precisely because as people migrate to new places, they become formally or informally embedded within the labour market. The significance of this, as Sassen points out, is that firstly, global cities, are a function of cross-border networks, and the informal economic activities of migrants in developed economies are often excluded from the discourse of globalisation, despite there being evidence of their transnational activities including remittances and small-scale trading activities. Nevertheless, a consequence of this increasing interdependence between world economies is that it has created the conditions for ‘the unmooring of identities from what has been traditional sources of identity – nation’ (Sassen, 1998, p. xxx). This forms another significant element to my study, in part because AFWL UK Ltd is a diaspora business organisation that contributes to the UK’s economy. The event setting in London provides migrant women, who are also business owners, opportunities for visibility and the construction of meaningful identities.

However, the impact of this concentration of economic power in some global cities, as Thompson (2003, p. 247) points out, continues to play a role in the processes of globalisation, creating an ‘interplay of forms of power’. For diasporic communities, the infrastructures of global cities serve as nodes for networking across multiple places and homelands. When immigrants settle in new societies with developed infrastructures such as telecommunication technologies (Thompson, 2003), these technologies offer migrating populations and disadvantaged minorities the opportunity to engage in transnational politics and make new claims to belonging. In the present study, the infrastructures of the host country (global cities such as London and New York) have been exploited by the African diaspora fashion practitioners in order that they might stake a claim to belonging, as well as forge global networks and connections.

In his work on the cultural dimension of globalisation, Robins (2003, p. 239) points out that ‘globalisation is about growing mobility across frontiers’ of ‘goods and commodities,

information and communications products and services, and of people'. Precipitated by advances in telecommunications and transportation infrastructures, the accelerating flows and mobility of people, ideas, products, and services across geographical boundaries have increased the scale of cultural and economic encounters, bridging great distances and transforming local, regional, national, and global communities and identities. For Robins (2003), globalisation processes create cultural confrontations as well as dissolve barriers between different cultures. For John Tomlinson (2009), the era of globalisation has produced complex connectivity with contradictory consequences that the author categorises according to the actor involved. In his examination of the role of culture in the process of globalisation, the author points out that, culture is a core element in this societal transformation because it involves how people understand their lived experiences and everyday practices. On the one hand, globalisation has been associated with economic activities and the normalisation of market logic, its discourse obscuring the increased diverse expressions of cultural agency (individuals as agents). On the other hand, the globalisation of capital through international trade and corporate financial exchange has increased the globalised cultural experience in which daily life, culture, and diversity have become packaged and commodified. Globalised cultural experience is also characterised by the production and consumption of similar mass-produced products including local community and religious activities. As Tomlinson (2009, pp. 224–225) writes, these are

cultural experience that does indeed escape the grip of the market: deeply structured senses of national or ethnic identity [...] these and many other common practices are not negligible exceptions to an iron rule of market control: as they are enacted and experienced within different local contexts and traditions, they produce the 'thickening' of cultures that in various ways preserves cultural distinctions and chaffs against the smooth advance of a uniform capitalist culture.

In other words, globalisation processes affect not only capital commodities but also, crucially, the daily mundane activities of individuals and groups – the way of life. With this understanding of globalisation in mind, in the case of the African diasporas, individuals and diaspora organisations are actors within the processes of globalisation, and their location in the global centre (London) offers a space for the unmooring of those fixed identities. Things that were previously barriers, such as colonial boundaries, linguistics, and ethnic divides amongst Africans across home and host societies are being redefined, challenged, and reinvented through cultural practices and influences – media and technology- that are 'simultaneously

local and global' (Back, 1994, p. 14). For example, in his study of the new African diaspora, Falola (2013) points out that Nollywood is a global cultural phenomenon that is consumed, produced, and distributed across localities in the United States, Europe, and Africa. While the cultural production of these films incorporates and blends ideas from other cultures, their contents convey and assert Africanness, Nigerian cultural heritage, and Yoruba global identities and experiences. Nollywood does this not to shy away from global transformation, but to position itself in the new global space as an actor. This assertion of loyalty and allegiance to an ethnic group, identity, cultural heritage, and place is not a rejection of globalisation but rather reflects the 'contradictory relation to the globalisation process' (Robins, 2003, p. 244). In other words, people can assert themselves in contradiction to terms established by their co-ethnics. The processes of globalisation have, in turn, allowed for the dissolution of territorial boundedness as well as the expansion of the notion of power (Thompson, 2003). For the present study of the Nigerian diaspora, this means that in the digital age of globalisation, social relations and a sense of self can extend beyond the conventional binary of homeland and host land. The concept of globalisation thus describes a set of new conditions in which the logic of territoriality is partly transcended into a transworld – or single-world –space characterised by 'simultaneity and instantaneity' (Scholte, 2003, p. 87). Based on this understanding of globalisation, the study of diaspora communities in the age of globalisation requires a spatial dimension because globalisation is not experienced equally across the world.

Decolonising Globalisation Processes

While the concept of globalisation remains contested, what remains relevant to this study is the decolonial perspective. This provides a genealogical insight into globalisation processes, highlighting not only their historical foundation in Western colonial expansion, but also a dialectical process that 'produces outcomes that are difficult to predict and control' (Giddens, 2001, p. 55; 2003). A decolonial perspective understands globalisation as a historical process, where 'the unit of analysis is not society but a historical system which is larger than the boundaries of a nation-state' (Grosfoguel, 2002, p. 203). Decolonial theorist Walter D. Mignolo (2020) understands globalisation to be a neo-liberal term that emerged in the 1980s, and something that is characterised by global linear thinking and the matrix of power established through Western domination which began in the sixteenth century, when the foundations were laid for the Westernisation of the world or the 'modern/colonial world system'. Thus, contemporary globalisation from a decolonial perspective involves a process of 'de-

Westernization’, ‘resistence’ and ‘re-existence’, characterised by resurging modes of living and knowing from ‘diverse levels, spheres and areas of experience’ (Mignolo 2020, p. 2). This, in turn, challenges and confronts Westernisation and the ‘colonial matrix of power expressed through the economic and political spheres’ (Bhambra, 2014, p. 117). Here, ‘Westernisation of the world’ refers to the processes and ideologies through which the West came to dominate the rest of the world, such as colonial difference, denial of other co-existing civilizations and cultures, appropriation of time, and the secularisation of philosophy and science. It is through these methods that the Euro-centric narrative of Western modernity as a master narrative became impinged on the world (Wallerstein, 1979; 1991). Mignolo (2020, pp. 2–3) also refers to the ‘coloniality of knowledge’, which involved ‘the subjugation of local cultures and civilisations’ as well as the casting out of ‘ways of knowing and knowledge that does not bend to Western European and North Atlantic epistemic regulations’. While globalisation is celebrated as a ‘popular buzzword among journalists, politicians, and business leaders’ (Erickson *et al.*, 2009, p. 51), Mignolo points out that ideas of coloniality and modernity are missing from much globalisation discourse. For Peruvian sociologist and activist Quijano, coloniality of power and modernity are inseparable, precisely because they form the basis of the larger structural axes of ‘global, Eurocentered capitalist power’ (2000, p. 342). The decolonial concept of coloniality, thus described as the underlying logic of Western globalisation, refers to ‘the conjunction of the Western constitution of an institutional conceptual machinery to regulate all areas of human experience with an intervention in all co-existing civilisations to distort, disfigure and destroy their past disturbing the present of the people intervened’ (Mignolo, 2020, 5–6). Unlike the concept of colonialism – a form of control and management of territories – the term ‘coloniality’ refers to a world order that continues to impact former colonial territories and people, as well as non-colonised places like Russia and China (Mignolo, 2020). For example, it is coloniality that legitimised the American dollar as fiat and established it as a universal medium of exchange and trade, even though other nations have their own currencies.

In addition to this, the rhetoric of modernity serves to further mask coloniality: consider the expressions, ‘to civilise barbarians and the primitive’, ‘to save women from patriarchal husbands’, ‘to spread democracy’, ‘to bring economic development’, and ‘to keep global peace’. Mignolo (2020) argues that Western modernity is thus a form of rhetoric, a narrative, and a fiction of history, salvation, civilisation, and market democracy in which the West is centred. Mignolo adds that Western modernity is based on the logic of colonialism in which

Black Africans were invented as slaves, and human life was made dispensable to advance capitalism, all the while hiding the ills of the colonial process and instead directing attention towards the ideologies of modernisation and development. This aligns with the description by Robins (2003) of globalisation processes creating tensions, owing to the collision of different cultures. In addition, Grosfoguel (2002) argues that much theorisation surrounding global processes obscures 'global coloniality'. Drawing on Quijano (2000), Grosfoguel (2002) defines coloniality as the continuation of colonial forms of domination after the technical end of that colonial administration. Coloniality of power refers to a 'crucial restructuring process in the modern/colonial world system that articulates peripheral locations in the international division of labour, subaltern group political strategies and Third World migrants' inscription in the racial/ethnic hierarchy of metropolitan global cities' (Grosfoguel, 2002, p. 205). Grosfoguel (2002, p. 205) continues to point out that, although colonial administrations of former colonies may have been replaced by new political organisations, making them nation-states, 'European-Euro-American exploitation and domination [...] characterises the globalisation of the capitalist world economy today. The old colonial hierarchies of European/non-Europeans remain in place and are entangled with the international division of labour'. This view suggests that globalisation as an economic process is entangled with the political and cultural, and the nation-state cannot be understood as a unit of analysis on its own (Wallerstein, 1991). Rather, globalisation is a historical process in which the greater interconnectivity of the world's regions, peoples, and cultures as observed today stems from five hundred years of European colonialism, through which global ethnic/racial hierarchies were established and continue to be structured by the 'regimes of global coloniality imposed by the United States through the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and Pentagon and NATO' (Grosfoguel, 2002, p. 205).

In his work on postmodern-era globalisation, Hall points out that the phenomenon is not unitary and centred, even in the core nations. As Hall (1997, p. 23) writes, 'In cultural terms, the new kind of globalisation has to do with the new forms of global mass culture, very different from that associated with English identity, and the cultural identities associated with the nation-state in an earlier phase'. Hall describes global mass culture as a newly emerging field of visual representation that has itself engendered new forms of cultural communication and representation. The phenomenon is characterised by a concentration of capital, techniques, labour, stories, and imageries centred within, and driven by advanced Western societies. The implications of this new field of visual representation are plenty: foremost, the conventional

understanding of the logic of capital and identifications has been transformed. As Hall notes, global mass culture has evolved to the extent that culture, identities, and place can no longer be limited and constrained by national boundaries. It is an era characterised by ‘modern means of cultural production’ through which all forms of mass communication – images, visual and graphic arts, entertainment, television, and films – permeate and facilitate the ‘reconstitution of popular life’ (Hall, 1997, p. 23).

More recently, Mignolo (2020, p. 8) argues that ‘Globalisation isn’t just trade, transportation, fast cybernetic interconnections the sale of information and all manner of things material and aethereal [...] it is packaged in the language of progress and civilisation [...] modernization and development [...] and] market democracy’. This view goes beyond the conventional understanding of globalisation as either an economic or a cultural phenomenon, suggesting that the discursive formation of globalisation must first be examined to understand its logic and rhetoric.

While processes of globalisation have allowed for the unprecedented intermixing of people and cultures, the reality is that nations such as the United States and the UK, who have long been the foremost economic, military, and political global superpowers promoting human rights and equity, have constructed the dominant reality of the world through ‘a hierarchy based on neoliberal economics and a global consumer culture’ based on closed Western values and exclusive global identities (Rosenmann, Reese and Cameron, 2016, p. 209). Western globalised culture and economic policy are thus imposed through the activities of multinational media conglomerates and the dominance of supranational political institutions. As Rosenmann *et al.* (2016) point out, this dominance and hegemony of the West is reflected in the increasing levels of migration of people and refugees to Western economies.

The Concept of Diaspora and Contemporary Diaspora Formations

The etymology of the term diaspora comes from the Greek διασπορά, meaning ‘scattering’. Shuval (2000, p. 42) points out that the Greeks understood the term ‘to mean migration and colonisation’. The application of scattering of seeds metaphor was initially applied in the study of the Jewish historical experience of forced exile, dispersal, and expulsion from their biblical homeland (Cohen, 2008; Sheffer, 2003; Brubaker, 2005; Safran, 1991; Bakewell, 2008; Rafael, 2013). Over time, however, diaspora became an analytical term often deployed in scholarship and popular discourse for explaining not only the historic specificity of the Jewish, but also of

the Armenian, and Greek experiences of dislocation and translocation from their original homelands, as well as their resettlement elsewhere. These instances serve as the paradigmatic models for understanding and explaining the forced and involuntary dispersal and settlement of distinct groups – whether religious or ethnic – from an original homeland to a new place of residence (Shuval, 2000; Reis, 2004; Karla *et al.*, 2005; Mistra, 2006). The classical understanding of the diaspora, then, placed a distinct emphasis on the traumatic experience of forced exile and the inability to return to the original homeland.

In 1965, historian George Shepperson first applied the term diaspora to the African experience in his speech at the International Congress of African Historians held in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Shepperson (1993, pp. 152–157) outlines the contours of the African diaspora as

the study of a series of reactions to coercion, to the imposition of the economic and political rule of alien peoples in Africa, to slavery and imperialism [...] the migration of Negro slaves and servants to Europe before the opening of the transatlantic slave trade and the enslavement of Negroes by Muslim powers.

These historic imperialist processes, which led to the forced dispersal of African peoples across the world as slaves rather than free men and women, were also characterised by traumatic experiences of loss of homeland and suffering in the new host land. This, in turn, shaped African diasporic identity and consciousness. The definition of the African diaspora was thus characterised, then, by the experience of loss and inability to return home and became an analytical and conceptual tool for making sense of the historical experiences of forced captivity, colonisation, and enslavement that created the conditions for the dislocation of African peoples and descendants in the Western hemisphere (Gilroy, 1993; Segal, 1996; Alpers, 2001; Edwards, 2011). Karla *et al.* (2005, p. 9) also emphasise the cultural understanding of diasporic communities as defined by a sense of loss, trauma, suffering, and grief experienced by a group of people with a shared common origin/homeland, as well as a shared common identity in the form of sentiments, opinions, beliefs, ideas, and their ‘inability to return’ (Karla *et al.*, 2005, p. 9).

In contrast to this, Virinder Karla, Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk (2005, p. 10) write that the conventional model of diaspora, ‘is unable to deal with highly qualified Chinese migrants to the engineering sector in the USA, migrants who have no bars on their return, yet organise themselves in many ways which we would call diasporic’. Also emphasising the contemporary

limitations of the classical diaspora theorisation, Tsagarousianou (2004, p. 64) introduces the concept of ‘transnational diaspora’ defined as ‘complex multi-directional flows of human beings, ideas, products – cultural and physical and to forms of interaction, negotiation and exchange, processes of acculturation and cultural creativity, webs of exclusion and struggles to overcome it’. Rafael (2013, p. 850) combines the concepts of diaspora and transnational, arguing that transnational diasporas are a ‘factor of societal and global change’ because not only are they significant ‘for further developments in relations between the original and new homelands’. Through their partial identification or segmented assimilation within the host society, these individuals can influence and participate in the societal political processes. The value of this cross-border activity is that, when transnational diasporas act as intermediaries between homeland and host societies, it can reduce feelings of ‘diasporic alienation’ (2013, pp. 850–851). Applicable to this study are Nigerian, Yoruba, and African diasporas, with other diasporic communities settled elsewhere. The literature on contemporary diaspora (Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009) posits that globalisation has allowed ‘for scattered routes and roots’, and that these scattered belongings continually create new diasporic spaces, whether imagined, real or digitally mediated (Kassam, 2016, p. 12). Globalisation has contributed to the shrinking of time-space distance (Giddens, 1991) enabling the new diaspora to return home.

Scholarship on diaspora media consumption in the age of globalisation also illuminates how these communities negotiate identities through the ties and alliances they forge with co-ethnics across the diaspora and the home country. As Mandeville (2001, p. 169) points out,

diasporic media can and should be understood as much more than simply a means by which information of interest to a given community can be exchanged, or a means for communicating images of that community to the wider society. [Indeed ...] we need to understand these media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of the diasporic community are continually constructed, debated, and reimagined.

From the quotation above, we can understand that the media provides diaspora communities with opportunities to communicate meaningful information not only about their identities, but also their issues – the social, cultural, economic, and political realities that are important to them, but excluded in mainstream media. Diasporic media consists of ‘intercontinental networks of communication that use a variety of media that include mail, telephone, fax, film, audiotape, videotape, satellite television and the internet’ (Karim, 2003, p. 1). This diasporic

mediascape in which planetary connections are produced by non-state actors provides an alternative to the Western-centric media narratives. For diasporic communities, this ability to connect a shared language, religion, and culture across vast distances has offered a way to maintain cross-national ties with the homeland and in other co-ethnic communities, thus sustaining global networks (Karim, 2003).

Falola also points out that, in the global world facilitated by modern technology, 'it is much easier to create a sense of proximity and zones of interactions between members of the diaspora' (2013, p. 241). Similarly, in his contribution to the discourse on contemporary African diaspora identities, Arthur (2010) points out that international migration – crossing state boundaries - and globalisation offer several opportunities for African immigrants travelling to developed countries in North America and Europe. Migration as a process of globalisation, has led to the creation of a postmodern diaspora in which identities have been uprooted from the boundedness of the nation-state's specific territorial limits. Arthur points out that, unlike the historic diaspora of the Middle Passage characterised by slavery and captivity, the contemporary African diaspora (also known as the new African diaspora) is characterised by both voluntary and involuntary migration. Importantly, these migrants retain ties with their national homelands, negotiate ways of belonging in the new host societies, and sustain multiple transnational circuits of networks and new identities. Contemporary diasporic agents/actors in the global digital age are therefore more likely to engage in homeland development issues, to return to the homeland if they choose to do so, and to maintain ongoing links to the homeland (Zezeza, 2005; Falola, 2013). Falola (2013, p. 238) points out that the notion of 'multiple locations' characterises diasporic Africans who live in multiple locations as 'natives and hosts, citizens, and strangers'. Multiple locations imply that the diaspora is simultaneously representative of 'a geography where people can be defined in spatial terms, an identity where the meanings of life have to be defined and lived, and a notion of citizenship where belonging becomes both a political and identity question' (Falola, 2013, p. 238). This is another term that applies to this present study, where British-Nigerian fashion practitioners are multiply located in the UK as citizens as well as migrants. AFWL provides an opportunity to examine how these diaspora practitioners negotiate their belonging in both British and African fashion systems.

Diaspora Identifications in the Age of Digital Media

As Baumann (2000, p. 313) points out, the contemporary theorisation of the diaspora ‘has been celebrated as expressing notions of hybridity, heterogeneity, identity fragmentation and (re)construction, double consciousness, fractures of memory, ambivalence, roots and routes, discrepant cosmopolitanism, multi-locationality and so forth’. With the expansion of the classical concept of diaspora comes even newer notions of diaspora that emphasise ‘cultural hybridity, continuous linkages across borders, transnationalism, and the incorporation of migrants and/or minorities into the countries of settlement’ (Faist, 2010, pp. 12–13). In this respect, what is pertinent to this current study is the concept of hybridity, which highlights contemporary African diaspora identities as syncretic, de-territorialised, and changeable rather than fixed and unchanging (Bhabha, 1994).

The terms hybridity and diaspora are often used interchangeably and are linked to processes of globalisation (Ang, 2003; Karla *et al.*, 2003). This highlights the drawbacks of the notions of ethnic identity politics, which are very much preoccupied with boundary setting and maintenance (Ang, 2003). In her argument for hybridity, Ien Ang asks why the concept of identity is, privileged as the naturalised principle for social order. The concept of hybridity rests on the premise that social life in the human experience is hybridised, porous, and boundless, despite some nationalistic claims of purity. The process of hybridisation, as Ang (2003, p. 147) notes, ‘consists of exchanges, crossings, and mutual entanglements, it necessarily implies a softening of the boundaries between people: the encounters between them are as constitutive of who they are as proceedings within’. Ang (2003, p. 147) further argues that ‘hybridity provides a counterbalance against the absolutizing tendency in the vision of diaspora’. This is because diaspora is a form of social categorising of a group of people that ‘postulates the existence of a closed, united, mutually exclusive universe of ethnic sameness, [where] difference is absolutized’ (Ang, 2003, p. 145). This view suggests that, because diaspora is sometimes characterised by an ethnic identity that is fixed, exclusive, and unchanging, hybridity is a more apt term to use when describing diasporic identities. One such example of a hybrid identity is expressed in the notion of Black British, defined as ‘a mode of self-representation designed to interrogate hegemonic “white” definitions of British national identity by injecting it with blackness’ (Ang, 2003, p. 149). This quotation above illuminates the politics of hybridity for non-White immigrants from the ex-colonies of the British Empire who are seeking racial inclusion and citizenship. However, Ang (2003, p. 149) argues that,

unlike the concept of identity, hybridity is an ‘active intervention, involving both a disarticulation of exclusionary conceptions of Britishness as essentially “white” and its re-articulation as a necessarily impure and plural formation that can no longer suppress the black Other within’. In this sense, diaspora and hybridity recognise their power to subvert ‘naturalised forms of identity centred on the nation’ (Karla *et al.*, 2005, p. 2). Coombes (1994, p. 90) similarly sees hybridity as an ‘important cultural strategy for the political project of decolonisation’. Thus, when combined with the diaspora, hybridity is a powerful device for troubling the notion of a single idea of belonging to a nation or an ethnic group. For Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 41), the hybrid moment of political change does not articulate or translate elements that are ‘neither the One (unitary working class) nor the other (the politics of gender) but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both’. While hybridity tends to be celebrated in popular culture and society as a happy fusion of cultures, its performative power lies in its capacity to

destabilise established cultural power relations between black and white, coloniser and colonised, centre and periphery, the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’, not through a mere inversion of these hierarchical dualisms, but throw into question these very binaries through a process of boundary-blurring transculturation (Ang 2003, p. 149).

In the present study on African diaspora fashion cultures, boundary-blurring is expressed through the notion of being British-Nigerian, a common phrase used by my informants to convey conceptions of Britain and Nigeria as plural and hybrid formations. More importantly, the framing of Africa Fashion Week London – which combines Africa and London - blurs the artificial boundary between Africa and fashion, since London is a Western fashion capital – and destabilises the established cultural powers that assume African fashion must be geographically fixed to Africa. In this case, hybridity and diaspora show that ‘in the ever-expanding boundaries and territories of the global world’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. xxii), individuals and groups can no longer be confined to any single and fixed identity because their experience of the world is complex. My informants are neither solely Nigerian nor solely British because, empirically, through processes of migration, media consumption and globalisation, they experience and negotiate ‘difference’ in multiple identities across a multiplicity of places (Ang, 2003; Shuval, 2005). The AFWL event brings into focus a thriving formal transnational African fashion economy in Britain, centring African fashion practitioners as creators and tastemakers to the global market in London.

Modern Diaspora and the Nation-State

The discourse of diaspora formation continues to be the subject of scholarly debate among migration and cultural theorists, with some holding the view that diaspora is a subversion of the nation-state, and others who critique the concept for retaining the view of diaspora as characterised by a particular ethnic group, bounded to a particular place (Hall, 1990; Boyarin and Boyarin, 1993; Anthias, 2001; Ang, 2003; Karla *et al.*, 2005; Shuval 2005).

However, Gabriel Sheffer (1986, p. 3) posits that ‘Modern diasporas are ethnic minority groups of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with their countries of origin – their homelands’. Rafael (2013, pp. 843–844) also points out that ‘what distinguishes diasporas from other kinds of ethnic collectives is the retention of allegiances and connectedness that cut across national boundaries and links people into a transglobal entity’. These cross-border ties forged by diasporic groups, especially those who are marginalised within national borders and geographical lines, are deemed as performing a political function of ‘deconstructing the nation state from within through their transnational connections’ (Ang, 2003, p. 143). An example of this can be found in the community associations and business networks established by diasporic communities, which link the host and home societies together. These include trade associations and small businesses that cater to and provide cultural products for co-ethnics in the host country (Alakija, 2013; Falola, 2013).

This characterisation of diaspora as an ethnic group maintaining links both to the host and homeland troubles the homogeneous representation of national identity fostered by the nation-state. As Mahmud (2016, p. 4) observes, ‘diasporas pull ethnic identifications out of the space of the nation-state and move from one single nation to multiple entities’. These multiple alliances and ties are representative of diasporic communities and are deemed problematic for the continuance of the nation-state, which Ang (2003, pp. 143–145) defines as a ‘limiting, homogenising, assimilating power structure [...] premised on a national community which is territorially bound’. While the processes of diaspora formation share some commonalities with a nation in terms of its capacity for inclusion and exclusion (Ang, 2003), the diaspora exists within two or more historical and political contexts of nation-states that wield the power to dictate policies that shape their lives. Nevertheless, in today’s globalising world, the diaspora’s preoccupation with boundary setting and maintenance remains ‘a very powerful mode of collective identification’ constructed by ethnic members to make sense of their positions and roots (Ang, 2003, p. 150).

Judith Shuval (2005, p. 47) explains that the diaspora's sense of uniqueness is at its most crucial when they as a group find themselves excluded, politically dominated, or discriminated against, with limited opportunities for advancement. This is pertinent to my present study because Black African fashion practitioners' experiences of discrimination in and exclusion from mainstream British fashion culture partly contributed to the creation of the concept of Africa Fashion Week across Western cities such as London, New York, and Milan. As Shuval (2005, pp. 47–48) explains,

a diaspora culture helps maintain a sense of community and belonging to a more rewarding and welcoming social entity. This is accomplished by selectively preserving and recovering traditions that they create or maintain identification with far-reaching historical, cultural, and political processes giving a sense of attachment elsewhere, in a different time accompanied by hopes or visions of renewal.

The above conveys the importance of the diaspora culture, which provides a space for marginalised ethnic minority groups and communities to engage in meaningful activities across multiple sites. Shuval (2005, p. 48) defines this notion of diasporic consciousness as 'The sense of being a "people with historic roots" outside the time/space of a host nation', and it differentiates diaspora from other types of ethnic formations. Shuval (2002, p. 44) points out that ethnic theory is related to diaspora theory in part because it explains how and why 'people seek a shared identity, especially in an era of large-scale urbanisation and weakening of localized, particularistic relations'. Zou and Trueba (1998, p. 1) also argue that ethnic identity is important because 'it gives ethnic groups the power to control their destiny and succeed in their host countries'. On the other hand, Karla *et al.* (2005, p. 17) argue against continually focusing on the notion of an ethnic group in relationship to diaspora theory, because it inevitably 'reinstates the nation-state as the legitimate social sphere in which boundaries are made'. Nevertheless, Sokefield (2006, p. 267) argues, 'there can be no diaspora community without a consciousness of diaspora, in other words without an idea of shared identity, of common belonging to that group'. The author argues that, while diaspora is a discursive construction, it also 'produces tangible social and political effects in so far as while all members of the diaspora formation may dispute the precise formulation of their identity and imagine their identities differently, there is a common identity' (Sokefield, 2006, p. 267). Diasporic consciousness involves the feeling or awareness of being from *there* – the homeland – and living *here* – the host land – a feeling that, for Shuval (2005, p. 48), 'provides a sense of power

and legitimacy to claims of oppression or disadvantage'. At AFWL, this sense of common identity, and a consciousness of being *from greatness* but positioned within *exploitative colonial order* is expressed by many respondents.

In his study of African diaspora identities, Arthur (2010) argues that contemporary African immigrants to the United States have the opportunity to contribute to the development of their home countries, construct new identities, and propagate African cultural heritage and values in the new spaces of residence (2010, pp. xii-xiii). Arthur explores not only these transnational activities of African migrants – Nigerians, Ghanaians, etc. – but also the opportunities for these African migrants to contribute to the transformations of the African diasporas in the new host country. Arthur's approach aligns with other scholars who posit that the African diaspora comprises old and new (Falola, 2013), and that the new/contemporary African migrations have the potential to renew the practices, cultures, and identities of the old diaspora (Arthur, 2010). 'Migration is not a one-off event with one-way consequences, but rather [...] an ongoing process of building links and relationships at the material and cultural levels [...] these relationships, to a greater or less extent, changes both the sending and receiving countries' (Karla *et al.*, 2005, p. 15). As Zeleza (2005) asserts, the formation of the global African diaspora is not the result of a single migration Thus, Zeleza (2005, p. 41–42) asserts that the concept of the diaspora should be viewed as

a process [...] Diasporas are complex social and cultural communities created out of real and imagined genealogies and geographies (cultural, racial, ethnic, national, continental, transnational) of belonging, displacement, and recreation, constructed and conceived at multiple temporal and spatial scales, at different moments and distances from the putative homeland [...] fashioned [...] through the transnational circuits of exchange of diasporic resources and repertoires of power.

This view of diaspora departs from the conventional definition, which assumes that diaspora formation is a result of exile from an original homeland; the contemporary diaspora is transnational and global in its interactions, exchanges, and activities. Karla *et al.* (2005, p. 16) point out that the diaspora can be understood by 'focusing on transnational links and emphasizing a multiplicity of belongings and identities, [which] can challenge the fixity of identity invoked by ethnicity'. This departs from the definition of diaspora as constituting an ethnic identity that is fixed to one place. This notion of national and ethnic ties is important to this current study because Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners maintain and represent

themselves not only in reference to their national origins but also as members of distinct ethnonational communities such as Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, etc. Identity, as a concept, ‘is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion and the critical factor for defining the ethnic group, therefore, becomes the social boundary which defines the group with respect to other groups [...] not the cultural reality within those borders’ (Schlesinger, 1987, p. 235). In other words, the concept of identity works by generating both inclusive and exclusive practices and is utilised by groups within a shared geographical or national boundary (e.g., Yoruba and Igbo, or White and Black) to demarcate distinctions and a shared common cultural heritage.

Soysal (2000, p. 12) argues that ‘the primary orientation and attachment of diasporic populations is to their homelands and cultures, and their claims and citizenship practices arise from this home-bound ethnic-based orientation’. The present study offers a window into this phenomenon to examine how and why diaspora communities are mobilised, and where there might be internal divisions within the Nigerian national configuration. AFWL establishes itself within the tenets of Pan-Africanism, adopting the ideas of solidarity, unity, and the advancement of Africa and its diaspora (Adi, 2018) as a means of mobilising African fashion practitioners and consumers to participate in the production of African fashion. My observations at the event site, combined with textual and visual analysis of AFWL’s promotional campaigns, highlight not only the complexities of socially and discursively producing the African diaspora as unitary, bounded, ‘organic cultural collectives’ (Werbner, 1997, p. 229) but more importantly that ‘the process is driven by a passionate identification with and reification of’ Africanness ‘as a globally relevant marker for identity and difference’ (Ang, 2003, p. 146). As already mentioned, this study’s focus is on the Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners, which reflects the fact that AFWL is dominated primarily by Yoruba Nigerian fashion practitioners. Despite coming from a shared geographical boundary, however, Nigeria is heterogeneous with individuals speaking from multiple, hybrid positions. Their design production narratives highlight their common ambitions to uplift their distinct ethnonational groups through capacity building and entrepreneurship.

Transnationalism in the Global Era

Although the concept of diaspora tends to be conflated with transnationalism, the definitions of both are shaped by various disciplinary conventions and interests, which in turn determine

how these concepts are measured and applied (Crang *et al.*, 2003). In his survey of the concept of transnationalism, Steve Vertovec (1999, p. 448) identifies six different meanings associated with the term: a social morphology, a type of consciousness, a mode of cultural reproduction, an avenue of capital, a site of political engagement, and a reconstruction of 'place or locality'. The variation in meanings within Vertovec's survey illustrates the areas of consensus and disagreement between them and explains the wide applicability of the concept within diverse historical and contemporary empirical observations. As Vertovec (2001, p. 580) asserts, transnationalists 'weave their collective identities out of multiple affiliations and positionings and link their cross-cutting belongingness with complex attachments and multiple allegiances to issues, peoples, places, and traditions beyond the boundaries of their resident nation-states'.

In another survey of the term transnational, Glick *et al.* (1995, p. 49) argue that, in the 1960s, transnationalism referred to the economic processes of corporate structures that were established in more than one state. Glick *et al.* (1995) go on to conclude that the meaning and usage of transnationalism should be expanded from its application to corporate structures and applied to migrating individuals. This transition marks the beginning of the application of the term to describe the flow of migrants, cultures, and populations across borders in a new global context (Glick *et al.*, 1999, p. 48). The figure or image of the immigrant was thus redefined, and rather than being associated with loss, contemporary immigrants became transnational actors possessing agency. As such, their 'daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation-state' (Glick *et al.*, 1999, p. 48). These public identities may include racial, class, gender, and ethnic categorisations. This new conception of immigrants regards them as embedded in more than one nation, and that this embeddedness is only one of their multiple potential identifications. In the host societies, therefore, these individuals engage in activities and processes of settlement 'where they become incorporated into the economy and political institutions, localities and patterns of the daily life of the country' (Glick *et al.*, 1999, p. 48). The concept of the transnational social field thus accounts for the activities of migrants beyond a single national border. Concurrently, 'They maintain connections, build institutions, conduct transactions, and influence local and national events in the countries from which they emigrated' (Glick *et al.*, 1999, p. 48). In sum, immigrant identities are plural and multiple, entangled within the structures of both societies of origin and settlement.

Contemporary transnationalism differs from the earlier patterns of cross-border immigrant activities characterised by ‘containment and fixity’ the former is defined by new processes and dynamics such as acceptance of dual nationality and ethnic pluralism and highlights ‘movement, resistance, and boundary transgression’ (Foner 1997; Mitchell (2017[2009], p. 6). From a migration perspective, Mitchell (2000, p. 853) further defines transnationalism as an ‘ongoing series of cross-border movements in which immigrants develop and maintain numerous economic, political, social and cultural links in more than one nation’. This emphasis on transnational migrants is critical to examining the role in transforming and liberating capital from the constraints of national borders, and territories’ governments.

The theorisation of transnationalism also differentiates between transnationalism from ‘below’ and transnationalism from ‘above’. The former refers to the grassroots activities of non-state actors (e.g., migrants, diasporic communities, and marginalised others), while the latter refers to activities initiated by institutional actors (e.g., multinational corporations, states, and intergovernmental organisations) (Guarnizo, 1997a). In contrast, Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer (2004, p. 9) recommend transcending the binary of ‘above’ and ‘below’, since globalisation is an unfinished process that involves disparate people, goods, and ideas that constantly cross and re-cross national boundaries. The authors argue that transnationalism ‘from below’ should not ‘be seen as a form of resistance to global capitalism but as an adaptation to it’ (Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer, 2004, p. 9).

Transnational Social Field, Space and Circuit

Scholarship on transnationalism tends to focus on the transnational social field (Faist, 2010), the transnational social space (Glick *et al.* 1999), or the transnational circuit (Rouse, 1991). In one example, the notion of transnational space refers to ‘a multidimensional space that is multiply inhabited and characterized by complex networks, circuits and flows’ (Crang *et al.*, 2003, p. 441). In contrast to this, the ‘transnational circuit’ is a new kind of social space that troubles ‘the comfortable modern imagery of nation-states and national languages, of coherent communities and consistent subjectivities’ (Rouse, 1991, p. 8). This notion of a transnational circuit accounts for the fact that migration is a complex process entailing the ‘continuous circulation of people, money, goods and information’ through which ‘various settlements have become so closely woven together that, in an important sense, they have come to constitute a

single community across a variety of sites' (Rouse, 1991, p. 8). Rouse's definition suggests that migrating individuals experience their lives as being simultaneously shaped by sites in more than two countries (1991, p. 14). While not physically present in a geographical sense, the concept of the circuit illustrates and highlights migrants' crisscrossing activities in the form of the transfer of money, ideas, and information, which are all characteristics of globalisation. As Scholte (2003, p. 88) similarly explains, transnationalism consists of 'cross-border exchanges over distance' while globalisation consists of 'transborder exchanges without distance'. The latter transcends space and territorial boundaries, whereas the former relies on exchanges and activities between national boundaries. In the context of this present study, we find that the cross-border activities of Nigerian migrants are not confined or limited to the relations between the countries of the UK and Nigeria. Instead, their cross-border activities are expressed through transnational supply chains and products made in China or Milan, through which connections are established and cultivated from the host land, the UK.

In contrast to the immigrant perspective discussed above, Portes (2001) points out that, from an ontological perspective, transnationalism consists of cross-border activities and goal-oriented relationships between a wide range of people: private individuals, civil society, and non-institutional actors. Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt relate the emergence of contemporary transnationalism in migrant activities to economic globalisation, characterised by developments (mass production and consumption of commodities) in the post-industrialised societies which led to the demand for migrant labour. Thus, they describe migrants as the 'raw material for the rise of the transnational enterprise' in post-industrialised societies (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt, 1999, p. 228). In contrast to the old colonial/imperialist world system, in which empires enforced a single political structure, the current world economy consists of several independent nation-states all jostling for power in the global market (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt, 1999, p. 227). One outcome of this is that it has led to the production of commodities in other parts of the world where labour is cheaper, while developed economies concentrate on the development of the knowledge economy. However, Jackson, Crang, and Dwyer (2004, p. 11) assert that 'transnational connections have been a characteristic feature of capitalist economies throughout history' because the phenomenon of cross-border activity is a long-standing practice. For a multitude of different reasons, people, ideas, and capital have always moved across spaces, places, national territories, and continents (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt, 1999; Vertovec, 1999).

The notion of goal-oriented relationships implies that people forge and engage in cross-border activities for material, social, and psychological reasons: to achieve aims or outcomes and to reinforce a sense of belonging, affinity, attachment, and loyalty (Hanchard, 2003; Vertovec, 2003). Transnationalism is thus not limited to immigrants and diasporic groups. Kivisto (2001, p. 569) explains that spatially and non-spatially dispersed peoples and communities build and maintain linkages and connections through processes of exchange, reciprocity, and solidarity to achieve ‘social cohesion’ and ‘collective representations’. Here, the view is that individuals engage in cross-border activities to fulfil certain aims and objectives, such as resisting socio-economic marginalisation and exploitation and building trade, relations, and economic development. This is particularly relevant to AFWL, which brings together fashion design practitioners from across Africa, and the diasporas in Europe and the Americas, to collectively produce and control narratives of African designer fashion.

Vertovec (1999) points out that the decisions and choices individuals make regarding cultural practices also serve to transcend the territorial borders of the nation-state, albeit in a symbolic way. For example, in his study of Nigerian migrants in Peckham, Alakija (2016) finds that their transnational social practices manifest symbolically through social practices such as dress, food, music, religious gatherings, and consuming digital media content from the homeland. Similarly, in the context of fashion consumption practices, Botticello’s (2009, p. 143) study of Yoruba Nigerians in London reveals that, at social events, individuals participate in dress practices from Nigeria such as dressing alike, known as *aso ebi*. These empirical studies suggest that transnational activities materialise and manifest in the cultural practices of migrants. In addition to looking at migration and media communication technologies, this present study also examines how migrating and diasporic ethnic groups use design and dress practices to forge connections and identifications as members of particular ethnonational groups residing outside the original home country. The fashion practices of diaspora and migrant groups are therefore very relevant to these discussions of transnationalism and globalisation.

Transnational Actors: Black Transnationalisms

The concept of Black transnationalism shifts attention to the fluidity of the ideas, images, commodities, experiences, and capital of people of African descent across national boundaries.

In Black transnationalism, the units of analysis are Black populations, whose experiences of disadvantage emanate from historic and contemporary national policies in which Black people in White-dominated societies are subordinated and oppressed (Hanchard, 1999; 2003). Hanchard (2003, p. 249) further asserts that ‘derogation of blackness, though varied from the nation-state to the nation-state, has been and remains global and transnational’. Foner (2017, p. 1115) adds, ‘On both sides of the Atlantic, black migrants and their children have had to cope with living in societies where blacks are not just a minority, but a highly stigmatized racial minority’. And similarly, Arthur’s (2012, p. 5) work on African immigrants points out that ‘their racialized identities as black minorities mark them as a subclass in systems of stratification. This thwarts or inhibits their full integration and incorporation into the affairs of their host societies’. Contemporary transnationalism – in this example, Black transnationalism – is one of many positions occupied by Black and African migrant social actors in global capitalism to lay claim to subjectivities beyond the control and authority of the nation-state in which they are based. Importantly, as Arthur (2012, p. 22) argues, African immigrants also use another mechanism of globalisation processes – migration – to enter the ‘global domain’ and challenge ‘the entrenched global depictions and representations of Africans as helpless victims, poverty-stricken, a marginalised group with less social or human capital, and citizens of a continent of missed opportunities’ As they settle in their new host societies and become aware of these persistent external notions about Africa and African cultures, African immigrant consciousness becomes ‘structured around one central theme: the need for the global community to recognise and appreciate the continued contributions of Africans to world cultures’(2012, p. 5). The author argues that contemporary ‘African immigrant identities are broad, overlapping and often intersecting in multiple social and cultural domains [...] as reflected by a strong consciousness of their multiple and complex cultural heritages, hard work ethic, commitment to education, family, social responsibility, a sense of collective altruism and community-building’ (Arthur, 2012, p. 22). Just as Black transnationalism reflects a strategy employed by Black social actors across national boundaries for liberation within the globalised racial/ethnic capitalist economy, African migrant transnationalism articulates the need for African peoples themselves to encourage the ‘incorporation of Africa into the world systems’ (the market and relations of production) through ‘the collective mobilisation of resources’ (Arthur2012, p. 22). Importantly, for contemporary African nationals migrating to new host societies in the core advanced economies, these facets of transnational migration, cultivated networks, and interrelationships established across borders play pivotal roles in shaping contemporary African transnational identities and determine the degree of adaptation

Transnational Processes: Contemporary Media Technologies

As the twenty-first century unfolds, technologies ‘especially involving telecommunications’ (Vertovec, 1999, p. 447) such as satellite, digital, and social media have accelerated the pace at which cross-border individual activities can take place. Research by Vertovec (1999) on members of South Asian religions outside the subcontinent has shown that these modern communication technologies have contributed to shaping our contemporary understanding of diasporic communities. Vertovec goes on to describe diasporic groups as culturally and socially dynamic because they engage in transnational practices that link scattered communities with the homeland. Transnationalism, therefore, refers to ‘long-distance networks’ characterised by ‘systems of ties, interactions, exchange and mobility’ in which the media and technology play equal roles in the processes of globalisation (Vertovec, 1999, p. 447). Technology has always been pivotal to the transnational practices and activities of diasporic communities, facilitating as it does the transmission of creative expressive practices and the exchange of ideas, thus expanding boundaries and connecting African diasporas with Africa itself (Zezeza, 2010). Advances in both communication and transportation technologies continue to enable newer modes of relationships, building networks and bridging distances between the homeland and host land.

This present study focuses heavily on the use of such digital media technologies in the work of Nigerian fashion design practitioners. As Vertovec (1999, p. 447) points out, ‘new technologies, serve to connect such networks with increasing speed and efficiency [...] in real-time while being spread throughout the world’. Satellite technologies in particular have made instantaneous communication a reality – a significant difference between contemporary transnationalism and even the recent past. These advances in media and communication are increasingly enabling and maintaining social ties between geographically distant migrating and diasporic individuals, ‘despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders’ (Vertovec, 1999, p. 447).

In their work on Turkish transnationalism, Aksoy and Robins (2003) highlight how the notions of cultural separation or loss, historically associated with migration and diaspora, differ in the contemporary era. The authors argue that this change is thanks to a shrinking distance between the host country and the homeland, where feelings of alienation can be managed through

transnational activities such as watching television programs produced in the home country. While Aksoy and Robins (2003) draw attention specifically to media consumption as a transnational activity, this present study explores how African fashion designers maintain transnational connections with their home country through the production and dissemination of African fashions in the host country.

Scholarship has thus consistently pointed to the role technology has played in enabling cross-border activities, and its capability to accelerate the rate at which ‘information and images’ are disseminated ‘across boundaries and cultures’ (Shuval, 2000, p. 45). In the interlocked global village, the internet is one such medium that enables the cross-border activities of diasporic communities who choose to maintain ties to their faraway communities in different homeland territories. As Falola (2013, p. 241) points out, ‘Modern technology has made it much easier to create a sense of proximity and zones of interactions between members of the diaspora in a global world’. In his discussion of the spread of Nollywood across the world, Falola (2013, p. 282) points out that Nollywood, ‘has become truly global. It has become arguably the most powerful contemporary form of spreading African worldviews, recuperating older values, propagating new ones, and celebrating multivalent stories’. Nollywood is now ranked as the second-largest movie production industry in the world after Hollywood and is produced both locally in Nigeria and the diaspora communities. Falola (2013, p. 284) adds that the industry has also ‘transported Yoruba societies and cultures inside and outside of Nigeria to other parts of Africa and the West’. The internet has been instrumental to the rise of this industry, as well as its consumption and distribution by and to audiences in the diasporas. Today, one can easily find Nollywood films streaming on Netflix and Amazon Prime, which aptly illustrates Falola’s notion that new technologies are disseminating African cultures across new geographies. In this case, globalisation can be seen as a positive force, contributing to the expression of individual agency, the construction of new identities, and the creation of a sense of belonging to a global African community. Contemporary digital media technologies and electronic means of communication such as the internet have thus unlocked new interactive forms of information exchange, offering myriad opportunities for social groups and marginalised workers to feel empowered, claim new subjectivities, forge ‘multi-sited linkages’ (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007, p. 133), assert agency, and express their cultural identities in positive ways (Glick *et al.*, 1995; Sobande, 2020). This study also finds that African fashion media producers make extensive use of the internet in their transnational practices, as it enables them to disseminate African fashion to global audiences. I examine these linkages between the Nigerian fashion diaspora

and Nigeria at AFWL, not only because the medium enables global connectivities, but also because it intervenes in the reshaping and redefining of Africa's global image, fashion, and cultural identities.

In his examination of the use of online magazines by the Chinese knowledge diaspora in the West, Qiu (2003, p. 155) argues that the medium provides opportunities for mobilising shared values, culture, national identity, and community awareness. These Chinese migrant diasporas, who are dislocated from the mainstream culture of the host society, are aware of 'their status, they cannot rely on traditional communication media to reach and connect their scattered community members' (Qiu, 2003, p. 153). In the context of AFWL, African fashion practitioners increasingly employ social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram to disseminate information and connect with consumers outside their spatial locations across the UK. The AFWL fashion show is also live-streamed and broadcast from London to viewers all over the world, giving visibility to Black fashion producers, Black models, and a diversity of African fashions, helping to reform global understanding surrounding African fashions and identities. This is relevant to my investigations within AFWL, which examine the transnational fashion practices and identities of British-Nigerian fashion designers and practitioners as they construct and articulate their cultural identities through material and visual culture (dress and design).

Chapter Four

An Empirical Study of Nigerian Diaspora Transnational Fashion Cultures

Introduction

This chapter explains the research methodologies and methods employed for this study. The first section outlines the ontological and epistemological orientation of this research and justifies its qualitative approach. The next section further explains the qualitative approach, which draws on ethnographic elements of visual documents, participant observation, and interviews. It also discusses the problems encountered in recruiting participants for the study and how these problems were mitigated. The next section provides a discussion of the data analysis process, and the final section discusses my positionality as a researcher and a Nigerian and Yoruba woman.

The Rationale for a Qualitative Research Approach

Tseelon (2001, p. 445) writes that ‘the fundamental assumptions underlying any kind of social research concern questions on the nature of reality (ontology), and the best way to study it (epistemology)’. The concept of ontology, which informs every epistemological choice, refers to ‘a systematic exposition of the assumptions about the basic categories of beings admitted to the universe assumed in some scientific field’ (Harré and Gillett, 1994, p. 29). Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1994, p. 105) similarly define research philosophy as ‘the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator’. The decision to use a qualitative approach for this inquiry was built on social constructivism and interpretivist ideas, both of which are important to my work. I believe these ideas provide a suitable platform for the questioning of fundamental assumptions and generalisations about African fashions, Nigerian diaspora fashion cultures, AFWL, and African cultural identity in this digital age of global connectivity. My central

question is as follows: How do AFWL participants understand and express African cultural identities through their dress and design practices?

Social constructivism broadly describes the process by which the observer creates their reality. It draws upon the symbolic interactionism theoretical framework, which proposes that using language and symbols, individuals construct their self-identity whenever they interact with others in everyday encounters (Goffman, 1959; Blumer, 1969). Adopting a social construction perspective in this examination of cultural identity formation in diaspora involves investigating the complex processes by which AFWL participants negotiate their identities through their dress and design practices, as well as assessing the increased significance of media texts (including photographs, videos, and pictures) in that process. A critical assumption within social constructivism is that social phenomena are social constructions. That is, the observer or actor creates reality by designating meaning to whatever they observe. Human beings are complex, as are the processes of constructing meanings. On this topic, Michael Crotty (1998, pp. 42–43) writes that ‘meaning is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it [...] meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting’.

This conceptual understanding of meaning is a crucial factor in conducting qualitative research that draws on ethnographic methods such as participant observation, informal interviews, and documentary analysis. These ethnographic methods offer opportunities to observe participants, activities, and practices at an event, and understand the meanings participants give to their subjective experiences, and the impetus underlying their creative and commercial practices (Spradley, 1979; Fetterman, 1998). As Deacon *et al.* (1999, p. 7) write, ‘social and cultural life are continually reproduced and modified through the myriad activities of everyday life’. Meaning-making is thus a flexible and open-ended process, and always in production (Hall, 1997). This is particularly pertinent in this inquiry into the meanings associated with AFWL, cultural identities, and African fashions. In my research, I needed to examine the various meanings the Nigerian diasporic participants gave to their dress and design practices, as they define and construct their African cultural identities. This study of the transnational networks and activities of the Nigerian diaspora sits within a worldview, as outlined by John Creswell (2009, p. 8), which states that individuals construct meanings ‘through interaction with others and the way individuals value cultural norms’. These meanings are multiple. They are formed

from individual ‘subjective experiences’ and ‘negotiated socially and historically’ (Creswell, 2014, p. 8).

The qualitative research approach is characterised by distinct methodological principles and philosophical assumptions about the nature of the world, how it works, and how we might understand it (Flick, 2009). It is flexible, it places emphasis on subjective human experience within everyday life, and it uses non-numerical, statistical descriptive data, since it is ‘primarily concerned with stories and accounts including subjective understandings, feelings, opinions and beliefs’ (Patton, 2010, p. 142). Mason writes that this qualitative framework presents several research advantages, including ‘methodologies that celebrate the richness, depth, nuance, context, multidimensionality and complexity rather than being embarrassed or inconvenienced by them’ (2002, p. 1). Indeed, as I undertook this research, I encountered several challenges, such as difficulty in selecting what to record and observe and contemplating how to extrapolate meanings from my participants’ subjective experiences and accounts. Adopting a qualitative approach has expanded my perceptions of intersubjectivity and my assumptions about the world. Gretchen Rossman and Sharon Rallis (2003, p. 5) point out two further ways qualitative research differs from quantitative approaches: first, ‘the researcher is the means through which the study is conducted’; and second, ‘the purpose is to learn about some facet of the social world’. In this regard, the researcher is a learner, a constructor of knowledge rather than a receiver (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). This notion of the researcher-as-instrument is important, given the fact that the researcher themselves is often transformed in the inquiry processes of collecting data, analysing, and categorising information, and interpreting and building knowledge. This opportunity for the researcher to interrogate and reflect on their position, their mental concepts, and attitude as part of the process of knowledge-production is considered a major advantage of using a qualitative framework (Flick, 2009).

Ethnography

The use of the qualitative method is a well-established approach in fashion studies that facilitates empirically backed research (Rovine 2015; Kawamura 2018). However, the global fashion industry is vast and dynamic, making it difficult to fully understand global fashion trends, including those emerging from the African diaspora. However, with all its complexity

and volatility, Aspers and Skov (2006, p. 803) suggest that fashion can be examined in terms of individual encounters that occur in small-scale settings, providing an ‘in-depth understanding of the micro-level over the systematic modelling of the whole’. Heeding this suggestion, and grasping the idea that fashion is produced across a range of sites, I consider the AFWL event setting to be a window through which to explore numerous individual encounters. It is also an environment providing increased visibility for networks of local, national, and transnational actors involved in African fashion production.

Ethnographic fieldwork techniques such as participant observations, observations, and interview, are commonly used because they ‘allow [...] researchers to investigate texts, objects and practices in the context of the cultural lives of the people that use them’ (Collinson, 2009, p. 14). For example, ethnographic fieldwork techniques are well suited to the study of fashion weeks and other situated fashion phenomena, because they offer the researcher an opportunity to adapt these techniques to the ‘contexts of particular field sites at particular periods in time’ (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 54). Culture, however, is a highly contested term (Storey, 2003; 2010), and there is much dispute in the literature over what counts as reality, what is considered knowledge, and what is represented as ugly and beautiful. For example, in her ethnographic study of Black British women of Caribbean descent, Tate (2007) examines accounts of their everyday lives and reveals that the discourse about, and recognition of, Black beauty permeates their day-to-day experience. However, rather than interpreting the beauty practices of these women as an imitation of White beauty standards, Tate reveals that these women use a range of props within their community to perform Black beauty outside the margins of the dominant White European culture that devalues it. Tate (2007) attends to the meanings of Black beauty from the perspectives of these women, to explicate how they negotiate their identities. In this regard, I also seek to give value to the ways in which the subjects of this study understand their practices in their own terms. This strategy is especially important, given that knowledge of ‘Africa is framed in relation to preconceived notions of Africa and received knowledge of the African invented by Europeans in the context of slavery, racism, colonialism and neocolonialism’ (Falola, 2013, p. 276). The approach adopted in this study therefore assumes that social phenomena such as African fashion, Nigerian and Yoruba fashion, and AFWL are created from the perceptions and consequent actions of the transnational fashion practitioners and social actors within these networks. The significance of this is that the meanings of African fashion are emergent, context-dependent, and constructed by its social actors, not just in the

physical setting of the event, but also in the media technologies employed in the dissemination of information about the event.

While traditional ethnography requires full immersion within a cultural setting over a long period of time (Clifford, 1983; 1988), my ethnographic approach draws on only some elements of the practice. I therefore choose not to describe my research as ethnographical but rather refer to the ethnographic methods that were employed to observe activities at AFWL, to better understand the meanings of African fashion from the perspectives of Nigerian fashion practitioners. The study of how a group of people dress, the meanings of their behaviours, and the meanings they give to their practices are not directly measurable variables that can be captured on scales and numeric indicators. Rather, as Kawamura (2018, p. 130) writes, ethnographic methods in fashion studies are ‘used to acquire firsthand experience as well as accounts of phenomena as they occur in natural real-life situations’. Consequently, this study employed the ethnographic techniques of participant observation, interviews, and documentary analysis to provide a detailed understanding of the transnational Nigerian fashion system at AFWL. This is informed by the idea that ‘knowledge is situated and partial’, and that the social world is not something fixed but rather constituted of ‘competing social constructions, representations, and performance’ (Limb and Dwyer, 2001, p. 8).

Accordingly, this research gives primacy to the Nigerian diasporic group, their views, their lived experiences, and their shared understandings as produced within the context of AFWL. The ethnographic techniques used in this study thus gather empirical evidence on the transnational activities of Nigerian fashion designers in the diaspora. The focus was on a single site – the AFWL location – and lasted only for a short period – the two-day events in 2018 and 2019. This approach aimed to examine both individual and group expressions of identity and meaning-making from a multitude of perspectives within the social context of AFWL. The need to concentrate on human stories as opposed to data measurements is articulated by Stephen Toulmin (1990, p. 190), who writes that research should not only ‘concentrate on abstract and universal questions but [...] treat again specific, concrete problems which do not arise generally but occur in specific types of situations’. It was important to conduct interviews and employ observational research methods in this space to overcome what Tseelon (2001, p. 438) terms the ‘stereotype approach’, which is defined as attempting to ‘fix meaning by privileging a certain (and limited) set of meanings over others’. My approach on this site

therefore constitutes an effort to counter the stereotypical approaches of the mass media, for example, which trade in pervasive generalisations about African fashions (Jensen, 2019; 2020).

As already mentioned in Chapter Two, African fashion practices are conventionally associated with tradition and remaining fixed to the past (Jansen, 2019; 2020). These stereotypes can even be re-produced by African fashion practitioners themselves, owing to their socialisation in Western knowledge systems. One way I avoided falling into this stereotype was to learn about what matters to the participants themselves, employing methods that elicit open responses rather than imposing pre-given assumptions. In this regard, the ethnographic techniques of participant observation, interviewing, listening, and documentary analysis were most appropriate for gleaning information from participants about the meanings of their dress and design practices, as well as the significance of their participation at the event. The pan-African nature of AFWL offers an ideal vantage point from which to understand the transnational practices and identity constructions of the Nigerian diaspora from the perspective of its participants and stakeholders. As set out in Chapter Two, the importance of identity construction through fashion cannot be overstated, because it allows individuals within the African diaspora to affirm their sense of belonging to a particular social or cultural group. The AFWL event itself emerged partly in response to addressing issues of discrimination, exclusion, and the underrepresentation of Black models and designers in the mainstream fashion industry (Lewis, 2006). For African diaspora fashion practitioners, these are systemic industry issues with real material and psychological consequences, which affect and impact their self-conceptions and contributions as tastemakers in a capitalist market economy. The physical event setting of AFWL at Freemasons' Hall provides a transnational space for the participants to interact and engage in the social world as important social actors.

Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods used in this study combined visual sources, participant observations, and interviews to explore and explain complex human behaviour. This combination of data collection methods is referred to as triangulation: 'the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon' (Denzin, 1970, pp. 291–301). Triangulation in research describes the process of using two or more sources of evidence to 'seek convergence and corroboration through the use of different data sources and methods'

(Bowen, 2009, p. 28;). The consequence of this was that, rather than relying on a single data source, triangulation helped to increase the credibility and validity of my research findings. As an example of how this works, I can consider how my own personal experiences influenced my interest in this study. By using methodological triangulation, I was able to produce unbiased research findings because each method revealed a different aspect of reality, going beyond my assumptions about the event and its practitioners.

Visual Documents

Fashion , in the global digital era is an image-producing industry and is no longer considered as the preserve of the Western elite. As Anneke Smelik (2006) reasons, fashion images are created and shared by many people for several reasons, for example in maintaining social relations or in sustaining transnational networks. It is also a social phenomenon that increasingly transcends physical and geographical boundaries; indeed, it is this blurring of boundaries that has been mediated by digital media technologies, which increasingly facilitate the rapid circulation of images (Lewis, 2015; Rocamora, 2016).

In research, visual materials contribute to the enrichment of the data collection process by offering ‘depth and detail that cannot be conveyed through words’ (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell, 2013, p. 239). Within my study, photographic evidence provided additional information on how the event management team, as well as media practitioners, constructed and represented African fashion and cultural identities for their target audience. The visual materials sampled and reviewed were analysed to develop and track the development of the event over time: its objectives, its people, its practices, its processes, and its event partners, as well as the transnational networks and connections between them. Prior to my field visit in 2018, I began identifying, collecting, and tracking documents and visual materials produced by AFWL participants. These covered the topics of African fashion, African aesthetics, cultural identities, and African fashion practitioners ever since AFWL’s emergence in 2011.

As I began the research, my understanding of visual data in the cultural context of AFWL was that documents, photographs, and videos provided a crucial source for recording activities at the event and were ‘good repositories of memory and social history narrated pictorially’ for an audience (Perera, 2017, p. 1). One of the earliest videos I came across online was the coverage of the debut event in 2011, produced and disseminated on YouTube by a UK-based Nigerian

blogger. In the footage, a British-Nigerian male presenter conducts interviews with a series of design participants and the event founder. In my analysis of the data, I found that those interviewed were mostly Black, West African women, who described themselves as fashion designers. Some recurring themes I noticed in this YouTube video interview included active participation, the expression of tacit knowledge, the claim of ownership of African cultural heritage, and the affirmation of African identities.

A subsequent methodical search for relevant documents over several months proved fruitful. I was able to find a plethora of visual materials produced and disseminated by diasporic media practitioners including bloggers, photographers, and videographers, who represented the voices of African practitioners and communicated their interests and views. These sources (found data) went on to partly inform my research aims and objectives, because watching these videos and images circulated via the digitalised contemporary visual culture inspired me to examine the visual constructions and representations of African identities and African fashions at AFWL. My questions were, ‘Why AFWL?’ and ‘Why now?’ In other words, I wanted to find out how these African fashion practitioners understood, expressed, and negotiated African cultural identities through their dress and design practices.

Altogether, the documents gathered and analysed include editorial campaign photographs, magazine reports, press releases, and press coverage of the event. I also collated data from AFWL media partners and stakeholders, including the *New African Woman* magazine, the Nigeria-based *Punch* newspaper, the *Guardian* newspaper, and the *Bella Naija* blog. I also tracked video coverage produced and disseminated by diaspora-based *Arise* magazine, BENTV, and global media conglomerates such as CNN, the BBC, Reuters, and Al Jazeera. In fact, while at a family gathering in 2017, I was impressed to see a promotional advertisement announcing the upcoming AFWL event on BENTV, a London-based African diaspora channel established by a British-Nigerian media practitioner to provide national Nigerian news to audiences in the UK. Sources such as these, and the other documentary information gathered, constitute the data for the present study. I read these as cultural texts that contribute to the reality into which consumers are socialised, rather than accurate and absolute representations of reality. Within these texts, therefore, media practitioners construct the world around African fashion practitioners, depicting them as knowledgeable experts in their own fields. While the Nigeria-based media visual reports and coverage only ‘announced’ the event and the participating designers, global media conglomerates such as the BBC offered a more detailed

perspective, with emphasis on the visions and politics of the event. The different styles between the Western media and Nigerian media coverage of the event are indicative of different market sensibilities and technologies.

As Sarah Pink (2003, p. 186) explains, any research project that incorporates images should not focus only on the internal ‘meanings’ of the photos, but also on why a specific image might have been produced, and how it makes itself meaningful to those who see it. Part of the data collected for this study included the official AFWL editorial campaign images, and my analysis of these indicates that images of Black models on the catwalk were widely disseminated by AFWL media partners, the press, and consuming-public via digital media. As archival documents, these images and video texts provided information on the historical development of the fashion event, highlighting different aspects of the events, scenes, designers, national groups, commodities, design practices, consumers, styles, material culture, intangible African cultural heritage, activities, and representations of Black models and aesthetics. I argue that, in the image economy of today’s society, these visual representations are socially and emotionally meaningful to their African producers and consumers because of the historical overdetermination, erasure, and underrepresentation of Black models and Black bodies as ideal types in mainstream fashion media. Further visual analysis of these images suggests that Blackness, femininity, and youth are depicted as ideal types in the construction and representation of African fashion identities.

In my engagement with AFWL’s visual culture – which took the form of photographs of people, activities, and venues, as well as video coverage and press releases – I identified some key actors. These individuals were involved in producing information and providing media coverage about event activities, design processes, fashion practitioners, images, and stories about African fashions via blogs, websites, and social media platforms. I discuss some of these media platforms in Chapter Five, as well as their use as digital spaces for African fashion practitioners to shape and influence public perceptions and attitudes to Africa, African fashion, and African beauty aesthetics.

In tracking the development of the AFWL event online, I kept a close tab on AFWL’s dedicated website and social media pages – on Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and YouTube – for information on event schedules, catwalk shows, tickets prices, designers, model recruitment, event marketing, official promotional campaigns, media partnerships, and sponsors. The information gathered from these sites provided me with insights into the designers, for example

who they were, where they were based, and what market segments they catered to (e.g., womenswear, menswear, couture, or luxury). I found that many of the collections presented at the fashion show were Nigerian: the Nigeria-based brands comprised emerging and established designers with stores across Nigeria, whereas the UK-based Nigerian fashion brands employed social media platforms including Instagram and Facebook, as well as websites, to circulate their design offerings to consumers. For the purposes of my research, I found it important to examine how the images these different media practitioners and companies chose to circulate served to construct meanings around African fashion, African fashion practitioners, and the role of the designer. For example, in AFWL editorial promotional campaigns, Black models are primarily selected as representatives of the brand. The AFWL editorial shoots advertising the event also tend to favour garment styles made with fabrics that challenge the stereotypical African print fabric. The significance of this is that the AFWL organisers are actively engaged in constructing and shaping public perceptions of African fashion and Black beauty aesthetics through the images they produce and disseminate.

Another theme that emerged from the visual and textual analysis of images and photos was the setting of the photographs. In contrast to the stereotypical portrayals of Black African bodies as backdrops for Western White models in many mainstream editorial campaigns (Cheang, 2013), the images produced by the AFWL creative director centre Black bodies as an ideal, amidst spectacularly beautiful surroundings. In the cultural context of AFWL, the significance of these idealised images is that they project the Black woman as feminine, beautiful, contented, relaxed, and taking pleasure in self-adornment (Fig. 4.1). These images also depict the Black male model as a key actor within fashion consumption (Fig. 4.2), which indicates that fashion is not simply a feminine sphere, creating the ideal woman, but also a sphere for the symbolic construction of Black bodies, Black beauty, and African aesthetics as objects of considerable value (Simmel, 1908).



Fig. 4.1 AFWL editorial campaign, 2016, featuring a close-up shot of Nigerian award-winning musician Yemi Alade on the front cover. Source: AFWL Press Pack 2016.



Fig. 4.2: AFWL editorial campaign, 2019, featuring a male model at the Freemasons' Hall on the front cover. Source: AFWL Press Pack, 2019.

As Hendry (2003, p. 500) writes, 'the site of fieldwork has become multiple and complex as everyday modes of communication allow easy contact between related peoples scattered throughout the world'. In this regard, the internet offers new sites for observing and interrogating practices and activities, as well as developing an understanding of the critical issues under investigation: the definition and representation of African cultural identities. As discussed earlier, the globalisation of media technologies has provided new opportunities for marginalised individuals and groups not only to create meaningful content and disseminate it across the world but also to challenge conventional representations and stereotypes concerning their cultural practices and knowledge. Consequently, my research found that online spaces constituted some of the major sites where the production and consumption of AFWL, African designer fashion, and cultural identities were mediated, produced, consumed, and disseminated. On the internet, I found a variety of blogs (including video blogs) through which information and discourse about AFWL, African fashion designs, designers, and black models were produced and circulated. Most of these blogs provided information, commentaries, and the blogger's own experiences at the event, whereas some others, such as the Bella Naija blog (a Lagos-based media company) produced and circulated local and international fashion and lifestyle news to global audiences. The internet has proven to be a significant site for generating data about the research subjects because it illuminates the diverse sources and multiple actors contributing to the discourse, as well as the symbolic production and dissemination of African fashions to consumers globally. In the present study, the internet was used only to gather visual data: it was not within the scope of this study to undertake netography or virtual ethnography concerning the practices of the participants in the digital space.

Gaining Access to the Field, and Participant Observations

I began my preliminary fieldwork as a volunteer at AFWL in 2017, where my aims were to experience the event in person as a participant observer, to partake in its activities, and to establish a relationship with the event organisers. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out, the investigator requires a period of orientation and overview in the field to gain the trust of, and develop a rapport with, their potential informants. I was hopeful that, by building reciprocal

relationships with the event management team, I would later be able to ask them to contribute to the study and assist me with recruiting participants through word of mouth and referrals. In their analysis of the framing of the fashion show, Skov *et al.* (2009) draw on Goffman (1959) to explain how social interactions within the event sets are organised. One aspect of their finding was the categorisation and differentiation between frontstage and backstage activities. I found the same to be the case at AFWL, where volunteers had access to backstage spaces, including the rooms where the models, makeup artists, hairstylists, stylists, designers, and their garments were concentrated in preparation for the show. My experience of backstage activities included performing a range of tasks, activities, practices, and interactions with multiple people who were largely invisible to the attending guests, but necessary for the realisation of the show. For example, on Day 1, an induction of the volunteers' programme was held shortly after 10 am at the event setting, with the volunteer manager and events manager present. Volunteers were informed that a WhatsApp group chat would serve as a medium of communication, and that all queries should be directed to the events manager and volunteer manager. As part of the pre-planning preparations, volunteers were assigned into groups with specific tasks: front-of-house volunteers assisted with welcoming guests and checking tickets and guestlists; backstage volunteers assisted stylists in getting garments ironed and models ready; and the fashion show ushers assisted in checking ticket entry, answering questions about logistics, and seating guests for catwalk shows. My participation at the event was mainly within the catwalk space, where I engaged in the pre-show, during-show, and post-show activities. My interactions with exhibitors consisted of visiting their stalls and examining the range of items on display. I also observed experts setting up staging, audio-visual technology, and photography, etc. Importantly, my real-time experience within the event setting – both frontstage and backstage – contributed to my understanding of the practices and people involved in the production of African fashion. This information is supported by the documentary analysis of media promotional campaigns and press coverage of the event, discussed above. I have incorporated some of the data collected during this time into the study, given that people, culture, and practices are not stagnant items, waiting for the researcher to discover them. My observations and participation in 2017 as a volunteer at the event have thus informed my understanding of what people do, where they belong, and how they negotiate their multiple intersecting allegiances and identifications. At the end of the two-day field visit in 2017, I was fully oriented with the event structure and the key people I wanted to interview. I established contact with the event organisers and collected business cards and promotional materials from the exhibitors at the event, including those from South Africa, Nigeria, China, and the United States. As an

event volunteer, I was granted an all-access pass, which allowed me to visit all sites and areas at the AFWL event setting, including the AFWL management office, where volunteers stored their personal belongings. I also participated in various activities and tasks before and during the event. Taken together, this experience provided me with a deeper understanding of operations at the event, as well as the workers involved in putting it together for the visiting public. On the final day, I was invited to attend an AFWL after-party at a London nightclub, with the promise of mingling with celebrity guests; I was, however, exhausted, and headed home at 11 pm.

My fieldwork at the AFWL venue provided me with a window for direct observation of the fashion producers, their activities, their practices, and the meanings they gave to their ways of working (Wolcott, 1999). As Willis (2007, p. 237) points out, ethnography is

an umbrella term for fieldwork, interviewing, and other means of gathering data in authentic (e.g., real-world) environments [... that] puts the researcher in the settings that he or she wants to study. The research is conducted in the natural environment rather than in an artificially contrived setting.

In their ethnography of London Fashion Week (LFW), Entwistle and Rocamora (2006, p. 737) point out that ‘the specific embodied and situated logic of fields only becomes apparent during fieldwork’. By this, the authors mean that they prioritise observations in the event setting because the examination of the ‘social, institutional, and environmental contexts in which people live and perform social interactions’ (Yin, 2011, p. 8) provides information on the phenomenon. Connecting theory to practice, Entwistle and Rocamora argue that in this way, the key players at LFW (models, designers, buyers, journalists) and their position-taking practices, sites, spaces, and relations become visible to the researcher. In this regard, fieldwork forms a significant component of ethnographic data collection, primarily because it is the context in which the group under study performs their social, cultural, and commercial practices. Thus, the point of site-specific fieldwork is to gain an understanding of the diverse ways in which ‘people perceive and interpret their own actions and experiences in the context of distinct cultural and subcultural settings’ (Hobbs and Wright, 2006, p. x).

The fashion week location is a key site of social relations and interaction that ‘connects disparate interests and creates new spaces of economic activity’ (Weller, 2008, p. 105). Therefore, as a central space of fashion production, the AFWL event location was the ideal site

in which to observe Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners, to speak with them about what they considered and experienced as meaningful and important (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995), to identify and recruit further informants for the study. The researcher enters the cultural scene as constructed by the performers (in this case, vendors, designers, consumers, and other fashion practitioners), who constitute the object of study. In this context, the configuration of the fashion week event as a public space for networking, buying, and selling (Skov *et al.*, 2009), minimises the risk of the ethnographer interfering in the natural setting and activities of the people observed. In other words, since the event was staged and produced for a public audience with many observers, my presence did not contaminate the social world created by the research subjects.

The temporality of the event at this single location provided me with myriad opportunities to observe the production of African fashions and activities of Nigerian practitioners, as well as appreciate the representation and visibility of Nigeria and African cultural heritage in the fashion industry. The single location also provided opportunities to interview these ‘living sources’ (Wolcott, 1999, p. 58), to gain insights into the subjective meanings they attached to their practices. The fashion event setting is thus considered one of the key sites in the symbolic production of African fashion, and the production of Nigerian practitioners as professional, creative, and business ‘cultural intermediaries’ (Bourdieu, 1984). The data collected via participant observation and interviews at the event setting constituted my data for this study.

Building on the previous connection established with the event manager, now Head of Operations, I wrote an email on 3 May 2018 to the event organiser to formally request permission to attend the 2018 event as a PhD researcher. In the email correspondence, I sought permission to observe activities and interview participants (see Fig.4.3), and explained the purpose of the research, as well as my role as a PhD student studying AFWL at the London College of Fashion. I did not initially receive a response, and after a few days, I decided to telephone the event organiser, who apologised for not responding to my email and assured me that she had discussed my request with the founder and AFWL management. She then informed me that they had approved the request. In August, I wrote again to the event manager to confirm that I would be attending the two-day event. I subsequently used the same approach for my fieldwork in 2019. My original intention for the fieldwork was mainly to undertake participant observations and informal interviews with participating designers in the fashion week setting. However, following a lack of interest by some of the Nigerian informants I had previously

recruited, I decided that I would undertake more interviews with Nigerian participants at the event.

To: bukki@africafashionweeklondonuk.com

May 3rd 2018

Bukola Okiji
The Head of Operations and Event Manager
Africa Fashion Week London.

Dear Ms. Okiji

I hope you are well.

I am a PhD candidate at London College of Fashion, the University of the Arts London. My supervisory committee consist of Prof. Lewis and Dr. Rocamora. My research titled: An exploration of African cultural identity examines the role of dress in the representations and construction of identity in the diaspora. I am in the process of gathering data that will be used in the study, I am writing to obtain your consent to undertake research study at the forthcoming event to be held 10th and 11th August 2018 at the Freemason's Hall London. The information gathered will be used in my doctoral thesis.

Your approval to conduct this research study at Africa Fashion Week London in August will be greatly appreciated. I will be happy to provide further information and answer any questions or concerns that you may have in relation to my research study. The research study has been approved by the University's ethics and research committee.

I appreciate you taking the time to read this email, I look forward to your kind reply.
Thank you for your consideration.

My best,

Tolu Omoyele
PhD Research Candidate at London College of Fashion, John Princes Street, Oxford Circus.
Mobile: 074 269 25702
Email: Tomoyele1@arts.ac.uk

Fig.4.3: Formal request to observe at AFWL. The researcher's correspondence to the AFWL event manager.

Obtaining agreement from the organisers of the event proved useful, however my initial encounter with the front desk gave me cause for concern. Upon arrival at the event in 2018 I, like every other visiting guest, was directed to the front desk at the reception for registration. I noticed that two uniformed security men (Black and White) were posted outside the entrance. In the entrance hall, there were six reception desks with chairs: three to the left and three to the right, creating a pathway into the entrance. An A4 paper sign attached to the front of each table communicated and informed visitors of the appropriate reception desk. Vibrant African print cloth fabric served as table covers, and flyers, posters, and event schedules were displayed on

the table. There were female receptionists examining tickets, registering guests on the guest lists, and welcoming visitors. The receptionists also directed visitors to the appropriate desk. For example, as I stepped into the foyer and walked up to the first desk on the left, a young receptionist quietly asked, with no greeting, ‘Visitor or Press?’ I didn’t fit into either of these categories, so I explained that I was a researcher, and that the event organiser Bukki had approved my attendance. The unsmiling volunteer did not seem to know anything about this, but she directed me to the Press desk.

At the Press desk, I introduced myself again as a researcher, showing my LCF student ID, and explaining that Bukki had approved my attendance. This young woman asked for my name and cross-checked it against a guest list. After she located my name, she greeted me warmly and handed me a Press VIP badge, explaining that this would give me guaranteed access to everywhere within the event venue. As I fumbled to put the corded badge around my neck, the young woman told me that, at the volunteer meeting that morning, the event manager had informed them about me and my research on the event. She stated that they were all very impressed. I was pleasantly surprised, feeling that the manager had validated my research by sharing information with the volunteers and management. I was glad that I had offered my time as a volunteer the year before, particularly because the event manager had introduced me to the founder as ‘AFWL’s best volunteer so far’ while at the event in 2017. Being validated in this way invoked a feeling of belonging within me.

[Participant Observation: Fashion Shows, Exhibition, and All that Jazz](#)

The extent of my participant observation was dictated by the duration of the event. AFWL was held over two days in both 2018 and 2019, and I observed many people and event activities. The AFWL site at Freemasons’ Hall comprised a main catwalk theatre hall, where the spectacular fashion shows were held, and an exhibition or trade fair space spread over two floors, where designers, vendors, exhibitors, and merchants occupied individual stands to display ready-to-wear collections, accessories, textile fabrics, and services. The event was open to the consuming public, who were required to register and purchase tickets for the catwalk shows. In this regard, I considered the public event to be a space for image and impression management (Goffman, 1959).

During the two events, I undertook a combination of covert and overt observational techniques. At times I posed as a consumer visiting the event space to experience the event activities, and did not inform those who I was observing that I was undertaking a research project. I was also privy to conversations and exchanges between other consumers visiting these stalls and speaking with the sellers. These conversations generally centred around topics such as the price of items, where the seller was from, where the commodities were purchased or made, and anecdotal stories surrounding these commodities. Elsewhere, to minimise the potential for harm, I employed overt observation with exhibitors and vendors I interacted with directly at their stalls. To speak with these research subjects, it was necessary for me to obtain informed consent (Fielding, 1993). I recorded all observations on my mobile phone, and made some notes by hand in my notepad.

Over the two-day event, the exhibition was open to the consuming public from 11 am until after the final catwalk show, of which there were a maximum of three per day. As Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) argue, the organisation of these disparate activities at the event venue indicates the division between art and commerce: the catwalk space is where fashion collections are displayed on moving bodies, and is strictly a spectator space for the viewing of garments; the exhibition space, also known as the marketplace, is where vendors and the consuming public engage in the buying and selling of commodities, goods, and services. In the British fashion context, Entwistle and Rocamora (2006, p. 739) write that ‘The “creative” and “artistic” are celebrated through the privileging of the fashion catwalk to the detriment of the “commercial” exhibition, which receives little press coverage’. However, my observations of fashion within AFWL found that creativity and commerce were equally valued, despite designers and vendors having to pay to present their collections on the catwalk. Small and independent designers and vendors were also provided with a platform to sell and engage with new customers. This is one of the inclusive aspects of AFWL, because it offers an exhibition and commercial space for interested participants to network, sell, and interact based on their personal and emotional needs – an African cultural context- that appreciates and values African aesthetics and designs in the products and commodities. Some of the exhibitors I interacted with at the event in both 2018 and 2019 made positive remarks about this aspect of the event, as they were given the option to partake in the event for one day. Another research subject remarked that participating as an exhibitor gave her the opportunity to test the reception of her creativity in the marketplace and to engage with new people, including designers, fashion practitioners, and like-minded consumers. The exhibition part of the event was festive, with a

wide range of services and commodities on offer for both male and female customers: perfume, clothing accessories, jewellery, textiles, and ready-to-wear garments. (See Appendix for images of AFWL exhibition layout and commodities.)

During my fieldwork in 2018 and 2019, I attended and observed a total of ten fashion shows, exhibiting collections by at least 50 designers/brands. Each year, two shows were held on the Friday of the event, and three shows were held on the Saturday (at 3 pm, 5 pm, and 7 pm). Some of these events were structured in time slots, grouping collections by style, where individual designers would present their clothing collections (3–18 pieces). Another presentation format was the group show, where a group of designers (e.g., TIKZN South African design collective) presented as a part of one show. The maximum duration of each of these time-allocated shows was one hour and thirty minutes. While observing the clothing collections at these shows, I noted multiple constructions of African fashion by different design practitioners. For example, Nigerian designers, who were disproportionately represented in the fashion shows, presented garments that utilised a wide range of popular materials and fabrics, from Ankara/African print, to lace and adire. Some others used custom-made printed fabrics, which incorporated African motifs and images. In contrast to these, another national group of South African designers utilised local and indigenous fabrics, such as the xhosa, shwe shwe, and colourful beads. The clothing collections on display did not consist entirely of clothing, but also incorporated accessories such as shoes, bags, scarves (See Appendix B). These fashion shows depicted African fashions as spectacular and varied, challenging pre-existing monolithic notions and representations of what African fashion ought to be. The catwalk itself thus became a stage for promoting the multiple meanings of African fashion.

Although the catwalk events were inclusive of African, non-African, White and Black, male and female models, my observations found that Black female models were predominantly represented, with diverse body shapes and skin tones. For the audiences watching, this is significant, considering the recurring debates about the underrepresentation of Black models in mainstream fashion weeks and editorials. In this way, AFWL celebrates Black models and amplifies their presence as ideal types in the marketing and communication of fashion for an African audience. As would be expected, the audience for the fashion show was majority Black and diverse, comprising industry practitioners such as press, editors, journalists, buyers, and photographers, as well as the consuming public, including celebrities, socialites, representatives from government agencies, fashionistas, etc. As already mentioned, the seating

arrangements at the AFWL fashion shows mirror mainstream fashion shows, with front-row seats reserved for fashion insiders and important dignitaries (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). Equally, as in the mainstream industry convention, the AFWL fashion show takes place within an enclosed space, creating a boundary between fashion art and commerce (McRobbie, 1998). In this respect, the layout of the building was structured to separate the fashion show from the marketplace of exhibitions of commodities. Guests must buy tickets to the enclosed fashion show space at AFWL online via Eventbrite, and security standing outside the entrance will inspect their tickets before granting them access. The reason for the inspection has to do with the commodification of fashion shows: guests may purchase tickets for one or more of the five scheduled shows over the two days, which means that a ticket purchased for a 3 pm show cannot be reused for a 5 pm or 7 pm show (See Appendix. for show schedules). Those wishing to attend the fashion show without tickets are thus denied entry, unless they are pre-approved press/media members with established credentials (an AFWL Press placard worn around the neck).

During my observations, I kept in mind the notion of ‘Being there – the guiding principle of ethnographic fieldwork’ (Sadre-Orafi, 2019, p. 106). This is a useful technique for learning and gaining a sense of what participants do at the event, and what the event means to them. Before my attendance at the event, as I have noted, I collated promotional materials and tracked information online about the participants and event producers. I also watched video report coverage on the AFWL activities, including catwalk shows, the exhibition of commodities, and interviews with event participants. This preliminary research conducted online initially gave me an expectation that recruiting participants would be straightforward. *Being there*, however, was a different sensory experience. This provided unforeseen opportunities to fully immerse myself within the fashion event settings, to interact with participants in real-time, to obtain a feel for the atmosphere at the event, and to watch what participants did. For example, while observing the event, I became aware that participants’ social attributes such as gender, class, race, and ethnicity were much more visible. I found that most of the design participants were women, and that my textual analysis of designer brands had not provided this insight. Furthermore, while AFWL’s promotional materials and advertisement constructed the event discursively as pan-African – that is, using the term African and African-inspired design talents incorporating both African-descended and non-African-descended practitioners - unified by strong bonds of solidarity and commitment to the collective goal of building a more inclusive fashion industry. On the other hand, *Being there* to observe the participants, fashion shows,

activities, and commodities, apprised me of contradictions between the realities I witnessed in the event setting and the media representations of the event as seen online. To put it another way, both the fashion show and the fashion press are image-creating institutions that produce the images that define the meaning of fashion (Skov et. al 2009). Fashion itself is an ideology and a powerful force that exists in the minds of those who believe in it. Kawamura (2018) notes that this belief in fashion is constructed through the fashion system in which the fashion media act as a key component. A well-established fact in the literature is the role the fashion media play in constructing ideas and ‘aesthetic value’ for consumers (Entwistle, 2009, p. 9) through their representations of designers, collections, brands, and models on magazine pages. This is applicable to AFWL’s media materials, which construct both the fashion week event as well as African fashion as an object of value. It does this not by elaborating on the oppressive structures of the fashion industry that has historically marginalised non-White and non-Western practices and bodies. But through the centralisation of black bodies, African cultural heritage, and values, these media materials serve as objects of orientation for emphasising not only the diversity of African fashions but the excellence of its practitioners. However, the media representations of AFWL present only one account of reality, as understood from the unique perspective of the media practitioner who produced the image for an intended audience and purpose. In attending the event myself and directly observing the diverse processes, people, and activities going on within the event, I was alerted to the complexities of producing fashion, and the idea of fashion as a collective activity involving multiple actors with their own unique perspectives (Braham, 2007). For example, from my conversations with several audience members, I found sitting arrangements and start times to be two recurring issues. For example, consumers complained about the delayed start time of the catwalk shows reflecting that their expectations were unmet.

As Sadre-Orafai (2019, p. 107) highlights in her study of the New York fashion industry, ‘studying cultural producers raises a number of ethical, methodological, and representational dilemmas and requires negotiating a particular kind of researcher-subject relationship’. In my own experience, I found myself dealing with each of these dimensions, particularly the issues of maintaining a critical distance from the research, and deciding on which aspects of the event to observe and write about. For example, while at the event, I observed the event founder conducting interviews with members of the press at different intervals during the day. However, I subsequently found it difficult to get her to grant me an interview. It soon became clear to me that fashion media and fashion research play different functions, and my role placed

me as an outsider. The former works as part of the capitalist structure, disseminating information and ideas about the motivations, influences, and practices of the event; fashion research, on the other hand, is an academic practice that does not promote but rather provides cultural interpretations of practices and cultures. Nevertheless, research is essential for correcting misconceptions and developing new knowledge. Hobbs and Wright (2006, p. xi) note that ‘in writing up accounts of their research, fieldworkers inevitably must pick and choose what to report, and serious questions have been raised about the extent to which such choices reveal more about the observer than the observed’. In addition to this, Wolcott (1999) mentions that the neophyte ethnographer and researcher entering the field want to capture and observe everything they see. Seasoned ethnographers, on the other hand, narrow the scope of their observation to make it more manageable: ‘the unseasoned ones may have to learn that less is more as part of their seasoning’ (Wolcott, 1999, p. 87). Indeed, I found the practice of fieldwork in 2018 and 2019 to be exhausting and time-consuming, as I oscillated between spaces in the event location, from the exhibition stands and their wide range of commodities on display, to the catwalk show’s enclosed space. At one point, after spending four hours talking and interacting with exhibitors, I had to step outside the event venue to get some air and escape the crowded space.

Field Notes

An important part of the research process is taking field notes (Burgess, 1984), in which the fieldworker records descriptions of what they have observed, the people, the activities, personal experiences, feelings, thoughts about activities, and interpretations of events. Emerson (1995) also suggests that field notes constitute an important aspect of the participant observation and final written report. Taking field notes is an interpretive activity in itself, because, by choosing what to jot down, the researcher provides an analysis of what they have seen and observed, and what they have understood from that experience. My field notes included descriptive accounts of fashion show activities, including audiences’ reactions to the clothing collections presented on the catwalk, models on the catwalk, and the behaviours and practices of individuals within the fashion show hall. I also jotted down my personal thoughts and feelings about my engagement and interactions with exhibiting vendors at the event. In writing up my report later on, I found that some aspects of my field note observations were irrelevant to the research objectives, for example, the layout of the event venue, the organisation of the exhibition stands,

the display of commodities, and the use of African print material for table covers by some exhibitors; realising this, I chose to leave these details out. Choosing what to include in my report itself was a challenge, considering that I found every moment of the event to be interesting. However, as exhaustive as fieldwork is, the ‘fieldwork can only be fully appreciated through the interpretive lens of the investigator [...] in which the researcher and instrument are one and the same’ (Hobbs and Wright, 2006, p. xi). In the end, I had to revisit my research objectives, which served as a guide for sifting through aspects of the observation relevant to the research.

Recruiting Participants for the Study

The sampling region from which I recruited participants was the event setting of AFWL, beginning with the participants’ roles within the cultural event. The second condition of my sampling accorded to participants’ national origins, which had to be Nigerian. I did not set ethnicity, class, and gender as parameters, because these emerged from the sample as units of analysis. As a result, the study focused specifically on Nigerian and Nigerian-descended participants, with the assumption that this group of participants within the broader African diaspora represents a case study of the complex fashion presentations and identities at AFWL. As discussed in Chapter One, the Nigerian diaspora is not a homogenous group, and thus examining the participants offers a way to explicate and understand the transnational fashion networks and practices of the Nigerian diaspora. Additionally, this focus serves to challenge the misconception and underlying assumption in dominant representations of Africa that all Africans and Nigerians share a similar culture. As a country, Nigeria itself is not a monolithic group but rather comprises distinct ethnonational identities and heritages. My focus on the Nigerian diaspora and transnational practices thus illustrates the fact that Africa is a multifaceted continent with heterogeneous cultures – local, regional, and national – with different trajectories of development. Finally, this work also provides insights into how a specific group within the broader African diaspora framework constructs and expresses meanings of cultural identities through their dress and design practices. While much research has focused on the consumption practices of Black women in the UK, less scholarly attention has been paid to the production of African fashion by Nigerian fashion producers in the diaspora.

As mentioned above, the recruitment of participants to interview proved difficult. In this section, I explain briefly the strategies employed to recruit participants for the study. Prior to my attendance as a fieldworker, I identified potential participants in my documentary analysis of AFWL's past events. Among these were several Nigerian design practitioners and brands who had taken part in the fashion event since 2011, and who possessed the knowledge and experience that would be of interest to this research. To recruit participants for in-depth interviews, I thus employed the method of purposive sampling, described by Crookes and Davis (1998, p. 6) as 'judgemental sampling that involves the conscious selection by the researcher of certain subjects or elements to include in the study'. Having assessed the information collated from the AFWL catwalk schedules, press releases, and press coverage on these design participants, I contacted them via the emails provided on their social media platforms and websites and invited them to partake in the study. The eligibility criteria of whom to include in the study were based on those participants with prior or current lived experience of the event. The use of social media as a strategy for identifying and recruiting participants is now established in academic research, however the approach did not yield the expected result. Some of these brands were now defunct, some others were unwilling to partake in the study, and some did not respond to my email. As Molloy and Lerner (2010, p. 269) point out in their study of New Zealand designer fashion, 'infrastructure and financing' are major challenges for newer designers in the process of establishing their businesses. This is evidently true for African diaspora fashion designers as well.

Based on this slow response rate, I adopted a snowball approach to sampling for interview participants. This method describes the process wherein the 'researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others' (Bryman, 2008, p. 182). One advantage of this snowball approach was that I was able to recruit participants through my personal contacts, 'through a series of referrals that are made within a circle of people who know one another' (Berg, 2016, p. 12). In this manner, I contacted two UK-based fashion practitioners to help recruit participants for the study: a British-Nigerian designer and stylist who had participated at AFWL since 2015, and a fashion stylist who had also worked at the fashion week since 2015. The designer was helpful and supportive, facilitating an introduction to prospective participants of Nigerian descent via Facebook and word of mouth. Those who were contacted, however, were uncooperative. The fashion stylist whom I contacted for assistance in recruiting participants proved even less successful. This paucity of interest was unexpected, yet it provided me with

an unexpected opportunity to re-examine my position as an academic and outsider and to question whether my racial identity as a Black female researcher and non-religious woman constrained my access to informants, or whether the informants were simply not appreciative of the research study. In her study of the Nigerian diaspora in the UK, which combined snowballing and purposive sampling methods, Alakija (2016) writes about a similar difficulty in recruiting participants. The author characterises the behaviour of the sample group as evasive, suspicious of the referral, and unwilling. To gain access to Nigerian informants, Alakija (2016, p. 99) approached ‘various organisations, mostly Christian and Islamic centres’, and found it easier to recruit Christians than Muslims, ‘Partly due to my own religious affiliation as a Christian. Despite my efforts to cover up with a hijab in Muslim environments, and in spite of the leaders’ support in the form of presenting me to the members of their congregations, I was still considered an outsider’. During my field visit, I noted that most of the Nigerian participants I interviewed were Christians. They expressed their religious identity through explicit statements such as ‘I am a Christian’, or in passing remarks like ‘We thank Jesus’. As Alakija notes above, religious identity is one of the ways in which difference within the Nigerian diaspora is marked. During my visit to AFWL in 2018, a female Muslim Nigerian vendor whom I approached became interested in the research only after I explained the purpose of the research and the option to anonymise her comments. In the end, she was reluctant to participate in the study.

This illustrates the fact that the recruitment of participants in qualitative research is not straightforward. Even through referrals, most Nigerians are suspicious and unwilling to partake in research for several reasons, including an attitudinal disposition of keeping others at arm’s length, as a form of self-preservation (Alakija, 2016). Alakija explains in her report that, despite being of the same ethnic Yoruba background, some of those she initially approached were unwilling to participate, and others regarded her as the ‘Nigerian police’. As my study was also focused on Nigerian practitioners, I wondered if I had encountered the same problem as Alakija (2016, p. 117), who observes that she ‘may have been seen to be assessing their “Nigerianness” and their legal status in the UK’.

Finally, I employed convenience sampling, which involves engaging with participants at the event and trying to recruit them to partake in the study. The decision to use convenience sampling of those who were *in situ* at the event was based solely on their availability and cooperativeness. All of the participants involved in this study were therefore recruited through

personal interactions at the event setting in 2018 and 2019. Upon arrival at the event location for fieldwork in 2018 and 2019, I walked around the exhibition stands, observing and speaking with vendors and consumers. The exhibition stands provided signage – names of the brands – which partly informed me whether this was a Nigerian brand or not. At other times, I had to speak with the vendor to ascertain whether or not they were Nigerian, at which point I would introduce myself, show them my student ID, explain the purpose of my research, and ask whether they would be willing and interested to contribute to my study. For those interested, I sought their informed consent to record the interviews on my tape recorder. I also let them know that they could remain anonymous if they preferred. Similarly, I sought prior consent from the respondents to include the brand names discussed. Once consent was given, I conducted an interview at their exhibition stands for a duration of around 10 to 20 minutes.

In total, I interviewed approximately 30 participants in August 2018 and August 2019 at the event location. These respondents were selected based on their national origins as Nigerian, and their lived experience within the commercial and creative setting of AFWL. Many of the informants I interviewed described themselves as fashion designers, entrepreneurs, British and Nigerian, and provided me with background information about their educational qualifications and religious identities as Christians. As a result, the sample is disproportionately Black, female, Nigerian, Yoruba, British, and middle-class. This is partly because, as I have mentioned, the event location featured mainly women, reflecting previous findings that fashion is typically associated with women. But unlike other studies (Appleford, 2011; Lifter, 2012), which focus mostly on the consumption practices of White women, these women at AFWL were producers of African fashion rather than merely consumers. As cultural producers, these women were creating products that expressed and conveyed their African cultural identities and affiliations. Although I took steps to recruit male Nigerian practitioners, including the head stylist and former AFWL fashion show producer and model agent, ultimately this was not possible, owing to a lack of interest on their part. I also made efforts to keep the sample even in terms of whether the participants were Nigeria-based or UK-based design practitioners of Nigerian descent. Most of the UK-based participants had travelled from across the UK to the event location in central London. The Nigeria-based participants, on the other hand, had travelled from Lagos to London for the duration of the event. The sampling methods employed above are indicative of the messiness and iterative nature of the qualitative approach (Patton, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Fetterman, 1998). Ultimately, the aim was to capture the experiences of the Nigerian participants at AFWL and their understanding of the significance

of the fashion week event to their professional practice and cultural identities, and I was able to achieve this aim by employing these methods.

Interviews

As key methods of data collection in fashion studies, interviewing and listening reveal ‘the subject’s own perspectives’ (Kawamura, 2018, p. 130) ‘more accurately than in a standardised interview or a questionnaire’ (Flick, 2009, p. 150). To capture and understand participants’ dress and design practices, motivations, influences and inspirations, therefore, the interview questions covered topics such as brand development, what they loved about fashion, whether they had any professional design background, and what they hoped to gain at AFWL. I compiled a list of these interview questions prior to the field visit, so that I might structure the conversation and focus on the participants’ roles, their understanding of fashion design, the descriptions of their brand, design and dress practices, and their reasons for participating at AFWL. With this approach, I was able to ask follow-up questions based on these conversations with the participants. This interview method allows for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the factors that shape fashion processes, such as ethnicity, family background, occupational position, social and kinship networks, and migration experience. In this regard, the Nigerian diaspora’s dress and design practices, must be placed within the cultural and social contexts of their production because these practitioners are constructing complex hybrid cultural identities.

Beginning with AFWL in 2018, I conducted informal interviews with 20 participants exhibiting at the event. These included British, Indonesian, South African (TIKZN collective), French, Chinese, Tunisian, and Nigerian informants. In 2019, I returned to AFWL for fieldwork and conducted about 21 interviews, each lasting between 4 and 15 minutes, over two days (see Table 4.3). By recording these interviews, I was able to listen attentively in person and then transcribe them at the end of the field visit. The most relevant information from these is now included in this report. Overall, the participants interviewed were all professionals – running established and emerging brands within the transnational African fashion system.

Role	Activities at the event	Market segment	Nationality/race	Gender
Designer	Fashion show/vendor	Van Else Womenswear	Dutch-Indonesian Netherlands-based	Female
Representative	Fashion show/vendor	Shwe Mixed	South African White	Female
Designer	Fashion show/vendor	Beau Sapeur Mixed	British-French Kampala-based	Male
Designer	Vendor	Dawn Eseff Mixed	British London-based	Female
Designer	Vendor	Melinda Hope Repurposed clothing	French-Tunisian UK-based	Female
Designer	Vendor	Ebi by Avu Mixed	Nigerian/British UK-based	Female
Designer	Vendor	Aso Mixed	Nigerian/British London-based	Male
Designer	Vendor	AfroStylist	Nigerian/British	Female

		Mixed	UK-based	
Designer	Fashion show/vendor	Style and Pride Womenswear	South African Zulu	Female
Designer	Fashion show/vendor	Bright Shadow Womenswear	South African Xhosa	Female
Designer	Fashion show/vendor	Afrolucious Womenswear	South African Undisclosed	Female
Designer	Vendor	Womenswear	Brazilian	Female
Blogger	Stylist		Nigerian/British UK-based	Female
Blogger	Influencer		British UK-based	Female
Blogger	Influencer		British UK-based	Female
Blogger	Stylist		Ugandan British UK-based	Female
Volunteer	Stylist/student		Nigerian British	Female

			UK-based	
Volunteer	Student		Black British UK-based	Male

Table 4.3: List of informants interviewed at AFWL 2018.

Role	Title/activity	Market segment	Location/nationality	Gender
AFWL management	Press officer	AFWL management	British UK-based	Female
Event partner	Media partner	Nollywood Actress/Producer	Nigerian/British UK-based	Female
Event partner	Media partner	DJ Abass	Nigerian/British UK-based	Male
Designer	Fashion show/vendor	Ire Clothing Mixed	Nigerian Lagos-based	Male
Designer	Fashion show	Edi by EddyLast Mixed	Nigerian UK-based	Male
Designer	Vendor	Flakkies Fashion	Nigerian/British	Female

		Womenswear	UK-based	
Designer	Vendor	Notable Woman Womenswear	Nigerian/British UK-based	Female
Designer	Vendor/fashion show	Precious Womenswear	South African	Female
Designer	Vendor	Ethnicity Clothing Mixed	Nigerian/British UK-based	Male
Representative	Vendor	Daviva Textile manufacturer	Nigerian Lagos-based	Female

Table 4.4: List of informants interviewed at AFWL 2019.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is a continuous process in which the data are organised, structured, and interpreted (Miller and Brewer, 2003). There is no single correct approach for data analysis; rather, the researcher (as the instrument) must maintain and apply intellectual rigour to the data analysis process (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). While the researcher may adopt various data analysis procedures and methods, the interpretation of the data belongs to the researcher. As Jones (1985, p. 57) specifies, ‘the analysis of data about the social world can never be a matter of discovering and describing what is there. The very process of deciding what is, and what is relevant and significant in what is, involves selective interpretation and conceptualisation’. I found this to be true during my own data analysis process. Although I

attempted to begin data analysis as soon as the interviews were transcribed, I soon found that the process was not straightforward, owing to the excessive amount of rich materials collected at the start of the project, my diverging interests, and the broad scope of my research. Nevertheless, my analysis of the data was informed by the exploration of thematic data analysis methods, characterised by three stages: description, analysis, and interpretation (Bowen, 2009).

My analysis was also somewhat complicated by the differing forms of data gathered, which ranged from field notes, to transcribed interviews, visual and textual materials in media representations, and event documents. In addition to this, my interpretations were guided by concepts and theories in the literature. Thus, in the data analysis stages, I looked for recurring themes and patterns across the data set and collated the recurring patterns that pertained to my research objectives. During the data transcription process, several themes emerged, which can be summarised as: negotiating identity, cultural pride, the commodification of cultural heritage, ownership and recognition, collective interests, and communicating Africa's image and building skills and manufacturing capacity back home. These themes reflect the idea that the meanings associated with fashion are produced through the activities of those who engage with it, as fashion design and production provided these producers with opportunities for self-definition, and to develop and reaffirm their ethnonational affiliations and identities. My initial textual and visual analysis led me to identify the concepts of African fashion and African-inspired fashion – categories constructed by the AFWL organisers to convey and brand the event to audiences. After the interviews were manually transcribed, I explored the participants' responses to ascertain whether these concepts were used in their description of their dress and design practices. This led me to differentiate between the pan-African inclusive narratives of African fashion as constructed by the event management and stakeholders, and the designer-led narratives about their dress and design practices. From this data analysis emerged multiple constructions and narratives of African fashion, Nigerian and Yoruba identities, transnational networks and activities, and the motivations for maintaining these networks.

The Researcher's Positionality and Critical Reflexivity

As previously discussed, the process of decolonisation is not about the cessation of physical domination by exploitative foreign invaders. Rather, it involves an epistemic revolution to reclaim the knowledge systems, humanity, and histories (e.g., confidence in identities, language, cultural heritage, and traditions) of the colonised peoples, which have been destroyed

and devalued through the violent imposition of the colonisers' cultural worldviews. Consequently, the researcher's role as a knowledge producer is entangled with coloniality. In other words, as they produce knowledge about subjectivities and being, the researcher perpetuates (willingly or unconsciously) the Euro-North American-centric modernity that unfolded from the fifteenth century onwards through their methodologies, interpretations, and analysis (Mignolo, 2007; 2011). Decolonial scholars posit that one avenue for challenging the perpetuation of global coloniality is through research methodologies employed in the study of oppressed and marginalised groups, to recover lost identities, foster self-determination, empowerment, and social justice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015; 2019). Critical self-reflexivity is one such measure by which the researcher may test and gauge their credibility (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000 p. 5) define this as a continuous awareness and attention to 'the way different kinds of linguistic, social, political and theoretical elements are woven together in the process of knowledge development, during which empirical material is constructed, interpreted and written'. Throughout the writing stages of my report, I was aware of a constant internal negotiation and renegotiation of my subjectivity, thoughts, past experiences, and visions for the future. From conceptualising the study to conducting the literature review, my views and mental schema about the nature of reality and my own position in the social world have evolved, and I have taken great care to provide analysis and interpretations that are equally respectful of my subjects' worldviews and knowledge.

At the start of my PhD research, I did not think of this study as a decolonial project; I was, however, deeply committed to capturing the experiences and understandings of participants at AFWL about their dress and design practices. I was also confident that my ethnic background as a Nigerian and Yoruba woman would facilitate my access to the event's participants. My interest in this study was, in part, motivated by my lived experiences as a Black woman and African model living in Europe, and my interactions in an industry that claims and frames fashion in Eurocentric terms. To my dismay, I have engaged with Black and non-Black practitioners – designers, models, and model agents – who have attempted to devalue, invalidate, misread, and/or make invisible the lived experiences of Black fashion practitioners and African beauty aesthetics. I understand this to be a reflection of, and evidence for, the phenomenon of socialisation within a colonial thought system. Overall, I felt assured that my familiarity with the subject matter and the subjects under study would provide me with a good critical vantage point from which to examine the construction and representations of African fashion and cultural identities in the global age.

During the study, however, I encountered a recurring issue, particularly in the processes of data collection and analysis. This was the idea of maintaining a critical distance or ‘objective separateness’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1988, p. 94). Flick (2009, p. 229) describes the failure to do this as ‘losing critical external perspective and unquestioningly adopting the viewpoint shared in the field’. As a data collection tool, participant observation presented several such dangers; one being the risk of losing my sense of being a researcher. Because of my shared knowledge and culture with the research subjects, and my prior knowledge and lived experience within the industry, I found myself becoming shrouded in the world I was supposed to be researching. Not only did I adopt the viewpoints shared by the research participants in the field and in media representations of the event, but my interpretations of the data were also influenced by my lived experiences. In other words, I began to see the event as my informants saw it – a safe space for African fashion practitioners to perform and express African cultural heritage, alternative knowledge, and cultural identities in a meaningful and self-affirming way. This experience is unique and tends to be prevalent among researchers studying their own communities. I was haunted by my observation and the subjects’ responses about the fashion event, namely that this was an ‘opportunity to witness black women in charge of a large-scale event focused on engendering positivity and social justice initiatives’ (Patterson *et al.*, 2016, p. 57). In sum, I interpreted the visible dominance of Black African women at AFWL as meaningful and symbolic, because the platform amplified the role of Black women as creative, enterprising, and occupying leadership positions.

Through the course of the study, therefore, I recognised my both of my roles: as a researcher, an instrument of critical inquiry into AFWL and Nigerian fashion producers, their transnational activities, and networks; and as a cultural insider, with an innate understanding of the concerns and issues raised by participants. As such, I acknowledge myself to be a product of colonisation, and understand the need for self-liberation through unlearning and relearning new ways of thinking and being. As Norman Denzin (1991, p. 68) writes, our interpretations are ‘shaped by prior cultural understandings’. As already mentioned in the General Introduction chapter, my interest in this topic of African fashion and the event is shaped by my personal experience as a Black and African model working in the fashion industry. I had previously concluded that Black people in the diasporic context – UK and the USA - had not organised themselves sufficiently because of their differences in class, race, culture, ethnicity, and nationality. However, the creation of AFWL by a majority of Black and Nigerian African women as practitioners and cultural tastemakers, counteracted this negative, preconceived

notion. My beliefs shifted as a result of this, and I became convinced that AFWL was full of rich ethnographic data worthy of documentation and study. I was certain that further research was pertinent for examining the role of the fashion week in fostering alliances amongst Black people and resisting negative media portrayals of Africa, African cultures, and African beauty aesthetics. This necessary research would subsequently provide a broader understanding of the African diasporic fashion cultures, creativity, and commercial activities. In addition to this, I found that I could not ignore my personal lived experiences in both fashion and academia, where I have observed silencing, subjugated knowledge, and marginalisation of African and Nigerian fashion designers. To be sure, a lived experience is not only something that is fleeting ‘its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. 53). The importance of challenging Eurocentric media narratives on African fashions and realities through self-representation and definition is an unending topic for African diaspora practitioners, who have been marginalised in mainstream fashion discourse (Rovine, 2015). For these individuals, their creative practices are an effective way of claiming their humanity and realising the economic value of their work. Particularly for my own purposes, evidence of these tensions plays out daily in the digitalised contemporary visual culture, through media representations, encounters with other people, and societal structures (Patterson *et al.*, 2016, p. 70). Throughout this research project, I was aware that I was looking for data, or evidence to support my lived experience of fashion as a Black woman which to some extent has been under-examined in much fashion studies. At the same time my textual and visual analysis, interviews and observation were supportive in better understanding of my personal experience.

An autoethnographic approach combines autobiography and ethnography, allowing the researcher to situate her own personal experiences on the topic researched (Jones *et al.*, 2015, p. 5) and connect this to wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings (Elis 2004). Despite the merits of the autoethnographic approach, which include challenging the rigidity of positivism and the emotionally detached researcher, I decided against employing this method. Nevertheless, my past experiences of working in the fashion industry gave me the advantage of being able to relate to the research subjects and carry out my research in a sensitive and respectful manner, so that I might contribute to the knowledge of Nigerian diaspora fashion based on these participants’ experiences.

Patricia Hill Collins (2002) offers some suggestions for bridging the disconnect between the personal and professional lives and roles of Black women scholars undertaking research on their communities. Collins states that the researcher must be aware of her positionality; this form of self-reflexivity means recognising that her race, sexuality, gender, and class are tools that shape her identity as a researcher. Accordingly, Black feminist thought (BFT), defined as a critical lens, “encompasses the theoretical interpretation of Black women’s reality by those who live and experience it” (Collins, 2002, p. 2). In their operationalisation of BFT, Patterson *et al.* (2016) employ a discussion-group approach, in which they participate and share their lived experiences alongside other women. The authors point out that, ‘Mainstream positivistic research traditions may raise questions about the validity of our research because neither the existence of a singular truth nor the necessity of researcher objectivity is pursued’, thus BFT ‘embodies methodology that privileges black women’s embodied ways of knowing’ (Patterson *et al.*, 2016, p. 70). Clemons (2019, p. 3) adds that, ‘The act of sharing one’s story and drawing a connection to other Black women who have similar experiences is powerful and can aid the understanding of the many challenges people face’. This suggests that knowledge is acquired through various experiences of living, surviving, and thriving within multiple forms of oppression. It is a self-defined, embodied way of knowing that privileges Black women’s experiences and understandings of their position in the global racialised hierarchy (Collins, 2000; 2002). Therefore, because of my shared experiences with the research subjects, my role as an insider (Nigerian, Black, a woman, and African) and outsider (researcher) was one of constant negotiation, especially considering my emotional attachment to the topic and research group. While at the event as a participant observer, for example, I participated by watching the fashion shows, visiting exhibition stands, speaking with vendors, models, and consumers, trying on accessories, and even purchasing some items – two pairs of earrings fabricated in Ankara, and a dress from the South African brand Afrolucious. While writing up my report, on the other hand, I was acutely cognisant of the fact that Black women’s experiences of the event vary, and are by no means similar, nor are they devoid of contradictions and internal tensions owing to geography, capital, cultural, and social norms. In the ‘polycentric fashion world’ economy (Skov, 2011, p. 137), in which ‘Africa and Africans are embedded’ (Falola, 2013, p. 277), the transnational field of fashion offers African nationals in diasporas possibilities and opportunities for affirming their creative agencies and asserting their multiple cultural identities and homeland allegiances.

This chapter has described and discussed the methodological approach undertaken in this research. I employed an interpretive approach to focus on my respondent's voices, their thoughts, and their interpretations about their activities, practices, situations, and identities (Geertz, 1973). My participant observations at the event setting were complemented by the interviews I conducted with fashion participants, as well as textual and visual analysis of media coverage, all of which served to interpret the transnational practices of Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners and the transnational fashion system. The data gathered were used to flesh out more clearly the cultural intermediaries within the Nigerian diaspora, and how Nigerian fashion practitioners utilise fashion to alter and re-construct the image of Africa within the global market. Consequently, by using multiple methods of data collection including interviews, participant observations, and fieldwork both at the event settings and online through social media platforms, websites, and blogs, I was able to examine the ways in which African fashion is symbolically and discursively produced at AFWL through the transnational practices of Nigerian cultural producers and intermediaries. Overall, the methodology I adopted highlights the views, experiences, and practices of the Nigerian design practitioners in the diaspora and how they construct, express, and negotiate belongings and cultural identities through their fashion and design practices.

Chapter Five

Africa Fashion Week London and the Symbolic Production of African Fashion

Introduction

The analysis in this chapter addresses the first research question: How and why did AFWL emerge? What are the socio-economic and political implications of AFWL's intervention, and who are its main players? Drawing on thematic analysis of media materials, participant observations, and informal interviews, this chapter critically interrogates the AFWL fashion event as a key site for producing African fashion, mobilising different players, and allowing designers to seek legitimacy and exposure within global markets (Kawamura, 2015). A broad range of new actors is emerging, and these individuals are playing key roles in the construction of an African diaspora transnational fashion system in London. In this contemporary African fashion system, designers, media practitioners, retailers, producers, events, and trade agencies are contributing to the production of African fashion through their interconnected networks and activities. As already mentioned in Chapter Two, Kawamura specifies in *Fashion-ology* (2018, p. 42) that to 'analyse fashion as a system we must look for its systemic characteristics, the kind of workers it involves and the tasks each worker does'. The AFWL fashion event, characterised as it is by the routine activities of a wide range of actors, constitutes a key component of the African diaspora fashion system that legitimises Nigerian fashion designers and increases the value of African fashion as a cultural consumer good.

In this Chapter, I operationalise the concept of 'Diaspora fashion media' as a novel conceptual framework to encapsulate and describe the adoption and use of social media technologies and platforms by Nigerian diaspora fashion practitioners in their transnational fashion activities. This concept extends the scholarly works of Ola Ogunyemi (2015) on Diaspora Media and Agnes Rocamora on Fashion Media (2009). The introduction of this concept in this study is both original and significant. Foremost, it pioneers a focused approach to understanding the complex intersection of diasporic cultural identities, fashion production, and social media, thereby positioning the study at the forefront of scholarly discourse on communication and digitalisation of media within the Nigerian diasporic fashion community. The

operationalisation of the concept of ‘Diaspora Fashion Media’ is also timely, reflecting both the increasing shift towards digital technologies and social media platforms, as well as the evolving nature of fashion communication within diaspora contexts. Diaspora fashion media are an alternative “platform for self-expression, representation of cultural artefacts and the contestation of negative stereotypes” dealing with issues that are of specific interest to their members (Ogunyemi 2015:1). In this regard, it enables the visibility of Nigerian fashion practitioners both as users, as well as proactive participants in the production, consumption and dissemination of their cultural heritage and dress and design practice.

Cultural and Economic Capital at AFWL

The AFWL event attracts established and emerging fashion practitioners from Africa and its diaspora, who use the event as a means of representing cultural identities, marketing their brands, engaging in knowledge exchange, seeking legitimisation, and diffusing their creative innovations to the consuming public. Importantly, previous research has focused on fashion events as sites for reproducing hierarchies and power relations between industry practitioners (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006; Skov, 2006; Weller, 2008). The AFWL’s public admission through paid entry to the fashion shows, as well as free exhibitions, workshops, and seminars, demonstrates the use of fashion week as a diasporic resource to foster and mediate the relationship between African practitioners and consumers in the UK market.

According to the UK’s Companies registration office, African Fashion Week London UK Limited was registered in June 2010 and co-founded by British-Nigerian siblings Aderonke Ademiluyi (Ronke Ademiluyi), a fashion business entrepreneur, and her brother Adebolu Ademiluyi, a civil servant (Companies House, 2010; 2016). In media reports, the siblings are portrayed as being descended from Yoruba royalty in Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria (Nigerian Reviews, 2015). The princess (now Olori, Yoruba word for Queen, Aderonke since her wedding to the Ooni of Ife in 2022) is recognised within Nigeria as a Yoruba cultural ambassador and spokeswoman for Yoruba-African fashion and aesthetics. In her role, she has initiated a series of cultural events to teach, celebrate, and promote Yoruba cultural pride and identity amongst Nigerian youth. Among these projects are the Africa Fashion Week Nigeria (AFWN), as well as several events named after the legendary Queen Moremi: the Queen Moremi Beauty Pageant, initiated in 2016; the Moremi fashion collection, presented at the

AFWL; the Moremi musical, initiated in 2018; and a historical textbook on Queen Moremi. In media interviews, Olori Aderonke remarks that the ‘younger generation don’t know much about her story [Queen Moremi] and the important role she played as a woman in saving her people from neighbouring invaders of the lands. The Queen Moremi brand advocates for the rights of girls and women and promotes women’s empowerment in Nigeria and globally’ (Suleiman, 2019).

As already mentioned in the General Introduction, AFWL is women-led. Considering the debates about the under-representation of Black women in leadership positions in the cultural and creative industries (Dodd, 2012), my analysis and discussion are restricted here to the female founder of AFWL, to highlight the dominant position of Nigerian women involved in African fashion production and diffusion. Doing so also foregrounds her role as a tastemaker in the adoption of African fashion through the socially constructed institutional system (Kawamura, 2018).

Born in 1969, Olori Aderonke spent her childhood living between the UK and Nigeria. In Nigeria, she completed her secondary education at the Fiwasaye Girls’ Grammar School, where she graduated in 1985. In England, she studied law at Thames Valley University London, currently known as the University of West London. Experiences like this, of living between two countries, is described by Clifford as the co-presence of ‘here’ and ‘there’ (1999, p. 264). Similarly, Oboh (2018, p. 58) describes in her research that ‘This flexible movement back and forth is one of the criteria that distinguish contemporary diasporas’. This disposition or ‘habitus’, as Bourdieu (1977 p.) puts it, has contributed to the culmination and drive for the manifestation of the AFWL event. The concept of the ‘habitus’ refers to the socialised norms or tendencies that guide behaviour and thinking. Habitus is ‘the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them’ (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316). The experience of being here and there is thus a social process, and the AFWL founder’s disposition is shaped by past events and structures that continue to shape current practices and structures, to ‘condition our very perceptions of these’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170).

Prior to the founding of the AFWL event, Olori Aderonke worked in fashion retail, importing garments to sell in her Nigeria-based retail boutique Rukkies, opened in 2001 (*New African Woman*, 2013). She also established the now-defunct trade association, the Association of African Designers in the Diaspora, as well as a diasporic media company called the African

Fashion Channel, and initiated Nigerian Fashion Week London in 2010. The founding of these businesses reflects her passion and extended interest in fashion and African fashion practitioners. In 2015, Olori Aderonke created African Fashion Week Nigeria (AFWN), which is now firmly established within the Nigerian fashion system as a platform for African fashion practitioners. In an interview with the *Business Day* newspaper, Olori Aderonke describes her decision to pursue a degree in law, rather than fashion:

I studied law because at that time you could not tell your parents that you wanted to study fashion as it was not seen as a lucrative profession back then. But the desire to go into the fashion industry had always been in my thought process and eventually I was able to turn that thought into action when I set up a chain of retail boutiques called Rukkies back in 2001 (Okeke-Korieocha, 2022).

This experience of being discouraged from pursuing her interests is not unique to Olori Aderonke (Skov, 2002; Morsani, 2019). In her examination of the founder of the Congo Fashion Week (CFW), Morsani (2019, p. 242) writes that ‘Marie-France did not have the full encouragement of her parents regarding her decision to work within the fashion industry’; instead, she went on to study accounting to satisfy her parents’ desires. Similarly, in Skov’s study on Hong Kong fashion designers, the author points out that in non-Western contexts, parents do not support fashion design as a viable professional occupation, partly because they do not share a strong emotional involvement with the concept. Rather, parents readily instruct their children to pursue a career path within a discipline they perceive as relevant, prestigious, and offering job security such as medicine, law, or computer science. In the context of the African diaspora, where families move between the Nigerian collectivist and British individualist cultures, migrant parents tend also to prioritise education and the pursuit of a career with good employment prospects and a higher socio-economic status in society.

A study by Beth Kotchick and Rex Forehand (2002) specifies that, because they live in between cultures some migrants maintained their traditional parenting styles as a coping strategy, allowing them to reinforce their cultural identity and instil culturally endorsed behaviours in their children. Also, in their study exploring migrant parents’ roles in their children’s career decision-making processes in sub-Saharan African (SSA), Akosah-Twumasi *et al.* (2020) point out that contextual factors such as societal values and practices must be taken into consideration. The authors characterise migrant parents into two groups, based on the type of migration and their status in the host country: the first type is humanitarian, and the second is

professional. Parents in the former category were supportive of their children's personal interests, and came from low socio-economic backgrounds; parents in the latter tended to be authoritative in their parenting approach, and 'revered traditional careers such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, engineers, and architects because of their prestigious nature as well as the higher income associated with them' (Akosah-Twumasi *et al.*, 2020, p. 16). In this regard, the parental role in dictating the career development of their children can be a means to instil in them the African collectivist cultural values of family loyalty, adherence to group norms, and maintaining harmony in relationships. As will become clear, the dress and design practices of Nigerian fashion design practitioners are motivated by such Yoruba-African collectivist values. As the quotation above points out, Olori Aderonke initially adhered to her parental normative expectations, however she later renegotiated these expectations in pursuit of her personal interests.

While Olori Aderonke grew up in a time when a career in fashion was regarded by her Yoruba-Nigerian parents as frivolous, and not a viable professional occupation, her establishment of successful fashion initiatives later inspired the much younger founder of the CFW – offering her reassurance that it was possible to pursue her childhood dreams in fashion. As Morsani (2019, p. 243) points out, 'Attending the first edition of African Fashion Week London inspired the project. She decided to produce something similar, discovering that there was no Fashion Week in the Congo and thinking: "If they can do it, why not me!"'. This is indicative of the importance of AFWL as providing a 'local role model' for the second generation within the African diaspora in the UK (Fadahunsi *et al.*, 2000). The CFW founder's experience demonstrates the importance of representation – seeing people that look like you in the industry – as instrumental in shaping an individual's process of becoming, redefining their individual subjectivity, and making decisions about the future. The symbolic meaning of AFWL for the CFW founder should not be understated, because it shows that individuals are agentic, autonomous, and integral in creating the social world around them. As discussed in Chapter Four, central to the symbolic interactionist perspective is the idea that individuals employ momentous and meaningful symbols, whether found or created. In this context, the meaningful symbols consist of the AFWL event, the racial and gender identities of its founder, in the communication of the event.

Conversely, just as AFWL served as a source of inspiration for the establishment of the CFW, the catalyst for AFWL was Africa Fashion Week New York (AFWNY), established by Adiat

Disu.¹ Disu is an American Nigerian who studied IT, Marketing and Communication at Bentley, a private university in Massachusetts (Omoyele, 2016). According to Disu, African fashion designers deserved more time on the centre stage, and thus AFWNY was born in 2010. Drawing on her university education, the City's reputation, and the success of Arise Fashion Collective's media coverage, Disu defined her occupational role and position as an African fashion communication specialist within the New York fashion scene. As catwalk images, garments, and videos of African fashion designers at AFWNY circulated online, different manifestations of AFW began to proliferate across Western cities. Widely circulated and diffused, the imagery began to blur social, national, cultural, and political boundaries and divides, all the while foregrounding African cultural heritage (Omoyele, 2015). However, not all of the media and press coverage of the event was positive. Certain mainstream media firms including Forbes, CNN, and *Vogue* have featured and reported on AFWNY activities using historic cultural tropes about Africa. For example, the use of the word 'parade' in the CNN 'Inside Africa' report entitled 'African fashion parade in New York' (Sasey, 2011) is not only archaic-sounding, but it also minimises the efforts of the AFWNY organisers and the commercial aspects of the event. It steers the reader's attention to the idea of African fashion as a spectacle, a celebration-of-Africa day, a ceremonial march where Africans wear their distinct ethnic and national costumes. More importantly, by overlooking the economic contributions of African designers to the New York economy, the report occludes the challenges faced by African fashion designers in New York and more broadly within the global fashion industry (e.g., marginalisation within mainstream fashion).

By way of contrast, *Essence* magazine – a fashion and lifestyle magazine targeted at Black readers – captions its coverage of AFWNY as 'BOLD PATTERNS, BRIGHT COLORS AND BREATH-TAKING BEAUTY AT AFRICA FASHION WEEK' (Essence, 2011). However, while this coverage depicts a different narrative from the CNN report, it still reproduces

¹ In an interview with Arise Entertainment 360 (Arise 2015), Adiat Sade Disu (born 1987) recounts that the idea for the event occurred to her while at the Arise Fashion Collective showcase held at the Mercedes Benz Fashion Week, 2009. She recalls that the 15 minutes allocated to four West Africa-based fashion designer brands – Tiffany Amber, Xuly Bet, Stoned Cherrie, and Momo (Nigerian, Malian, and South African) – was insufficient. Disu opines that 'New York needs more time with us' (2015) Disu recognised a commercial opportunity and niche within the fashion week structure. Disu then re-innovated the fashion week concept to concentrate on showcasing the innovation, advances, and creativity of African fashion practitioners to consumers in New York. The Arise Collective Showcase, sponsored by the African diasporic fashion press, *Arise Magazine*, was meaningful to Disu as it constituted a significant event for amplifying the presence of African practitioners who had been historically marginalised in global fashion discourse (Rovine, 2015).

common stereotypes of African fashion as characterised by bold patterns, bright colours, and beauty. However, unlike the CNN report, *Essence's* coverage describes African fashion as more than just patterns and colourful dresses, but also acknowledges distinct styles, appearances, and aesthetics. For example, the images deployed to accompany the report draws attention to the styles and personal tastes of designers and guests at the event. In 2015, AFWNY rebranded itself to New York Fashion Week Africa (NYFWA) in part to consolidate its stand-alone nature alongside the mainstream fashion week. The mainstream media's response to the AFW concept has been marginal, partly because attention is directed to emerging fashion weeks on the African continent (Tudor, 2011; Menkes, 2018; Singer, 2019). Nevertheless, in diasporic spaces, AFW continues to attract fashion design practitioners from Africa and the diaspora to present their collections on these platforms.

This series of events, from the Arise collective at the Mercedes Benz Fashion Week New York (MFWNY) that acted as the catalyst for AFWNY, AFWL, and CFW, is exemplary of how the processes of globalisation, defined as the flow of ideas, people, information, and capital (Appadurai, 1996), facilitate the cross-border transnational commodity circuits of African fashions led by the new African diaspora. As discussed in Chapter Three the changing role of the African diaspora in the age of globalisation has been further augmented by the rise of electronic communications. Importantly, this chain of events advocating for African fashions demonstrates the socially constructed nature of African fashions, particularly by African diasporic women, developing out of pattered interactions and representations. For these diasporic-based consumers-turned-fashion practitioners (e.g., Adiat Disu and Aderonke Ademiluyi), meanings relating to power/knowledge, representations, heritage, self, and collective identities. Emerged from their formal or informal spaces of interactions and relations with other African individuals within the host society – attending fashion events where African identity is centred or through the viewing of media coverage of African fashion practitioners and events on the internet (Blumer, 1969). Fashion provides a means for self-expression, for role-taking, and for the representation of African cultural identities. At this point, it is pertinent to make two important observations about the distinct features of contemporary fashion promotion, as well as the opportunities provided by new media communication technologies.

First, fashion events both serve and interweave disparate interests. Weller (2008) points out that, because fashion events are beyond the control of production systems, analysis of these allows us to explore the formation and shifting relationships and processes between firms,

industries, and sectors. Weller (2008, p. 110) goes on to describe the importance of fashion events for ‘creat[ing] and reforc[ing] intersections between otherwise apparently disparate interests, in an “open-ended interweaving” of multiple trajectories and power relations, [whose] transformative potential lies in their capacity to disrupt pre-existing power relations and structures of meaning’. In this regard, the AFW concept is a discursive practice, with each version of the event further constructing and presenting interpretations of African fashion and African identities. As such, the fashion event disrupts the pre-existing power relations and dominant structures of meanings between Western, Africa and African fashion practitioners and Britain.

Second, digital media technologies have significantly contributed to shifts in the dissemination and reproduction of fashion practices and knowledge (Barnes, 2013; Crewe, 2013). For the African diaspora, these technologies have facilitated the forging of a network of communication that transgresses both geographical and national boundaries and enables the sharing and circulation of information and ideas. For example, the mainstream media’s proclivity for misrepresenting African culture, women, and workers is challenged when African diaspora practitioners produce their own narratives shaped by unique experiences, practices, and an actual engagement with Africa. Together, fashion production and media technologies have integrated AFWL and contemporary African fashions into global and transnational networks of ideas, capital, images, and commodities (Appadurai, 1996).

[Analysis of AFWL Fashion Organiser: Structure, Activities, and Issues](#)

Like the British firms who sought international markets in Africa and Asia using their Britishness as an export technique (Goodrum, 2001), the Nigerian diaspora firm AFWL UK Ltd capitalises on its location to create and exploit opportunities in the UK market. This, in turn, sustains both the UK’s position in the fashion industry and supports the viability of the local fashion scene in Africa. The company’s knowledge of the local cultures both in Britain and Nigeria is advantageous to its positioning as a cultural intermediary.

This section analyses the micro-structural processes at AFWL to offer insights into the contemporary African diaspora fashion cultures and the production of African fashion. The event is organised and legally registered by AFWL UK Ltd, a private limited liability company. This analysis of AFWL UK Ltd is pertinent to the knowledge of the British-Nigerian business

venture that specialises in the production of the symbolic value of African fashion in an international market. Fashion is not something that exists outside commercial forces, it is commercial and a creative sector (Aspers and Skov, 2006).

As Blankson and Omar (2002) point out, ethnic minority small businesses in the UK (i.e., African and Caribbean) are likely to face greater threats to survival owing to intense competition. AFWL, however, is exemplary, and therefore ought to be studied. This analysis consequently highlights AFWL UK Ltd as a small business and observes its contributions to the UK economy. I argue for an understanding of AFWL as a small business by comparing it to the British Fashion Council (BFC), a trade association with charity status dedicated to promoting British fashion firms through its annual event, London Fashion Week (LFW). AFWL UK Ltd has emerged as a key player responsible for the materialisation of the African-centred Fashion Week event in the highly competitive global fashion market. The analysis presented here also contributes to the limited literature on the marketing practices of Nigerian diaspora businesses in the UK (Blankson and Omar, 2002). The Wiltshire committee defines a small business as follows:

It is a business in which one or two persons are required to make all the critical management decisions such as finance, accounting, personnel, purchasing, processing, servicing, marketing, selling, without the aid of internal specialists and with specific knowledge in only one or two functional areas [...] (Berryman, 1983)

The AFWL UK Ltd event fulfils the definition of a small business above through its two co-founders' alternate roles – secretary and director. Leading up to the event, however, and at the event, other workers such as volunteers and practitioners become visible. Although it is not specified in its company record whether AFWL UK Ltd employs these workers full-time, I have identified from the event's website and from document analysis that its key AFWL personnel are UK-based British-Nigerians, as illustrated in the table below (See Table 5.1).

Years	Role	Name	Nationality	Ethnicity

2011–	Founder/event organiser	Olori Aderonke Ademiluyi	British	Yoruba
2011–	Operations manager	CJ Ademiluyi	British	Yoruba
2011–	Co-founder/executive manager	Kamari Ademiluyi	British	Yoruba
2013–2015	Exhibition manager	Jo Ojerinola	British	Yoruba
2013–2015	Event manager	Seyi Olusanya	British	Yoruba
2014–2015	PR and marketing director	Yetty Ogunnubi	British	Yoruba
2011–2014	Creative director/stylist/fashion show producer	Sola Oyebade	British	Yoruba
2015–	Creative director/head stylist	Samson Soboye	British	Yoruba
2015–	Head curator	Caroline Chi- Chi Chinakwe	British	Igbo
2015–	PR & press director	Anne Marie Benedict	British	English/Yoruba ancestry

2016–	Event manager/ operations manager	Bukki Okiji	British	Yoruba
2017–	Volunteer welfare manager	Titi	British	Yoruba

Table 5.1: AFWL management structure (researcher’s findings).

Diaspora Entrepreneurship and Diaspora Fashion Media

Ojo (2013, p. 206) states that ‘Diaspora entrepreneurship could [...] be taken as a source of resistance to social exclusion and economic disadvantages being faced in the UK by entrepreneurs’. Through entrepreneurial activities – in this case, creating a fashion business – members of the diaspora can develop new subjectivities and new means of acquiring recognition in compensation for the social marginality they have endured (Ojo, 2013). The event organisers present precisely this view in media interviews. First, the British-Nigerian Fashion Show producer (2011–2015) Sola Oyebade, emphasised that the incentive behind the AFWL event was to foster positive narratives around Africa that are tied to cultural heritage, representation, and cultural identity:

How do we sell Africa in a good light, because the way we are always perceived is always seemed to be very much negative images? So, we wanted to do something about our fashion, which is a good statement, something which is attractive to the press, the mainstream media that can sell us in a good, positive light. (Factory78, 2011)

The comments above raise a pertinent issue, which is the prevalence of negative Western news media representations of Africa and African cultures (Jahoda, 1999) and how these representations impact African migrants through the ‘ideas about the people and places that are portrayed’ (Edward, 2018, p. 12). Africa has long featured in the Western imagination, conceived as the Other, through whom sections of White society have constructed postmodern consumer identities and reproduced social hierarchies and class differences (Ponte and Abraham, 2012). Africa has also been depicted as a brand commodity; a strategy deployed by corporations and non-profit organisations to satisfy consumer desires in the neoliberal era (Cheru, 2012). In his book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes that the discourse of the

Other, fixed in a timeless past, is produced to reinforce the interests and the hegemony of the West. This view can also be applied to the fashion context, in which Eurocentric knowledge claims and representations dominate the industry, despite its being characterised by divergent interests and identities, (Hall, 1997). Bhabha (1994, p. 31) highlights the fact that the disproportionate influence of culturally privileged Western elites carries and exploits the symbolic capital of non-Western practitioners and producers living on the ‘left margins of Eurocentric, bourgeois liberal culture’. The AFWL event provides a means of resisting that marginalisation in the fashion industry through its mobilisation of designers – from Africa and the African diasporas. In another media report, event founder Olori Aderonke emphasised her interest in promoting Africa: ‘I am passionate about Africa, African stories and that was why we started the Africa fashion week, being able to express ourselves and our culture through fashion’ (Oladeinde, 2019).

From Oyebade’s point of view, representations of Africa in mainstream Western media are problematic because they produce and circulate knowledge and representations of Africa that are fatalistic and pessimistic. This echoes Jansen’s (2020) argument that, the most pressing issue to be addressed is the White gaze that defines and fixes Africa as the ‘Other’ and its associated stereotypes and negative images of Africa perpetuated through the western news media. It is well documented in the literature that dress practices have been used in Africa to underscore power hierarchies, with clothing as a symbolic marker of either Britishness and civilisation, or Africa’s underdevelopment, savagery, and exotic culture (Allman, 2004). Another key point raised in the comments above relates to the figure of the expert – someone deemed to be authorised to speak on behalf of Africa. Therefore, by doing ‘something about our fashion’ and ‘express[ing] our culture through fashion’ African diaspora fashion practitioners can position themselves as knowledgeable experts on Africa. This call to collective action is thus borne from the negative representations of Africa, which constitute part of the split or ambivalent experience of being an African migrant in a racialised society (Bhabha, 1994). This reflects the idea of banal nationalism, defined by Billig (1995, p. 4) as a process of erecting boundaries in everyday discourse on the subject of identity through the usage of ‘a complex set of themes about “us,” “our homeland”; “our nation”; “ours” and “theirs”’. Further to these views, Oyebade and Olori Aderonke’s commentaries highlight the significance of fashion as ‘powerful markers of place and identity, and spaces through which processes of self-signification can be played out’ (Crewe and Goodrum, 2000, p. 26). In this regard, the image-making industries of fashion and the media can be powerful instruments for

sensitising and shaping public perceptions of Africa, addressing, and deconstructing historic negative imagery by providing images of African fashion practitioners and their design and dress practices. In one such example, Goodrum (2001, p. 166) notes that fashion exports and festivals have played a role in the marketing and updating of the image of Britain from its imperialist colonial associations to ‘Cool Britannia’.

From Oyebade’s point of view (Faactory78, 2011), the White gaze is the problem – yet it is also the answer, because by making positive statements about ‘our fashion’ and projecting ourselves as experts, the mainstream Western news media will in turn portray us in good light for Western audiences. The same tactic can be applied to Western media news reporting on Africa and the development of African fashion. In Western media discourse on Africa, Western figures – White actors, singers, musicians, and scholars – are presented as experts on Africa and African fashion (Ponte and Stefano, 2012). Abrahamsen (2012) points out how this issue is further complicated by globalised consumer culture, where previous experts on Africa and development aid (e.g., economists, statisticians, doctors, and social scientists) have been replaced by pop stars and celebrities. The culture of consumption celebrates these new kinds of experts ‘as those authorised to speak authoritatively about the “problems” of Africa’ (Abrahamsen, 2012, p. 114). In the context of AFWL, on the other hand, the experts speaking with authority are African diaspora practitioners, all of whom have experience of global consumer culture. Their collective practice and action resists the perpetuation of the image of Africa as dependent on Western foreign development aid. For example, in my interview with the AFWL PR and creative director Anne Marie, recruited in 2014, describes her background in marketing and advertising and how she got involved in the event:

Ah that’s interesting, I used to work for a magazine, and I know the family for years. One year, I think it’s 2014, their press person had an emergency, had to leave – and it was so close to the event date, maybe a month or two, so they said to me oh could you help out, and I said why not, I have never done anything to do with fashion before – why not. So that’s what happened, I just fell into it actually. (Interview 2019)

From Anne Marie’s point of view, her background and skills acquired in her job in magazine publishing were transferable skills to the business of fashion. In terms of her connections to the event organisers, Ojo (2013) points out in his examination of Nigerian diaspora businesses that the involvement of family members and friends in a business venture is not uncommon in the ethnic economy. Unlike the businesses examined in Ojo’s study, however, which exploit

their social networks to enhance their entrepreneurship, the AFWL venture recruits knowledgeable experts to provide support.

In order for fashion producers to encourage Western media to sell and promote African and African fashion positively, they must overcome an additional challenge: eliciting their interest. In an interview with *Black Hair* magazine (2013), the AFWL publicist Sinem affirms,

The biggest challenge we face as publicists and promoters of African or Black events in the Western world are to garner the interest of mainstream media. It is often a challenge to appeal to mainstream fashion and lifestyle publications which seem to lump all African-interest events into a not to be touched with a bargepole category. It is a shame that some national dailies or monthly glosses still seem oblivious to a fast-growing section of society.

As has been evidenced, the emergence of these contemporary African diaspora fashion promoters is often grounded in their experience of the clear disparity between the mainstream dominant structure of representations and the cross-cultural, multi-variant creative expression of dress and fashion, which seeks to affirm Black identity and African beliefs and articulations of political empowerment (Lewis, 2006). This can be applied to the current context of African fashion and African-inspired fashion produced at AFWL. In the extensive media coverage of clothing collections presented at AFWL, we can see that these designers are producing wearable, commercial designs in tune with the current looks and trends within Africa, rather than Euro-American mainstream trends aimed at a broad consumer market.

Lewis' (2006) study on African diaspora fashion explores the exclusion of African diaspora fashion practitioners from mainstream media because they do not conform to mainstream stereotypes. The author highlights that the existing mainstream fashion system structure is a dialectic of master-and-slave – in other words, shaped by colonial power relations of dominion and possession. In this respect, the mainstream fashion media perpetuated by many White firms regards diaspora fashion as a youth culture rather than a subculture, a street event rather than a fashion business. These media gatekeepers maintain the dominant culture's ideology by excluding Black images, suppressing diaspora connections, overlooking African indigenous perspectives on African aesthetics, and misreading and misrepresenting Black styles 'in an atmosphere of postcolonial guilt and unsettled conflicts' (Lewis, 2003, p. 176). Black fashion culture has thus become diluted in popular culture, as well as commercialised, recontextualised,

and appropriated, owing to the uneven position of Black creators in the mainstream. This tends to constrain the recognition and commercial success of Black fashion designers in the mainstream media, because the structure is incompatible with diaspora fashion creators. As a result, only a few Black designers have been promoted and recognised within this system, such as France's Laminé Badiane Kouyabe, America's André Walker, Epperson, and Lawrence Steele, and the UK's Oswald Boateng.

Conversely, AFWL is founded on emphasising diaspora connections (home country affiliations), which bring African fashion creators and producers from the peripheries of global fashion markets and into the centre. The online AFWL magazine documents previous events, locations, number of guests in attendance, mainstream media interest, number of designers and exhibitors represented, model competition winners, catwalk images of predominantly Black models, and details of the Nigerian version of the event². In the fifth issue of the magazine, a summary reports that, because the 2012 event coincided with the Olympics, 'it was the turning point of the event, as it enabled it to reach frontline media such as CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, Chinese Cable networks, and over two hundred media outlet blogs and websites' ('Celebrating Five Years of AFWL', 2015, p. 9).

This AFWL magazine commentary again shows that the White gaze remains the focus – the 'turning point' is in reaching Western news outlets, rather than fashion magazines. But as Hazel Clarke (2012, 54) points out, in the global context of fashion, the media is crucial to fashion communications, identification, and questions of place. Unlike most fashion print magazines, which require a paid subscription, news outlets such as the BBC or CNN are free and are broadcast via satellite or digitally across national boundaries, reaching larger audiences on the peripheries of global fashion.

² Interestingly, since 2012, the International Fashion Showcase (IFS), organised by the British Fashion Council (BFC), has run in parallel to AFWL. The organisers describe the event as 'a festival of emerging designer talent which continues to champion fashion as a cultural expression. It offers a collective welcome to creative talents from across the globe and – unique to London Fashion Week – it also throws its doors open to the public, allowing them a first glimpse of some of the most exciting international designers' (IFS, 2016). The inaugural IFS brought together emerging fashion designers from 19 countries; in 2013, 27 countries and more than 70 international designer products were featured in exhibitions during London Fashion Week. For its largest exhibition in 2014, the IFS (in collaboration with London-based foreign embassies and cultural institutes) exhibited the work of more than 120 designers. The public exhibition was held during LFW, 11–24 February 2019, at Somerset House. The exhibition installations sought to 'explore urgent issues and new ideas that are shaping fashion globally'. Among these issues are ethical trade, sustainability, and global warming. The organiser describes the 2019 edition of IFS as a platform for nurturing and presenting the 'most exciting fashion talent from around the world' (IFS, 2019). The IFS is a new format in the British fashion system, for international designers to attract attention to the British fashion industry and the city of London.

Importantly, the AFWL organisers' focus on Western media interests and performing for the White gaze did not overshadow the emerging African diaspora media practitioners. In a report on the 2015 edition of the event, Oyebade writes about the importance of its digital media outreach:

AFWL was streamed live across the world by so many media houses including the BBC, Swahili TV, OH TV, the Africa Channel, South African Broadcasting Corporation, Fashion One and hundreds more. I have never seen so many bloggers in my life. Next year I will call it the blogger's [sic] convention, but they did a great job of updating the world instantaneously as things were happening. I could not believe it, that at the end of the final show, I was FORCED to do a catwalk and within seconds it was live, and people were commenting on it from different parts of the world. The power of social media, where would we be without you? (*FashionsFinest*, 2015).

Oyebade's point of view suggests a shift in his belief about the role and continuing relevance of Western news media representations in the dissemination of African fashion, aesthetics, and imagery. As his commentary shows, the media practices of bloggers at AFWL have provided a means for challenging the dominance of Western media conglomerates. The role digital media plays in the reproduction of existing and new fashion discourses have been addressed in the literature (Rocamora, 2012; 2013). Because blogs provide rapid and instantaneous updates and transmission of information over the internet, they offer access to events happening in faraway places to audiences as if they were there. In this regard, internet fashion blogs have contributed to the democratisation of fashion promotion and communication (Berry, 2015).

In the same issue of the AFWL magazine mentioned above, celebrating AFWL's fifth anniversary, media representative and broadcaster at Factory78 TV (an African-owned platform on YouTube) Adesope Olajide recalls that his expectations were low at the event's original launch. However, since its inception in 2011, the high standard of the event, combined with the enthusiastic public interest, has now firmly established AFWL in Europe as a space for celebrating African style, fashion, and culture. Olajide affirms that AFWL has 'created a legacy that generations of African culture enthusiasts can enjoy, participate in and be proud of' ('Celebrating Five Years of AFWL', 2015, p. 3). From his point of view, AFWL is a space not just for Africans, but also for the performance and display of African culture for enthusiasts to enjoy, partake in, and be proud of. The discourse of 'high standard' is prominent at AFWL where - AFWL employs rhetorical terms like better and bigger in their marketing and

promotional materials to qualify the incremental development of the event over time. From this, we can see how the rhetoric of standards is deployed to establish the event as professional and conforming to industry standards. It is also clear to see how the event's marketing and production materials are committed to values of high quality and excellence.

At the same time, Olajide, who describes himself as a media representative, demonstrates that individuals in the African diaspora have embraced the opportunities provided by digital media technologies and used them to create new subjectivities and assert new roles as media practitioners within the African diaspora fashion media field. African diaspora media representatives who record and document the event are not performing for the White gaze, but rather carving out a niche in the highly competitive media scene to assert and affirm themselves as practitioners. The following example provides an illustration of this, from one of the key media partners I met at the event in 2018. Following the 2018 edition of AFWL, Afro Culture posted a video on its website titled 'AFWL AFRICA FASHION WEEK LONDON 2018'. The film is a collaboration between Afro Culture and Graphik Vision, featuring selected designers, catwalk models, and garments presented at the event. On the Afro Culture website are links to its blog, Facebook page, YouTube, etc. Afro Culture is a website blog curated by Caro Sika, a Black French woman based in the UK. It aims to foster and promote pan-African solidarity by connecting diasporic talents across anglophone and francophone communities through social and visual media, networking events, and artistic partnerships. By presenting information in both English and French, Afro Culture can educate and inform audiences in both English-speaking and French-speaking communities about African fashions from the perspective of an African practitioner (Afro Culture, 2018). Presenting the articles in English and French is also interesting from a scholarly perspective, because language differences has been identified as one of the barriers to the theorisation of the African diaspora (Alpers, 2001). What is important here is the role of the media – both Western and diasporic – in integrating African diaspora fashion into the network of transnational capital.

On a related note, as Lewis observes in her examination of the “modest fashion” system, Muslim consumers have long been ignored in mainstream marketing as a viable consumer segment, owing to their religious commitments and values. However, Muslim influencers have shifted this balance through social media technologies which have provided a space for their fashion and lifestyle blogging practices, thereby enhancing the visibility, diversity, and

liveliness of modest Muslim fashion. Bloggers are important opinion formers and tastemakers in this respect (Lewis, 2015).

As shown in the literature, African diaspora media companies play a key role in counteracting negative Western media portrayals of Africa, which are characterised by Western values and issues perceived to be of interest to Western audiences. In the global age, as Ogunyemi (2014) argues, the African diasporic press actively redefines ethnocentric African narratives in the public sphere. The author defines African diaspora press as newspapers and magazines created ‘for and by Africans in the diaspora’, which portray Africans and Blacks as subjects rather than objects of crime and negativity (Ogunyemi, 2014, pp. 14, 17). The establishment of media such as these in the African diaspora generally ‘fosters a sense of belonging among African diaspora through the counter-stereotypical information’ (Ogunyemi, 2014, p. 18) produced and disseminated. In the examples above, the same can be seen for the fashion field, where an emerging network of practitioners aided by digital and electronic media seek to project a positive portrayal of African producers, centring narratives and stories that are of interest to and reflective of African experiences (Rovine, 2009; 2015).

This research contextualises AFWL with other diaspora and indigenous fashion weeks such as Aboriginal Fashion Week Australia, Black Fashion Week Paris, and International Indigenous Fashion Week, precisely because these events are commercial spaces for the visibility of design practitioners and brands that have been collectively marginalised in the mainstream fashion industry. The emergence of these events and the spaces they create for the cultural expressions of African aesthetics, indigenous narratives and cultural heritage speaks to the ongoing resistance to Euro-centrism and the challenge to dominant power structures in global fashion culture.

AFWL provides an international fashion promotion platform for a wide range of state and non-state actors operating within the formal and informal sectors and from across diverse national borders and countries. In this vein, to draw attention to the complex transnational fashion system of production, consumption and dissemination of commodities, knowledge exchange and connection to new markets and consumers (Crang, Dwyer and Jackson 2003). The research recognises that AFWL operates within an informal transnational fashion commodity circuit because it provides a space for strengthening informal networks and interconnectivity through the fashion commodities - clothing collections and catwalk images - that are presented, disseminated, and circulated across national and international boundaries to

global markets. An example of this is reflected in AFWL’s partnership with independent lifestyle bloggers – mostly working within the informal unregulated fashion media sector – who provide information and news updates about African fashion designers, models, and clothing collections to their audiences.

Transnational Capital and the Economic Contributions of AFWL to the UK Economy

Another important effect of AFWL UK Ltd is its economic contributions to the UK economy. This analysis demonstrates how the Nigerian diaspora business organisation participates within the UK economy and reflects the view that ethnic minority businesses play a key role in attracting foreign trade, compared to non-immigrant-owned firms (Wang and Liu, 2015). Since its inception, attendees to the AFWL event have included practitioners, businesses, government agencies, and delegates from Africa, Asia, and the Americas (See Table 5.2). Among these are Dolapo Osinbajo, the Nigerian Vice President’s wife; Oba Francis Olusola Alao, the Olugbon of Orile Igbo; Erelu Bisi Fayemi, the First Lady of Ekiti State, Nigeria; Olufolake Abdulrazaq, the First Lady of Kwara State, Nigeria; Queen Diambi of the Kasia Kingdom of the Republic of Congo; Angelic Appoo, ESA Enterprise Seychelles Trade and Investment; Christine Pillay, Trade and Investment Kwa Zulu Natal (Kpade, 2019). National government export agencies such as the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC), Nigerian Exports Promotion Council Nigerian (NEPC), Trade and Investment KwaZulu Natal (TIKZN), and Seychelles Trade and Investment have used the AFWL platform in the promotion of regional and national fashion industries (NEPC, 2018). These visiting practitioners and temporary guests in the UK contribute to the economy through expenditure on accommodation, flights, food, visas, transportation, shopping, participation, and fees, etc. (Seychelles Nation, 2019). These economic contributions associated with fashion weeks to a city and region are well documented in the fashion literature (Ling, 2011; Crane and Bovone, 2006). The analysis of AFWL UK Ltd and the AFWL events in this project contribute to this view.

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	TOTAL

Nigeria	23	31	27	24	9	15	14	16	159
Ghana	6	7	5	2	2	2	1	4	29
Uganda	3	1		2				0	6
Congo	2			1	2	1	1	1	8
Kenya	2	2	1	3	1			0	9
Gambia	1					1		0	2
Sierra Leone	1			1		1		1	4
Ivory Coast or Côte d'Ivoire					1	1		1	3
Eritrea	1							0	1
Angola	1				2	1		2	6
Algeria	1							0	1
Botswana			1	1		2		0	4
Cape Verde Island	1							0	1
Togo		1							1

Cameroon			1	1		1		0	3
Ethiopia		1							1
Zambia			1	1	1	4		0	7
Namibia								1	1
Mauritius	1							0	1
Tanzania						1	2	1	4
Rwanda		1							1
Malawi		1	1	1	2	2		0	7
Senegal		1		1	1			0	3
Gabon							1		1
Somalia								1	1
South Africa			10	6	2	2		1*	21
Morocco								1	1
Mozambique						1	1		2
Dominica/	1							0	1

Trinidad									
St. Lucia						1			1
Jamaica						1			1
India	1					1			2
Zimbabwe	1		1	1	2	1	2	1	9
Brazil								1	1
UK	1	1	8	9	7		1	2	29
Switzerland		1	1					0	2
USA							1	2	3
Italy							1	1	2
Scotland	1			1					2
Bulgaria	1								1
Taiwan	1				2				3
Luxembourg								1	1
France		1							1

Netherlands					1	1			2
Denmark		1							1
Thailand				1					1
Collective Showcase		2	2	2	1	1	1		9
Unknown			6	2		3	5		16

Table 5.2: AFWL fashion show mapping of designers' nationalities (researcher's data).

Another way AFWL UK Ltd contributes to the UK economy is through its business operations, which include the rental of facilities and the hiring of local skills and services: DJs, audio-visual companies, staging, printing and advertising companies, personnel, etc. Despite operating at a loss (see Table 5.3), AFWL UK Ltd continues its annual organised gathering of fashion producers and consumers at prestigious purpose-built venues across London.

Year	Profit/(loss) after tax (GDP)	Net asset/net worth
2011	0	10
2012	0	10
2013	-44,437	44,765

2014	-46,010	90,775
2015	No reports filed	No reports filed
2016	No reports filed	No reports filed *Company was dissolved by the UK government agency
AFWL 2.0		
2017	New company registered	-30,130
2018	2,340	-27,790
2019	-2,923	-33,606
2020	-7,600	-41,206

Table 5.3: AFWL balance sheet 2011–2020. Researcher’s findings.

As Rogers and Davidson (2016) point out, event locations are part of the marketing activity of a company or business seeking to bring new products to consumers. As illustrated in Table 5.4, between 2014–2016 the AFWL event was held in the Olympia, a multipurpose-built conference centre designed to high standards to facilitate national and international events that can attract several thousand delegates. The choice of this location was strategic: to create a memorable experience for the participants and visiting public (Rogers and Davidson, 2016). Since 2017, AFWL has been held at Freemasons’ Hall, described as a ‘lavish art deco venue in Covent Garden that has hosted numerous shows [...] with a level of opulence implied by the Grand Temple’s one-tonne bronze doors and elaborate ceiling mosaics of Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice – AKA fashion’s four virtues’ (Wainwright, 2017).

Unlike the multipurpose-built conference centre mentioned above, weddings, civil partnership ceremonies, receptions, and private parties are not permitted at Freemasons’ Hall. This is because the venue is a landmarked period building built as a memorial to the Freemasons who died in the First World War. Only business-related events, product launches, meetings, and industry events such as Fashion Scout (part of London Fashion Week) are permitted at the event. The focus on business-related activities rather than those exemptions mentioned above at Freemasons’ Hall reflects its critical dedication to the business, intellectual, and political lives of communities worldwide, providing settings in which people can congregate for the purposes of negotiation, education, deliberation, motivation, and the celebration of their greatest professional achievements (Davidson, 2019).

Year	Venue	Type
2011: August 5–6	Gibson Hall, Bishopsgate	Historic building 5000 guests
2012: August 3–4	Spitalfields Market Hall, Central London	Creative quarter Award-winning (best new open space) 10,000 guests
2013: August 1–3	Old Truman Brewery, East London	Warehouse in creative quarter Indoor space 20,000 guests

2014: August 8–9		
2015: August 7–8	West Hall Olympia, Kensington	Multipurpose-built
2016: September 9–10		Conference and Entertainments
2017: August 11–12		
2018: August 9–10	Freemasons’ Hall, Covent Garden	Historic building with meeting rooms
2019: August 9-10		
2020:	Online/virtual event	

Table 5.4: AFWL locations across London 2011–2019.

As is already established in the literature, fashion is an image-making industry, created through marketing and branding in media representations. The fashion event location therefore plays a crucial role in contributing to meaning-making, where the spatial ordering of activities and practices help to determine interactions, people’s roles, and status. In her exploration of fashion production, Duggan (2001) points out that designers can manipulate four main components within the fashion spectacle, namely, the type of model, the location, the theme, and the finale. Of particular interest in this section, as we have seen, is the location. Mainstream fashion shows have been held in ‘deserted office buildings (Christopher Kane), nightclubs (Gareth Pugh) and abandoned tube stations (Anya Hindmarch), each acting in tandem with the collection. Official venues, meanwhile, have included an NCP car park, a former Eurostar station and tents in Chelsea’ (Wainwright, 2017). These locations provide different aesthetic atmospheres that add

meaning to the design brand and thus convey a message. Duggan (2001: p. 248) provides one classic example in which the location has influenced the aesthetic feel of the event: ‘McQueen’s Fall 1999 show was held in a transport depot, it featured a gigantic, twenty-foot cubed plexiglass container that enclosed a scene from Stephen King’s *The Shining*—the designer’s inspiration for the season’. Duggan (2001: p. 262) adds that designers tend to hold their shows in ‘abandoned metro stops, vacant parking lots, and small nondescript studios, where there are few superficial distractions’. The selection of venue is therefore sometimes precipitated by the intentions, inspirations, and motivations of the designer(s) for their collection – whether spectacle, substance, science, structure, or statement. As Duggan points out, the McQueen case is the ideal example of creating a spectacle, while the non-descript locations such as warehouses and car parks are substance-driven, selected to minimise distractions.

The spectacle-driven fashion show thus relies upon extravagant theatrical performances that yield no financial profit (Davis, 1995), but it is nonetheless primarily motivated by the need to ‘attract the attention of the fashion media as opposed to entertaining the public’ (Duggan, 2001, p. 249). These fashion shows are driven by the demands of the fashion press, and design houses expend large amounts of resources of them each season, as a marketing ploy to satisfy the appetite for novelty (Davis, 1992; McRobbie, 1998). The same can be said of AFWL, as shown in Table 5.4, where the event locations from 2012–2016 were selected with the aim of not only attracting the Western media, but also of accommodating the commercial side of fashion – with spaces for buying and selling. Within these event locations, the fashion show and the exhibition were held in one large open space, so consumers could move freely around the whole event (See Appendix D). In contrast to this, since the relocation of the event to Freemasons’ Hall in 2017, the different activities – fashion show, exhibition, and seminar – are separated by clear boundaries. As already mentioned in Chapter Four, boundaries are constructed and maintained to separate commerce from art and creativity (McRobbie, 1998; Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). This aligns with studies that view fashion shows as theatrical performances that tap into the language of the art world. In this regard, AFWL’s expensive choice of venues reflects two different motivations: the adoption of institutionalised fashion practices, and a marketing technique driven by the impetus to correct the historical negative portrayals of African fashion and the exclusion of African Black bodies in exclusive, sophisticated spaces. In this sense the choice of venues, contributes to resisting the historical ideological subversion of African fashion aesthetics and practitioners in mainstream fashion.

Further, the staging of these events in Freemasons' Hall acts as an effective branding strategy for the brand recognition of AFWL, for the image of African fashion, and as a way to differentiate the event from other low-key African shows typically held in community centres, churches, or hotels (Morsani, 2019). Together, these London venues, each of which is located within an important commercial and creative quarter, are core components of the symbolic production of African diaspora fashion. This is resonant with symbolic interactionist theory, which considers the mutual influence of the physical environment and the development of the self, because environments such as buildings are sites for the examination of symbolic meanings that influence our actions and our reflexivity (Smith and Bugni, 2006, p. 124). As already mentioned in Chapter Two, the modern, urban, global city (Sassen, 2001; Godart, 2012; Gilbert, 2006) is a site for marginalised minorities including Black women to lay claim to new subjectivities and unmoor from other identities (Sassen, 2001). The grand staging of the AFWL fashion events in expensive venues is symbolic. It is a means not only to repudiate and challenge stereotypes and tropes of African fashion and fashion producers but also to construct new meanings and associations of the imagery of African fashions and Africa. In this regard, images of the venue are commonly used in media promotional campaigns and press releases about the upcoming event. In 2019, the AFWL promotional campaign was shot at the Freemason Building, and the venue's interior decor provided a visual background for the Black models, provoking an association of African aesthetics with opulence, luxury, and high class. As Stryker (1980) points out, human social behaviour is organised by the symbolic designation not only of social behaviours, roles, and expectations, but also of the physical environment. These symbols, their associated meanings, and positions carry with them shared expectations about how individuals/people take on roles, relate to each other, and act. In this regard, the event venue plays a vital part in designating the position and role of African diaspora fashion practitioners within the broader British fashion system. As I discuss in Chapter Six, the notion of 'international standards' is a recurring theme amongst practitioners.

The Role of Nigerian Diaspora Organizations in Shaping the Informal Fashion Economy in Nigeria

I would argue that the key player – in this case, the Nigerian diaspora business organisation AFWL UK Ltd – is not simply motivated by monetary profits, but rather in the accumulation of symbolic capital and the affirmation of Yoruba-African cultural identity and heritage. My

finding corroborates the 2014 report titled *Diaspora Organisations as Strategic Agents of Development*, commissioned by the African Diaspora Policy Centre (ADPC). The ADPC report (2014, p. 6) finds that African diaspora organisations in the UK are small, owner-managed, and stunted by problems including ‘access to finance, access to and knowledge of support services, language barriers and limited business, management and marketing skills’. The report also emphasises that diaspora organisations in the UK occupy a strategic position, which ‘facilitates transnational activities and networks’ (2014, p. 7). Though AFWL UK Ltd operates at a loss, this is common for fashion weeks. Entwistle and Rocamora (2006, p. 249) argue that, despite the net loss, ‘fashion shows can secure important symbolic capital in the form of status accrued through good press coverage and enable a designer to carve out a visible presence in the fashion world’. While Entwistle and Rocamora’s study focused on the fashion designer, the same can be equally applied to AFWL UK Ltd – the small business that organises the fashion event and mobilises a stage for fashion designers and producers in diaspora and from the African continent to present their clothing collections to the media and consuming public.

As already mentioned in Chapter 3, the informal fashion economy in Nigeria is a significant part of the economy providing economic opportunities for a majority of the population outside the control of the state (Onyemaechi 2013). This dynamic sector is an alternative means of survival for creative and cultural workers such as craftworkers, tailors, designers, make-up artists, hair stylists, petty traders, retailers, textile weavers, dyers, and micro-entrepreneurs such as bloggers, content producers, and photographers engaged in a range of casual paid and unpaid jobs. For example, in their manufacturing process, diaspora-based designers employ the services of Nigerian tailors and textile producers in part due to the low-cost services. In this sense, migration can be seen as having contributed to the demand for informal enterprises. Since these diaspora-based practitioners become investors in local informal enterprises, they make significant contributions to the Nigerian economy. Diaspora-based fashion designers support the informal fashion economy in Nigeria through various means including investment in local tailors, providing training, and supporting opportunities for international trade which contribute to the livelihood of small-scale enterprises (see further discussion in Chapter 6).

Furthermore, now recognised as constituting a significant part of the Nigerian economy with the potential to generate foreign exchange, government initiatives such as MSME Development Funds and tax reforms, are increasingly targeted at formalising the business operations of informal enterprises/workers. For example, to incentivise compliance with government formal

regulations and taxation laws, in 2016, the Nigerian Export Promotion Council (NEPC) in partnership with AFWL offered an opportunity for Nigeria-based independent fashion designers to showcase their collections to the international market at AFWL. The NEPC offers other business support and trade export initiatives to businesses legally registered in Nigeria. Arguably, because the informal fashion sector in Nigeria, and much of Africa, is not counted in the national GDP, this presents some implications for an accurate assessment of policies, the labour force, and the market share of Nigerian fashion in the global fashion industry. This incentive to encourage informal fashion producers to formalise their business operations is aimed at increasing the global competitiveness and growth of the Nigerian fashion industry. In this sense, AFWL plays a role in the process of formalising and integrating the Nigerian informal fashion sector into the mainstream. It offers access to resources such as marketing to Nigerian fashion designers for global competitiveness.

As a result of their success in this regard, AFWL UK Ltd has now established its position within the formal UK economy, both in terms of representing African diaspora fashion in the UK and in facilitating the bridging of transnational knowledge networks connecting African and European markets. To supplement these points, I shall draw from my data analysis. First, since its inception, AFWL has produced and curated fashion shows at other African-focused cultural events in London, including the Africa Centre Summer Festival 2014, Africa on the Square³ (2014, 2015, 2016), and African Utopia 2017. These third-party events are sites through which AFWL has enhanced the visibility of African diaspora fashion cultures.

Furthermore, in an interview published in the *Nigerian Vanguard* newspaper, AFWL founder Olori Aderonke affirmed the transnational support and connections forged with Nigeria-based corporations (Onuoha 2017)

Yes, it is a huge investment, and we are not alone. We get funding from both the government and private sector as well. We have always had the Nigerian Export Promotion Council (NEPC) supporting the designers to showcase in London, and this year we had the Director General of the Nigerian Tourism Development Board,

³ Africa on the Square is a free event sponsored by the Mayor of London as part of the annual Black History Month.

(NTDB), Mr Folly Coker, who supported about seven designers to showcase their works in this last outing to promote the ‘Tour Nigeria Brand’.

From the founder’s point of view, AFWL is an investment and requires both private and public funding. The comments above point out that funding is provided on behalf of fashion designers, as well as by Nigerian export and tourism agencies to promote their national fashion identities and economies (see Chapter Six for further discussion of Nigerian Fashion). Importantly, through the international sponsorship provided by these agencies, AFWL is ‘integrated into another set of networks of transnational capital’ (Weller, 2008, p. 119). Together, these demonstrate the significant role played by a Nigerian migrant and the small diaspora business in facilitating cross-border networks, capital, and markets. This aligns with the findings made by Ojo *et al.* (2013, p. 289), which state that ‘African entrepreneurs in the diaspora are increasingly leveraging the duality of transnational space to expand economic opportunities in their countries of origin’. Whereas the focus in Ojo’s study was investment from the diaspora within the country of origin, in this present study I find that the Nigerian diaspora business contributes to the *host* country’s economy through the transnational exchange of capital and by networking with businesses in the home country. The Nigerian diaspora fashion event thus acts as a mediator between Nigerian businesses and the UK consumer market. For example, AFWL UK Ltd’s knowledge of the local culture in the UK is useful for African-based and non-UK practitioners looking to gain access to the international UK market. In this regard, home country development, cultural heritage, and cultural values (Alpers, 2001) appear to be the driving forces behind the ongoing implementation of the AFWL fashion events, despite the losses accumulated by the event organisers. As media coverage on AFWL demonstrates, Olori Aderonke has accrued symbolic capital in the form of recognition and status as a Nigerian fashion promoter and intermediary (Suileman, 2017; Falade, 2020). It is worth noting here, then, that the event organiser can accrue symbolic capital just as much as the fashion designers/brands who partake in fashion/catwalk shows can.

Differential Positions and Roles at AFWL

Kawamura (2018, p. 52) points out that, ‘organisation is the key factor in the process of institutionalising and structuring cultural industry’. AFWL UK Ltd attempts to provide structure around the fragmented African diaspora fashion sector by creating value for its

customers – African fashion designers, vendors, and the consuming public – and establishing conventions for publicity, marketing, and the promotion of African fashions. One of the key characteristics of the institutionalised fashion system is that some group members have better access to different forms of resources than others, which gives them an advantage (Kawamura, 2018). AFWL UK Ltd is no different in this regard, as its key players are differently positioned within the Fashion Week event; a fact that leads to the reproduction and reinforcement of social hierarchies based on class, gender, family background, network of influence, taste, and contacts. In this discussion, it is useful to apply the sociological theory of capital by Bourdieu (1984) to explicate how members within a social group arrangement – in this case, the transnational Nigerian Fashion System – are differently positioned and thus affected. Bourdieu points out that there are four types of capital – economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. Economic capital refers to economic resources such as money, property, and assets. Social capital denotes access to powerful social networks that can provide, influence, and offer support. Cultural capital relates to a person’s advantage in acquiring a favourable position in society. This last category also includes an individual’s family background in society – for instance, whether they descend from a royal lineage. Bourdieu further demonstrates that an individual’s cultural capital can be embodied, objectified, or institutionalised: when embodied, this refers to their dispositions, skills, or knowledge; when objectified, it takes the form of cultural goods or symbols; when institutionalised, this is usually via academic credentials or qualifications. The fourth type of capital is symbolic capital, which refers to the recognition and legitimacy a person receives from others, based on their possession of the other three forms of capital. With this understanding, it is clear to see how the transnational Nigerian fashion system in its manifestation at AFWL is not all about uniting and harmonising voices, although, unity and cooperation are certainly important. It is a stratified system that takes into account the dominance of Nigerian fashion producers at the event, despite its pan-African underpinnings and the ethos of its event organisers. I discuss this further in Chapter Five.

The financial loss accrued by AFWL UK Ltd is further compounded by the fact that fashion events are not profitable because they are temporal diffusion mechanisms. Like other fashion week events produced in cities across the world (Ling, 2011), AFWL is built around the promotion of African fashion designs, African aesthetics, and other fashion intermediaries. There is, however, a possibility that the limited business management and marketing skills within the AFWL company have caused it not to meet its full potential. In his blog reporting

on his experience of the event, Sola Oyebade, the AFWL creative director and fashion show producer from 2011–2015, highlights the issue of access to finance:

From my limited and extensive knowledge, I don't know of any other Africa Caribbean event that does an event at the Olympia and AFWL should be very proud of their achievements not just about having the courage and the tenacity to take the risk and do it at this very big and *VERY EXPENSIVE venue*, but they have ensured that the event gets bigger and bigger each year.

Well, this piece is dragging and I think I have to bring it to an end now but I can't go without firstly saying that we must all take our hats off to Ronke Ademiluyi for putting this event together and taking the risks and having the courage to keep going despite all the hurdles, difficulty in getting sponsorship and covering the costs. Ronke, I bow to you (Oyebade, 2015).

From the quote above, Oyebade's usage of the oppositional statements 'limited and extensive knowledge' is used to indicate that while he has extensive working experience in the fashion industry, his knowledge of Africa Caribbean events, organised on a large scale as AFWL is restricted. The statement of limited knowledge is in part due to the lack of visibility of these events – Africa Caribbean – organised and dominated by African practitioners, in the mainstream media coverage. While the issue of access to finance has been recognised as one of the main challenges for fashion designers (McRobbie, 1998) and African diaspora entrepreneurs (Ojo, 2013), what is less examined is the role of entrepreneurial fashion event organisations such as AFWL UK Ltd in producing and accentuating African diaspora fashion cultures. Oyebade's quotation above significantly highlights the salient issues that African diaspora fashion practitioners at AFWL talk, think, and write about, reflecting their unique entrepreneurial perspectives and experiences. This is consistent with the findings in the ADPC report (2014, p. 42), which states that diaspora organisations and individuals leverage their position 'both in their countries of origin and countries of residence' to create commercial opportunities in the host land that 'promote and elevate the African continent's development'. Oyebade is a British-Nigerian fashion insider with over 25 years of experience in the UK fashion system as a model agent and events manager. From his point of view, the African fashion event is a financial risk, encumbered by a lack of financial sponsorship. Oyebade's acknowledgement of Olori Aderonke's entrepreneurship capabilities in producing the event presents the founder as a key player in the production, communication, and dissemination of

African fashion. While the role and position of the fashion designer is well recognised and personified, in the star system of fashion production (Kawamura, 2018). In the specific context of AFWL, the event producer/organiser is a key player in the production of cultural goods; while they do not make clothing-fashion as a designer does, they design the *experience* of fashion to achieve their specific goals of nurturing and promoting African design talents and creativity, and projecting a sophisticated image of African fashion. In an interview, published in the Nigerian newspaper Business Day, Olori Aderonke states that in addition funding and financial resources challenges, other difficulties encountered were partly attributable to deep-rooted misconceptions about African fashion.

When I came up with the idea in 2011, of starting an African fashion week in London no one believed in it, almost everyone I spoke to thought it was unachievable, but I stuck with my gut feeling to establish a platform that will promote and create awareness for African designers. I ended up selling my flat in Totteridge to fund and sustain it, and now it has become a household name in the UK, where 100s of African brands participate every year. The success of our event has inspired the growth of African fashion weeks in many cities around the world that see us as the mother of African fashion. (Okeke-Korieocha, 2022)

In addition to encountering difficulties in accessing capital resources, new start-ups often find their entrepreneurial spirits dampened and even hindered by potential stakeholders who do not want to provide finances to a business idea they regard as unprofitable. In the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship, one camp proposes the view that ethnic factors such as racial identity contribute to variations in financial outcomes among businesses in the UK (Nwankwo, 2005). The other camp, however, suggests that it is not ethnicity itself acting as a factor in access to the financial market, but rather the lending institution's lack of understanding about ethnic-owned businesses (Fraser, 2007). This view aligns with the ADPC's findings that diaspora business' disdain for banks and other institutional sources of finance is often attributable to the fact that they fail to 'meet all of the requirements to access different financial services, such as providing security or guarantees to obtain credit' (2014, p. 45). Ojo's (2013, p. 141) examination of Nigerian diaspora businesses in the UK points out that environmental factors can determine the successes and failures of diaspora enterprises: the 'unavailability of mainstream funding confronting ethnic minorities in the UK' provides 'evidence of ethnic discrimination against' Black, African, and minority businesses. While Ojo focuses on

ethnicity in diaspora entrepreneurship, this 2013 study is limited by its lack of concern regarding the gendered nature of entrepreneurship in a specific sector such as fashion.

As several writers have pointed out in the literature on gender and entrepreneurship women's career choices are impacted by the social construction of women as guardians of their culture, as well as their stereotypical associations with motherhood, ethical behaviour, and caring responsibilities (Struder, 2003; Ahl and Nelson, 2010; Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Jennings and Brush, 2013; Henry, Foss and Ahl, 2015, Ahl, 2007). Jennings and Brush (2013) also point out that entrepreneurship is a gendered phenomenon; that it is embedded within families, and is spurred on by necessity, opportunity, and the pursuit of goals beyond economic gain. In this present study, gender, and ethnic identities intersect with external social and contextual factors: access to capital, in African diaspora female entrepreneurship. However, as Ojo (2013, p. 162) points out, the hindrances faced by diasporic minority business owners 'is fuelled significantly because of the perception in the socio-economic mainstream that UK Black entrepreneurs are spenders of money rather than generators of wealth'. Ojo's findings, namely that Nigerian diaspora businesses utilise informal sources such as family, friends, or the sale of personal belongings to fund their ventures, align with Olori Aderonke's comments above concerning the difficulties she encountered in running her fashion communication venture. Ojo (2013, pp. 161–162) argues that, for minority small business owners, exclusion from mainstream finance contributes to the lack of 'economic power to formidably organise themselves financially'; consequently, 'there is a need to examine the strength of their collective agency'. The event setting of AFWL provides an opportunity for such an examination of collective agency through its mobilisation of African small and independent business owners.

Lastly, the financial risks attributed to the fashion event can also be connected to the prevailing misconceptions and perceptions of African fashions and African fashion designers in the global fashion market (Rovine, 2009; 2015). Unlike the mainstream LFW, which is populated with established large and medium businesses, an African-centred event is perceived as risky business, both because of its limited access to finance, and because of the constraints imposed by the global modernity/coloniality system that continues to subordinate, exclude, and marginalise Black aesthetics, cultural tastemakers, and African cultural heritage and knowledge.

Event Marketing Strategies

The term ‘situation’ is a concept within symbolic interaction theory (Parks and Burgess, 1919; Goffman, 1959). The concept is employed in this study to explain how the event’s mission statement and other communication techniques define and communicate its participants’ understanding of the social contexts of the AFWL event. The media employed inform the participants’ (designers, models, creative professionals) expectations of event activities, behaviours, practices, and social interactions with a variety of audiences (other professionals and consumers), as well as the purpose of these activities and interactions.

The AFWL organisers describe and market the event as a platform to ‘promote and nurture the next generation of African and African-inspired fashion design talents’ to develop sustainable businesses (AFWL, 2014). This statement, which declares the event’s mission, strategically conveys both the overall purpose of the event and the intended target audience – African and African-inspired design talents. It is useful in our analysis of this statement to begin with the dictionary definitions of the terms ‘promote’ and ‘nurture’. The Cambridge English Dictionary (2022) defines ‘promote’ as a verb to mean advance, encourage, and advertise. From a marketing perspective, it means to support or actively encourage a cause, venture, or product; to further the progress of something; and to give publicity to increase sales or raise public awareness (Merriam-webster 2022). The term ‘nurture’ is defined both as a noun and verb and refers to the treatment of a child, and the care and encouragement of the development of someone of something (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2022). With these definitions, from the point of view of the AFWL event organisers, in a consumer-oriented global age, the value of African fashion design production is generated through the promotion, and the preservation of creative talents who lack the business support system in the management of their talents. The AFWL fashion event, therefore, seeks to address business-related issues for African fashion designers through the fashion week apparatus: catwalk shows, trade exhibitions, workshops, conferences, and media partnerships. It is common practice for firms in the cultural industries to ‘use a variety of strategies such as branding, packaging, marketing, product range management and loyalty programs to nurture and maintain relationships with their target consumers’ (Weller, 2006, p. 104).

For example, when asked to describe her experience as an exhibitor at AFWL in 2018, one interviewee affirmed,

This is my first year at AFWL, it's been amazing so far, and I am so grateful that they have me. Hopefully, I can come back next year, and this time maybe do a catwalk show. The event has been amazing, I met a lot of people, and I met you. (AfroStylist, 2018)

While participating in the event is not free, this exhibitor has nonetheless found the experience 'amazing'. What this tells us is that, for AFWL's marketing team, the notion of promotion and nurturing is simply to provide a platform for African designers to present their work.

In the fifth issue of the AFWL online magazine, the event is described 'as a project with a mission to help fashion designers convert their talents, into enterprises that can sustain them and grow into big businesses by giving them much-needed visibility' ('Celebrating Five Years of AFWL', 2015, p. 9). Here, the keyword is visibility, and this is achieved through exhibitors' participation in the event's activities, for example the fashion show and the exhibition during AFWL. This is important for participants in the AFWL event, because 'traditional fashion runways are expensive for these designers and world-class standards are notoriously expensive to organise' ('Celebrating Five Years of AFWL', 2015, p. 9). The event itself is therefore vital to their visibility because of the opportunity it gives them to showcase their work to the plethora of transnational media practitioners in attendance.

My own experience of witnessing these media partnerships at AFWL in 2018 and 2019 alerted me to the fact that the press paid the most attention to the fashion show activities at the event. Visual and textual analysis of AFWL media materials also informed me about the make-up of the press at the event. These comprised independent bloggers, YouTubers, online magazine editors, photographers, online TV presenters/hosts, and videographers, all of whom clamoured to the press stand alongside other media companies to capture images of the catwalk collections and live-stream recordings of the fashion shows, which were then shared and circulated widely. Taken together, the in-person observation and visual and textual analysis proved useful to my own study because they showed the important role that the internet plays in the global dissemination of African fashion discourse for diasporic and transnational media practitioners. For these individuals, digital media technologies and the internet offer a medium through which they can contest historical and stereotypical misinformation and misassumptions about African fashions and Identity.

African fashion promotion is, however, not the work of a single individual or business: it is the convergence of a wide range of fashion practitioners and agents involved in the dissemination

and diffusion of African fashion and narratives to global consumer markets. Some forms of media utilised in this promotion of African fashion include the images, advertisements, and photoshoot campaign editorials circulated on AFWL websites and on social media platforms, which mediate between the fashion designers and consumers. On these sites, users can find information about participating brands, as well as images of previous brands who have participated at the event in the past. In addition to these, AFWL has established media partnerships with both online and print fashion magazines and newspapers, as well as bloggers and social media influencers, all of which contribute to the circulation of African fashion and the development of ‘transnational and transcontinental networks’ (Oberhofer, 2012, p. 67).

Constructing African and African-Inspired Fashion

In fashion media reports (Balance Diversity, 2008), academic literature (Lewis, 2003; Jansen, 2015), and popular culture, African producers and consumers have expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment of African cultural heritage when appropriated and commodified by White Western designers, as well as the Western media’s omission and erasure of tastemakers and innovators within African fashion (Rovine, 2015). This is the context within which AFWL emerged, and the reason for its promise to promote and nurture African and African-inspired talent. In the comment below, Sola Oyebade (the AFWL fashion show producer, 2011–2015) speaks about the motivations behind the inception of AFWL and the collaboration between his companies Mahogany (model agency), *FashionsFinest*, and AFWL UK Ltd:

Mahogany and *fashionsfinest* have been in fashion for a very long time, I am working in Nigeria and other places around the world, and we had a discussion with Ronke the CEO and founder of AFW that it will be great to have an event of the equivalent of like London fashion week in the UK, but for Africans. (Factory78, 2011)

This account above reflects the view of fashion as a collective activity involving different actors and players. As one of the key players involved in the production and communication of African fashion, Oyebade points out that the dilemma facing African fashion designers (Lewis, 2003) was the lack of a pan-African platform, where the marketing and promotion of African fashion practitioners (models, designers, and press) can take place.

As already mentioned, the AFWL event was founded and established by British Nigerians for African and non-African fashion practitioners to accentuate the visibility of their dress and design practices to British consumers and the global market. It is tempting to infer from the last part of the commentary above that AFWL is ‘merely an imitation of European fashion’ – an explanation which derives from the trickle-down theory (Veblen 1899[1994]). AFWL is, however, a self-organising event in which ethnic minority practitioners in the diaspora within the UK can mobilise themselves collectively to pursue shared interests and secure the position of African fashion producers in the fashion markets both locally and globally.

Bovone (2012, p. 86) highlights that in postmodern culture, contemporary fashion is characterised by fragmented identities, pluralism, new opportunities, uncertainties, and the multiple meanings and uses of objects for different groups. AFWL constructs African fashion into two categories namely African and African-inspired, to emphasise pluralism, inclusivity, and the celebration of African fashion as a heterogeneous concept. In the visual and textual analysis of fashion show schedules, participating brands are typically organised and categorised either based on their geographical point of origin in Africa or their nationality or current place of residence (see Appendix C). As Ling (2011, p. 90) remarks, fashion week ‘provides a sense of national identity and pride from the achievements of the creative sector’. For the individual designers and brands, their role at AFWL involves acting as national representatives of their respective countries. Some design participants also select among their multiple nationalities – for example British, Nigerian, and Yoruba.

As we have seen, the emergence of AFWL in 2011 is conceptualised as a Nigerian diaspora intervention that emerged within the broad historical and contemporary context of mainstream fashion discourses, discriminatory practices, and the exclusion of Black models,⁴ with the aim of challenging these by celebrating African fashion designers as important fashion cultural intermediaries and tastemakers. There are other external interventions into African fashion development,⁵ however, unlike these others, AFWL is underpinned by the pan-African tenets

⁴ The Diversity Coalition, initiated in 2013 by prominent Black fashion models including Naomi Campbell, Iman, Tyson Beckford, and Bethann Hardison, addresses the racial discrimination faced by Black models in mainstream fashion shows. Known as the Balance Diversity Campaign, it aims to combat marginalization in global fashion circuits (Stewart, 2007, 2008, 2014; Sauer, 2010; Givens, 2015; Newman, 2017; Tai, 2018; Edwards, 2019).

⁵ Fashion 4 Development (F4D) was established in 2011 as a global platform to support women in developing countries in launching new fashion businesses. Unlike AFWNY, which is self-funded, F4D is a United Nations-

of collective power, solidarity, and cultural pride. It is a business created by and in the Nigerian diaspora in the UK for the enhancement and creation of positive representations of African cultural heritage and African identities. It also positions and represents African cultural practitioners, particularly designers, at the centre of the discourse of fashion production, to make more visible their creativity, talents, and innovations in design. In this regard, AFWL intervenes in the marketing, promotion, and communication of African designer fashions, Nigerian designs, and design practitioners for commercial success in the global market.

For example, British reporter Helen Drew interviewed several designers at the event in 2017. In the BBC News coverage British-Nigerian couture-trained designer George Adesegun remarks,

When I was at uni, when they [the English] see that I am doing something with Africa, they all presume that you had to be doing African print and I said I am a couture designer, I make beautiful clothes and all that. Just because I am an African doesn't mean that I have to make an Afro-centric kind of thing. (*Drew, 2017, [1.15:1.36]*).

In other words, despite his professional training, Adesegun's self-representation as a couture designer is frequently challenged because in the popular imagination, African identity is synonymous with African wax prints. The term Afro-centric implies African-centred, and in this case, the designer perceives African designers to be entangled with the usage of African prints. I would argue that this is one of the limiting beliefs and dominant images of African fashion that has been perpetuated in the media.

Another exhibitor interviewed in the BBC news coverage, a British-African woman, echoed Adesegun's lived experiences of being ascribed identity as an African designer within British society. She remarks,

When I first came out of uni, it [African fashion] wasn't as big, coming out as an African designer in my uni of English Western designers it was very much like your stuff is very different. Now that this [AFWL] is here it is very much, you know like-

backed initiative focused on achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2015). F4D collaborates with Franca Sozzani, former Editor-in-Chief of Vogue Italia, and other prominent fashion designers to foster fashion development in the developing world.

minded people will come to this place, and you can sell to the right people. (Drew, 2017, [0.35:0.53])

This remark above reflects the anxieties experienced by several African designers, owing to the perceptions of their difference – racial and cultural – and their minority status in a fashion industry dominated by White aesthetics and values. To resolve this anxiety, migrants (including designers) can either amplify their difference or augment their semblance with the dominant British culture. If we recall the interviewee's words in the statement, 'coming out as an African designer in my uni of English Western designers it was very much like your stuff is very different', we can see that the remark about being 'different' can also be perceived as problematic. This reflects the issue of conformity to dominant cultural values and aesthetics – in other words, to be accepted within the British fashion industry, an African designer is expected to conform to the dominant practices of fashion design, and dressing (Lewis, 2003).

These comments reflect the representational issues that AFWL attempts to address by providing a space for African-descended fashion designers, to present their 'difference' and perform their design identities. The remark about AFWL as a space harbouring 'like-minded people' and the 'right' consumers exposes the tensions within the dominant British fashion industry. The term 'like-minded people' also implies, considering the socio-cultural characteristics of the participants and visitors to AFWL annually, that these attendees share cultural values, as well as experiences of discrimination and exclusion from/in the dominant British fashion industry. Cooper's (2010, p. 389) findings about Caribbean Fashion Week as providing an opportunity for 'monochromatically black women' to take centre stage rather than on the margins of aesthetic discourse is apt, in this context. AFWL is a stage for the promotion of Black beauty aesthetics, tastes, and preferences. It also provides a safe space for like-minded African fashion designers, including creative practitioners such as makeup artists, hairstylists, and photographers to convene and project their diverse cultural identities and variable design practices. Through the AFWL platform, therefore, fashion designers of African descent can negotiate and communicate their membership to both the African and British fashion industries. They do this through the aesthetic design choices and techniques adopted or adapted in the fabrication of their collections, and this process further communicates their group belongings and cultural values.

While these comments from the BBC coverage (Drew, 2017) underscore some of the burdensome challenges experienced by Black African fashion designers, it also more

specifically reflects the ways in which the experiences of difference (racial, gender, class, ethnic, or cultural) play a central role in hindering their African identity and role performance as fashion designers within the dominant British culture/society. These quotations can also be read as some of the ways in which African-descended designers resist being ‘fixed’ to a European conceptualisation of African, or African fashion. The comments above show that fashion design presents opportunities for the negotiation and production of cultural identity. For example, the interviewees both refer to their university experiences, highlighting their perceptions of the educational setting as a critical site for producing knowledge and facilitating social interactions, all of which shapes the process of becoming. Presumably, it was at university that Adesegun became a couture designer, rather than an African designer.

Gaining a qualification is an important marker of identity; in this case, an authentic identity as a fashion designer. From a postmodern outlook, where needing a design qualification to be a designer is deemed unimportant. The significance of this is that designers can resist being confined and boxed into the idea that African fashion designers are tailors that make clothes primarily for their ethnic kinfolds. As we have seen, within the Eurocentric history of fashion, the creation of original design and the role of the couture designer has long been assumed to be a European invention, and reserved for White practitioners (Steele, 2010). Because of this, Adesegun’s assertion that he is couture and makes beautiful clothes for women is significant: in doing so, he untangles his roots – Nigerian identity and Yoruba cultural heritage – from his professional fashion role as a couture designer. One way of phrasing this could be that Adesegun is a UK-based couture designer of Nigerian descent. The designer has appeared twice on the AFWL catwalk platform, in 2012 and 2017. For his clothing collection in 2017 (See Appendix B, AFWL 2017 Catwalk presentation), Adesegun created textiles imprinted with motifs and artwork he believes best represents Africanness, such as the Nsibidi scripts. Although the origin of Nsibidi is mistakenly linked to the Igbo culture in Nigeria, it originated amongst the Ejagham people of Cross River, Nigeria. This confusion stems in part from the homogenisation of the communities in the Southeast, geographical proximity, and strong integration of the Ejagham and the Igbo people of Nigeria. The Igbo are diffused across Africa, as are their cultural practices, which have been transformed through mixing with other practices. Adesegun’s use of this ancient script is one way of constructing and representing his Nigerian and Pan-African identity. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, Nigeria is a multicultural and multiethnic nation, various groups incorporate elements from these diverse sources as a way of expressing their Nigerianness.

Adesegun's remarks about his experience in the British design education system and expectations for his design practices – that as an African designer, he must produce Afrocentric garments-, questions the popular perceptions of African print wax fabric as the material for accentuating and expressing African identity –Africanness. Clearly, Adesegun resists this narrow and limited conception of African cultural identity. Instead, through his design practices, the designer conveys his conception of an authentic Africanness by drawing from indigenous African cultural heritage. It is also worth noting that several African-descended fashion designers at AFWL use the term 'couture' in a different way to that of its Parisian origin and usage. For example, Nigerian brands use the term as a marketing tool to define and position the label, in contrast to the conventional use, which designates the type of market and quality of garment (custom-made and handmade). These include a mix of men's and womenswear brands for whom the term couture is a marketing technique to add value to their brands, such as ALABI Couture, Trish O Couture, ZARITA Kouture, Caesar Couture, Kass Kouture, and Ambience Couture. Alternatively, where some AFWL designers do conform to mainstream conventions is in couture bridal and eveningwear fashion by George Adesegun, Ade Bakare, and Adebayo Jones.

The discourse of African-Inspired Fashion

Clearly, the fashion designer is a core element in the fashion system – as Kawamura (2018) argues, fashion would not exist without a designer. The designer as a key player in the production of cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1980; Crane, 1997a, b.), and performs a vital role in 'creating, diffusing, and legitimating clothing as fashion' (Kawamura, 2018, p. 57). Through this broad framing of African fashion, AFWL brings together a wide range of ethnically, culturally, and nationally diverse design practitioners, all of whom contribute to producing African fashion. The AFWL organisers' construction of African fashion thus acknowledges and incorporates a diversity of producers of African fashion, including non-African designers who are producing concepts inspired by African cultural heritage (Rovine, 2015). The notions of African, African fashion, and African-inspired warrant further examination: for example, at the event and in its media coverage, there are several competing constructions, productions, and representations of the concepts of Africa and African fashion. This is discussed further in the remaining empirical chapters.

In my textual analysis, AFWL's official narrative does not define an African person as being biologically or racially fixed and determined. If they were to do that, non-African and White design participants would be excluded from the event. The strategy they employ is akin to the French Couture trade organisation's strategy to loosen some of their 'regulations to bring new designers into the system so that Paris as the fashion capital would survive' (Kawamura, 2005, p. 60). As already mentioned, Olori Aderonke established a Nigerian Fashion Week London event in 2010, which failed to take root. This was in part due to the popularity of the Africa Fashion Week in New York, which provided a broader, pan-African image rather than a nationally specific event bound to Nigeria.

In these pan-African events, Africa is constructed as a social experience, accommodating a wide range and groups of people with shared interests, common challenges, and experiences. The design participants at AFWL range from having various degrees of attachment to Africa and African culture to no attachment at all. In today's globalised world, in addition to providing a commercial platform for emerging fashion designers and brands to gain visibility in the industry, the event facilitates cultural exchange to build bridges of understanding and cooperation with people from around the world. For example, one of the respondents interviewed at the event asserted that the rationale for attending AFWL as a brand participant was to use the event as a stepping stone:

[...] when I started my brand, I wanted to go to London Fashion Week, but they have a demand, they told me I have to have a selling point here [London] already to participate. I didn't have one, but now I do have, I have one in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. So, I can do it now. So, I went to AFWL because I wanted to go to London.

I applied to showcase at London Fashion Week but because of the requirements [brands must produce for Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter] I wasn't allowed to participate. I decided to showcase at AFWL, since then I have been featured in *Vogue* magazine, and international fashion magazines, and I have a lot of celebrity clients in the Netherlands. The magazines in the Netherlands don't know about me. (Van Else, 2018)

Van Else is a Netherlands-based luxury womenswear brand founded in 2012, by Else Hardjopawiro, a woman of Indonesian heritage. Following Van Else's clothing collection presentation at AFWL in 2015, the brand was awarded best fashion designer at her first international presentation at the 2015 AFWL fashion show. Since her participation, images of

Van Else's collections have been featured in *Elle* and British *Vogue* magazines. This media coverage, which featured catwalk images of one particular garment, was shared and circulated by independent fashion journalists and bloggers across social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram). During my conversation with the designer at the event setting in 2018, she recounted how happy she felt to be validated by these two mainstream fashion media publications. Her positive emphasis on the coverage provided by these international publications demonstrates that, for the designer, these international mainstream magazines have conferred a certain status on her Rotterdam-based brand. The self-taught designer's design practice uses Indonesian batik materials fabricated into tailored, fitted garment styles – shorts, trousers, blazers, dresses, and coats. In her explanation of the use of Indonesian batik, the designer asserts,

Africa is the fabric and colours. I love the vibrancy and the colours of the fabric. I love African culture. You see my daughter [while speaking, she points at her daughter, who is black-skinned], her father is from Suriname. I don't try to include African culture in my brand.

The batik is because my descendant is from Indonesia; I love the fabric as well. They have more traditional designs, they don't have colours, it is something new that they are trying now to include in the Indonesian batik – to make colourful batik fabrics. That is what I will do next year. (Van Else, 2018)

From the comments above, it is clear that the designer's individual goal had been realised after participating in the African diaspora fashion system, where her creativity was legitimated by fashion gatekeepers (Kawamura, 2018). The collection presented at AFWL enhanced her visibility in the mainstream alternative fashion system, giving her the symbolic capital, she needed to showcase her collection at London Fashion Week. The designer's claim of Indonesian batik as her cultural heritage is significant, given the history, migration, and contamination of the cloth. As Nielsen (1980) points out, in the seventeenth century, under the political control of the Dutch, Javanese batik was introduced to the European market, where it was subsequently rejected because of its exotic designs. European firms later developed the fabric for the colonial African market, where it was adopted and adapted to suit local tastes (Nielsen, 1980, p. 2; Edoh, 2019). African print, also known as Dutch wax, has been both critiqued and celebrated as part and parcel of African heritage and the cultural expression of shared identity (Akinwumi, 2008; Delhaye and Woet, 2015; Oboh, 2018; Edoh, 2019). The

designer highlights colour as one salient aspect of the cloth that differentiates the African version of the batik from the traditional Indonesian batik. In her design practice, she combines both the traditional monochrome Indonesian batik and the multi-coloured, bright African prints to create a new form of hybrid, Indonesian-African fashion. Such cultural exchanges, enabled through the connectivity of distinct national and ethnic groups at AFWL, have created ‘countless ways for designers to incorporate references of African histories and cultures’ (Rovine, 2015, p. 27) into their design practices.

This understanding of African fashion as colourful and bright is also shared by White designers at the event. For example, the brand Dawn Eseff’s design process involves the use of African print materials to produce accessories and garments for male and female consumers, which she sells to predominantly White customers at Dance festivals across Europe. In her explanation for making African fashion, the designer opined that ‘it’s about the colours, it makes me feel alive. I feel bright’ (Eseff 2018). She learned about the African culture from her interactions with her Black African friends and dance colleagues. For these designers who are non-African, the association of African fashion as emblematic of bright and colourful prints offers a platform for these designers to perform and construct new subjectivities.

I would go to events, and they have their themed nights, everybody will be in their colours and I will be in my plain black dress, feeling really boring. So, I bought a piece of African print wax off eBay – I bought two meters off eBay and made an outfit. And of course, everyone said wow, yes, I made the outfit myself. Yes, I am a tailor, but I have never made anything with African print. Cause I never had any real need, it just grew from there... people started asking me can you make something for me, can you make something for me. Then I gradually made the jewellery which I take to dance festivals all over Europe (Eseff, 2018).

From the account above, it appears that Dawn never had any real need for the colourful printed African fabrics; the fabric probably held a different meaning for her than it does for others. The meaning changed for her after she experienced her body being out of place on an African-themed night. From Eseff’s point of view, within a physical event setting dominated by African people in their brightly coloured clothing, her plain black dress marked and signified her as different. To fit in at the next African-themed night, she purchased the yellow African-printed fabric (Dutch wax) initially to make a dress for herself, and subsequently began to develop the brand and then participate at AFWL. Like Van Else, Eseff can be described as an

African-inspired designer. The account above aligns with Rovine's (2015, p. 256) examination of Western designers drawing inspiration from Africa to construct Africa: 'designers may refer to Africa through the narrative or textual settings that surround these garments. Names of designs, description of garments by fashion journalists and the setting of fashion photographs' are all strategies employed to link garments to the idea of Africa. An examination of Eseff's Facebook page shows references to Africa as well as the stylistic markers of African influence. In its marketing strategy on Facebook, the brand Dawn Eseff Designs is described as 'African Influenced Clothing and Accessories. Bespoke Couture and Designer collections' (Eseff, 2018a). The brand creates accessories (necklaces, bangles, and earrings) as well as garments (dresses, skirts, and tops) influenced by African clothing and textile consumption practices. The brand also incorporates Western approaches to cuts and shapes, such as halter neck style tops and dresses, without signalling an association with a specific African region, nation, or ethnic group. Among the visible elements of stylistic markers the designer employs to market the brand are multiple printed African fabric materials, and a variety of garment styles and accessories modelled by Black fashion models. In addition to the marketing strategies stated above, Black bodies of female and male models and materials and textiles associated with Africa in popular culture – such as the African wax prints - are also employed to link Africa to Western fashion brands and construct and convey the meaning of the brand as an African inspired fashion. For example, on the designer's gallery on Facebook are a selection of Black male and female customers dressed in the designer's garments and accessories. The inclusion of Black bodies in the representation of the brand plays a role to validate and authenticate it. It should also be noted that while White customers are also represented in the gallery, the brand primarily employs mannequins to present its clothing.

From these two accounts, we can see that African fashion is variously produced and constructed through different attendees' individual motivations. It is worth recalling that Van Else's participation at LFW was encumbered by the event's criteria, namely that participating brands must produce for Spring/Summer and Autumn/Winter and have a stockist where their garments are sold. This highlights the production, consumption, and diffusion processes of fashion. A similar view about the accessibility of AFWL catwalk shows was emphasised by the event founder Olori Aderonke in a media interview, when discussing the rationale for the fashion week event:

Also, our catwalk is really accessible because not many people get to see a professional catwalk show because they have London Fashion Week as for industry only, so we try and make the catwalk so accessible and African fashion so accessible, and we just do this for everybody really (Factory78, 2011).

The flexibility offered to emerging design participants by AFWL reduces the high entry barriers associated with the mainstream LFW. Like Van Else, Beau Sapuer is an emerging designer brand founded by a male, British-French fashion designer based in Kampala, Uganda. In his description of the design journey that led to the presentation of his clothing collections at AFWL, the designer opines,

Well, I suppose when I started this [designing clothes] at Christmas I never could have imagined doing this. I got invited to do a fashion show in Kampala, it was showcased on television, that kind of gave me the confidence that I needed, and also I have evidence of a previous show that I could actually show to AFWL. I wanted to come as an exhibitor, but these other successes made me think that I have the confidence to say maybe I am actually worthy of being there, so I sent a video of my show, which is a mess, but I said it is a mess, but I can do better, they liked it and that's it. (Beau Sapuer, 2018)

For this self-taught individual, stepping into the position of a designer raised deep psychosocial issues for him, relating to his confidence, sense of worthiness, and self-doubt. His participation and prior experience as a designer at the Kampala Fashion Week provided him with the confidence fully to adopt the role of fashion designer. In the literature, participation in fashion week is one of the key ways in which a designer becomes identifiable as an author and creative maker of cultural goods (Skov *et al.*, 2009; Kawamura, 2018). As the commentary above shows, the localised Kampala Fashion Week is a space for fashion production and diffusion, however the London-based Africa Fashion Week event fulfils a broader function, which involves acting as a bridge connecting the local (Uganda) to the global (UK) market. AFWL's location in the diaspora space (Brah, 1996) of the fashion capital city of London is instrumental not only in differentiating it from other Africa-based and related events, but also in providing exhibitors with access to an international audience. The point I am making here is that, based on the hierarchical power relations between different fashion cities, each fashion week serves a different function, providing diverse opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and market interactions. Research has shown that the city also plays a role in the construction

of regional identity and the representation of cosmopolitan identities (Breward and Gilbert, 2006; Editor 2009; Rocamora, 2009). Through the construction of AFWL as an inclusive platform, emerging design talents are able to create and represent their multiple identities. These practitioners – including non-African designers who are inspired by the rich culture of Africa – are critical to the establishment of AFWL as an authoritative, international platform within the African fashion world. The examples of Van Else, Dawn Eseff, and Beau Sapuer serve to illustrate the varied components that constitute African fashion at AFWL. As Rovine (2015, p. 233) writes,

African fashion offers abundant insights into cultures, both close to home and distant, real, and imagined. Through garments, designers tell stories about history, heritage, and global networks of style, as well as the perpetuation or revival of local dress practices.

Definition of the situation is critical for cooperation, collaboration, implementation, and realisation of the event's objectives. The annual event of AFWL is a site for repetitive social interactions (Goffman, 1959) for the establishment of the African diaspora fashion system, which comprises fashion practitioners and trans-sectoral organisations and firms (Weller, 2008). As we have seen, the event includes shared activities and rituals such as the fashion show, exhibitions, conferences/business forums, and buying and selling. At the event, there are certain boundaries that are constructed and maintained between fashion designers, vendors, and visiting consumers. To communicate with its diverse audiences about what to expect at the event, and what is expected of them, the AFWL organisers produce event schedules, press releases, designer application forms, model casting calls, media reports of the inaugural events, advertisements, and marketing campaigns (See Ngu, 2017; Elite Living Africa, 2019). For example, leading up to the annual fashion show, the event organisers issue a call for designer and model participation through their websites and social media pages. This information is also circulated digitally by AFWL media partners such as bloggers, newspapers, and fashion magazines, via the internet, all over the world. To partake in the AFWL catwalk shows, prospective fashion models must attend casting calls and auditions; similarly, fashion designers and exhibitors are required to fill out an application form to showcase their work (see Appendix 1). The selection of design participants is based on a screening process whereby prospective fashion designers are assessed and evaluated on whether they fulfil the prerequisites for the role. Although these requisites are not explicit, they can be inferred from the AFWL designer application form, wherein demographical background information is requested. Following the

application, applicants are reviewed and selected by a panel of industry professionals consisting of the AFWL management team, who are invested in their roles as cultural tastemakers and as architects of the meanings associated with African fashion. In other words, African fashion is evaluated by the event organisers, AFWL UK Ltd, who make decisions about acceptable designer-led fashion aesthetic tastes.

This chapter has examined and discussed how British-Nigerian fashion practitioners have established themselves as cultural intermediaries, bridging Nigeria and the UK, as well as the broader African and European markets. AFWL UK Ltd constitutes a legitimate fashion business in the British fashion system, providing and satisfying market demand and wider access to an international market. Through the AFWL event, diaspora-based practitioners seek to provide positive representations of Africa for the Western media so that these may be spread to wider audiences. As seen in the literature, the new African diaspora is multi-local and maintains relationships across multiple homelands. AFWL UK Ltd was established in the UK by British Nigerians to mediate relationships between the host and home countries through the fashion event, which provides a platform for African diasporas and Africans who are marginalised by the mainstream fashion system. As a powerful marker of place and identity (Crewe and Goodrum, 2000, p. 26), fashion is deployed as a device for the rebranding of Africa and the contestations about African and British identities, shaping new narratives about cultural production and consumption.

In the practices of the event's stakeholders, who repudiate the limiting beliefs placed upon them by the West and follow their intrinsic motivations to use the resources of the host country, we can see the processes of becoming, of being made visible, and of illuminating the home country. Collectivity plays an important role in this process, in the participants' ambitions to fashion new forms of African identities. As a result, the contemporary African diaspora fashion cultures, in which British Nigerian practitioners have established themselves as gatekeepers of African fashion, differs from the development of fashion in Nigeria. Unlike the latter, the UK setting (with its highly sophisticated communication and media network and strong reputation in global fashion) positions it in the fashion transnational field. Event practitioners make use of their home country resources in the consolidation of roles, bringing in the much-needed cultural and economic capital for offsetting the challenge of running a minority business in the UK.

Chapter Six

Constructions and Representations of African Femininities

Introduction

This chapter critically explores and analyses the different ways in which research subjects at AFWL talk about the production, consumption, and dissemination of African fashions. Fashion here refers not to a specific product category but to ‘a system of stylistic innovation and a production system that is geared to making and distributing these clothes’ (Entwistle, 2009, pp. 8–9; see also Kawamura, 2004). In this way, African fashion at AFWL is socially produced through the ‘routine interaction’ (Kawamura, 2004) of a range of actors: designers, stylists, journalists, buyers, and consumers. In the next chapter, I discuss in detail the cultural practices within the event settings. In this chapter, however, the focus is on fashion designers and cultural producers of African fashion at AFWL, because they ‘choose what garments to show in their collection’ and encode an ‘aesthetics around the garments’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 9), as well as dress and accessories displayed in the fashion shows and circulated via digital media. I discuss how the design participants at AFWL speak about their fashion practices, taking informants’ commentaries as the basis of my analysis. I also supplement this discussion with secondary interviews and visual analyses of the AFWL promotional campaigns. The chapter argues that the ways in which designers talk about women’s bodies at AFWL both serve to challenge social norms and to promote beauty ideals, foregrounding feminine agency through fashion production and consumption practices. In the sections that follow, I attempt to substantiate these claims.

Feminine Agency

In this section, I explore how design participants at AFWL speak about their fashion practices, taking informants’ commentaries as the basis of analysis because ‘fashion markets are demonstrably concerned with the body and the orientations are specifically towards bodily aesthetics’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 3). Following Entwistle, the commodities produced and promoted at AFWL are ‘destined for bodily display’ (2009, p. 3), and this affects how markets

operate, as well as how race and national identity are produced through gendered performances. The body is thus at the centre of the design practices of practitioners, the fashion show presentation, the types of commodities available in the trade segment of the event (the exhibition), and AFWL's promotional campaigns, circulated on social media. As in mainstream Western fashion week events or cultural activities, male and female bodies feature to varying degrees in AFWL's fashion show and exhibition activities. However, in contrast to the mainstream, AFWL features predominantly Black bodies – whether models, event patrons, or ambassadors. As such, the event acts as a site for the construction and inscription of meanings on Black bodies, which takes place largely through the interactions of its diverse actors in the event itself, and in African fashion. A British-Nigerian exhibitor, Informant F, asserts that we see a predominance of women at the event because of the difference between male and female shopping habits and practices. She remarks,

But you know what, women buy more, so it's better to concentrate on them [...] men when they see something and they want it, they want it, see it, they buy it. A woman will be like, Ooh, ooh, do I want, ooh, can I have this one instead? [...] Overall, you are going to sell more to women than to men. (Informant F, 2019)

From this, we can infer that vendors and merchants sell more to women not because the event is structured in a way that attracts women, but because the consuming public for fashion consists mainly of women. In other words, women are socialised to fashion themselves, buy and consume new clothing for the expression of their femininities. In fashion promotion and at AFWL, female bodies and faces have also served as marketing devices for circulating information to the consuming public – a phenomenon I discuss more below. The focus at the start of this chapter is on the fact that AFWL organisers construct and present a public image targeted at a female market segment. This is certainly the case with its 'Face of AFWL' competition, as well as the AFWL ambassador activities, for which women and girls are usually featured. It is still worth noting however that the above exhibitor observes the difference between male and female consumers: men are perceived as sure, direct, and focused on the practical uses of an item, whereas women are deemed to be unsure, with multiple conflicting desires, wants, and needs. According to Informant F, while a woman may question whether to buy an item, she may also be impulsive and buy items not for their practical uses alone but because she is captivated by the numerous market offerings. But whether or not women buy more is not the issue here; my focus is on how women's bodies and faces become marketing

devices used to attract and sell ideals about bodies, values, and lifestyles to other consumers – typically women.

The majority of the designers at AFWL are therefore womenswear brands that produce a variety of commodities (garments, shoes, bags, necklaces, etc.), all fabricated in a wide range of materials for women's consumer markets. These designers mainly describe and relate their design practices to women's bodily display, and as women, in doing so they express their own subjectivities and constructions of womanhood and femininities. While there are also design brands who make clothing for both men and women, the female consumer market segment is the target audience for these participants. One of the main themes that emerges from these interviews with designers of womenswear brands is that of feminine agency. Certain constructs are used in this regard, including the figure and ideas of 'real woman', 'notable woman' and 'hardworking woman' to convey the 'importance of external appearance in the pursuit of beauty as the essence of femininity' (Bae, 2011, p. 30). In these interviews, the way designers speak about their brands being created for the 'real woman' also reflects a challenge to the normative representations of ideal body standards, largely considered to be White, 'thin' (Entwistle, 2009, p. 8), and driven by Western consumer capitalism. All of these constructs nevertheless reflect 'the association of women with the body and the higher cultural value placed on female beauty' in popular culture (Entwistle, 2009, p. 5), an arena in which everyday lived experiences occur. Overall, these fashion designers play a major role in shaping and guiding male and female roles through the garments and clothing styles they produce and market to consumers. The body and the garments themselves are instruments that serve to construct an individual's social identity, political affiliations, and group memberships (Allman, 2004). In other words, clothing is a form of non-verbal communication that conveys different meanings. As Evans and Thornton (1991, p. 49) argue, fashion's concern with femininity and the representation of sexuality owes to the primacy of the body in any clothing system. In other words, the body is the object of fashion through which sexuality and femininity are expressed. Women's fashion, therefore, participates in the construction of ideas about femininity through its representations of the female body. Citing examples such as Schiaparelli and Chanel's design practices, Evans and Thornton (1991, p. 50) argue that the cultural conceptions of feminine are 'produced and changed through dress'. Which is to say that the way a woman acts is socially constructed through the choices she makes about her dressing practices. While Schiaparelli offered women excess and folly in fashion, for example, 'Chanel insists on an invulnerable dignity' (Evans and Thornton 1991, p. 50). This is relevant to the study of the

women-led AFWL event, because the design practices of its fashion designers are instrumental in negotiating different gender identities and concepts of masculinity and femininity, as well as the meaning of African cultural identity. More poignantly, within these constructions, women's bodies are centred as the medium for communicating these beliefs.

Clothing for the 'Real African Woman'

As is commonly understood in the literature, the body is a social phenomenon that is shaped and moulded, made, dressed, and undressed by society – through societal norms, expectations, and traditions. Within this idea, women's bodies in particular carry a high cultural value (Entwistle, 2009). My informants understand this high cultural value placed on women's bodies, as well as the competing representations and constructions of Black women. Women's bodies are created and inscribed with divergent meanings that further dictate and shape (both consciously and unconsciously) individual and collective behaviours. The fashion industry is an arena in which any human body can be shaped and inscribed with meaning. Several informants I interviewed spoke about the woman's body in different ways, illuminating the different conceptualisations of femininity, womanhood, and their expressions through fashion production and consumption practices. One informant, interviewed in 2019 at her AFWL exhibition for the Caribbean-based womenswear brand Diane Carlton, described her brand as created for the 'real woman'. The designer is a woman in her forties, and her look could be described in conventionally Eurocentric terms as skinny and petite. The informant was inspired to start her design business by her father (a Calypso entertainer), her fashionable aunty, and her African heritage. Her customers are geographically dispersed and racially diverse. After I commented that her clothes were not tiny – small - in sizing, she remarked,

My designs are for the real woman. Anything you see here that is stick thin, those are runway samples – that we just put on sale – but the average African woman has some sass, she has good booty, we are ample, they are not stick thin. I want woman to – even on my website I don't use conventional models. Love it when the customers purchase – it's almost mandatory that they send me their picture – that's what I use on my website and I cannot tell you how it has driven sales for me, because people think, There is something that I can wear. (Informant D, 2019)

The wording above conveys a multi-layered message. First, it shows how the designer's personal experience, heritage and identity as a woman manifest in her professional occupation as a creator of clothing for women. On her website, she describes women who purchase her clothes as 'real women', whom the designer sees as her market segment in the real world and thus essential for communicating her brand message that women are 'fabulous and at any size'. The 'stick thin' runway samples created for her fashion show presentation, however, mean that the designer continues to uphold the expectations of the fashion industry in relation to bodily standards. Considering the designer's remarks during the interview ('My designs are for the real woman'), and my observation of her clothing display and the collection she presented on the catwalk show in 2019, there are some contradictions that need to be unpacked here. While these promotional practices of fashion show collection presentation versus advertising on the website are necessary media for disseminating the brand to various consumers, my observations and subsequent interview with the designer reflect a complex fashion process. The designer exemplifies how she negotiates between the industry practice of using thin models provided by the event organisers, and her own personal ideals concerning the use of unconventional models, i.e., the average female consumer who purchases her garments. This reflects Entwistle's argument that 'aesthetic value in a fashion market is a value attached to things', which 'is in constant flux' (Entwistle, 2009, pp. 10–11). In this case, the female body and its physical appearance are highly valued by both the organisers who supply the models, and the designer who makes and markets the clothing. AFWL organisers (stylists, model agents, and designers) place great value on thin body shapes because the models are implicated in mediating body aesthetics and play a role in 'connecting points between producers and consumers' (2009, p. 16). In her study of White models in mainstream Western fashion, Entwistle (2009) argues that modelling work is complex. Citing Kate Moss as an example, she writes that the 'model mediates numerous things, the clothing she wears in advertisements and editorial, the brand she serves as the face of, and general trends or fashion – such as the grunge look' (Entwistle, 2009, p. 17). Similarly, the event organisers of AFWL and designers enlist fashion models in these mediating processes. It should be noted that, unlike mainstream fashion shows and the White models Entwistle writes about, the models selected by AFWL organisers serve to promote a racialised image of Black beauty in contrast to the dominance of Whiteness in mainstream fashion weeks and media. I discuss this more in Section 2 of my analysis of the official narrative of the event produced by AFWL organisers.

Several informants I interviewed presented varying notions of the average African woman to mean a physical bodily sensibility, shape, and physique. I would argue these divergent views, which highlight the physical form, traits, and qualities of the African woman, draw attention to the differences between the African woman and the White woman. This is reflected in the informant D comments above that the ‘average African woman has some sass, she has good booty; we are ample, they are not stick thin’. In other words, while African designers conform to mainstream conventions – such as using standardised sizes for clothing presentations at the fashion shows to the fashion press – in the real world, these standards are often incongruent with the average African consumer body shape. One informant (2019) remarks, ‘I think African designers know how the African form is and they do give extra hip room’ for ‘your big bust and big backside’. These comments demonstrate an understanding of the physical form of Black women themselves and the significance of the bodily shape in fashion consumption. As indicated in Informant F’s comments above, the designer situates and positions herself as an African woman with an understanding of the African female form, thus expressing her sense of belonging to the African cultural group, evincing the phrase ‘we’.

With respect to the comment that the ‘African woman has good booty’, it can be argued that commodity fetishism has created the process and condition whereby Black features (such as ‘big booty’) are no longer the reserve of Black women. For example, several celebrities including Kim Kardashian and Jennifer Lopez have been proponents of those bodily features typically deemed ‘Black physique’. Likewise, African-American, and Nigerian celebrities also engage in bodily modifications to alter their natural bodily forms to fit into an idealised version of beauty through the augmentation of lips, nose, butt, stomach, breasts, etc. These general fashion trends in bodily modifications fall under the concept of dress as ‘an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body’ (Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992, p. 1). But for Black women who embody these features naturally, and have internalised the historical trauma of been vilified, mocked, and devalued in mainstream media for these features that are now celebrated on non-Black bodies, this is not a trend. Nonetheless, this shows how in contemporary consumer culture, the body is experienced as unfinished, something that is open to change, transformation, and revision (Entwistle, 2007).

A designer who highlights the facts of Black women’s bodies and physiques does so with the intent to empower, celebrate, and liberate Black African bodies from the colonial ideology and Eurocentric gaze. Informant D does this when she talks about using photos of ‘real’ consumers

dressed in her garments for brand promotion on her website. This also highlights the designer's approach to driving sales, precisely because 'images serve as aesthetic marketing devices' (Doseku, 2019, p. 96) that contribute to the construction of the womenswear brand and the clothing it markets, which aids in promoting 'certain kinds of body in the process' (Hollander, 1993, quoted in Entwistle, 2009, p. 16). The model body types promoted on the AFWL catwalk collection presentations, the kind 'found in mainstream editorial and commercial imagery' (Entwistle, 2009, p. 18), the designer's website promotes looks and body types considered more unconventional. I would argue that, not only does this contribute to the brand's image as a promoter of 'body beautiful' and a 'disseminator of body aesthetics' (Entwistle, 2009, p. 16) precisely because these bodies are commonly exempted from the ideal in fashion modelling, but it also produces a countercultural narrative through its online content (Sobande, Feafull and Brownlie, 2020). It could be argued that, by using photos of 'real women' with 'real bodies' in brand promotion marketing on her website, the designer co-produces content for in collaboration with these consumers. More importantly, Informant D sees her practice as advancing positive self-image and contesting the invisibility of these unconventional body types in fashion advertising and retail. She further expounds on the importance of this practice and strategy, as a moral obligation of her role as mother:

It's important for me I am a mother of three girls. My girls are of different shapes, so I understand that battle first-hand – you know, finding something that fits you when you are body-conscious, to be body-shamed. And I think we all need to be fabulous and at any size. That's why I think it's important. (Informant D, 2019)

Although the comments above focus on body shape and size, the intersections of race and gender also underpin these ideas. Informant D suggests that her role as a mother informs her design practices and strategies, evincing the comments 'I am a mother' and 'my girls are of different shapes, so I understand that battle first-hand'. The informant's experience as a Black woman and mother to young girls in an era of global consumer capitalism, in which popular culture shapes daily experiences, is significant because she considers herself the nurturer and protector of her girls. She therefore describes the act of challenging normative body ideals, as well as the issues of being body-shamed owing to differences in body shape, as battles she must fight. I would argue that race plays a significant role in this, in part as a result of mainstream fashion retailers and brands treating all bodies as a one-size-fits-all, with Whiteness as the ideal standard, inspiring the designer to cater to clothing specifically suited to the Black

female physique, i.e., ‘ample booty’. In addition to this, the underrepresentation of Black women (other than size zero models) in fashion media representations often creates body-conscious feelings in young girls, because the fashion industry promotes ‘unrealistic images of beauty’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 16).

Informant D’s comments above also align with recent developments in the luxury cosmetics beauty sector. For example, the Barbados-born musician, Rihanna, created the Fenty Beauty brand in 2017 to cater to the needs of women who have felt excluded and undervalued in the beauty sector. The brand’s creation was particularly significant for Black women, who have always felt excluded from the image of the ideal consumer of mainstream beauty cosmetics. Although other cosmetic companies such as Iman and Mary Kay existed long before Fenty Beauty, the brand particularly appealed to Black women consumers. This is not only because it employs Black women in its advertising campaigns, nor because it makes use of Rihanna’s celebrity status, nor that it is associated with the luxury group LVMH; it is because the brand offers products specifically created to suit the various shades of darker skin tones, in contrast to the generalising approaches taken by mainstream cosmetics brands such as L’Oréal or Clinique (Bain, 2017; Ali, 2018).

‘Young African Woman’ and ‘True African Woman’

The organisers of AFWL also project a similar notion to the one discussed above, through their official narrative constructs – ‘Young African Woman’ and ‘True African Woman’ – as well as through their idealisation of the image of Black beauty that appeals to African, Black, and other female consumers. While the designers interviewed in this study variously describe the average African physique and the uses of clothing for changing appearance and communicating identity meaningfully, AFWL brings a different dimension to the discourse of African womanhood and femininities through its incorporation of educated young women and celebrities in its promotion of the event. Below, I discuss and analyse in brief how the organisers construct and represent gendered Black femininities, taking its promotional strategies (the Face of AFWL competition and the AFWL ambassador) as bases for analysis. The Face of AFWL competition was initiated ahead of the second event in 2012, and subsequently ran from 2012–2017 (See Table 6.1 for list of the competition winners).

Year	Name	Nationalities	Education/occupation	Prize
2012	Edith Uba	Italian/Nigerian	Property, finance and investment at Nottingham Trent University	Photoshoot Catwalk show Access to the event site
2013	Regina Manneh	Gambian/Senegalese	Interior designer	Photoshoot Catwalk show Access to the event site
2014	Chinelum Nwuba	British/Nigerian	Dentistry at Plymouth University	Brand ambassador Access to the event site Media representative
2015	Maggie Smith	Scottish/Ugandan	Receptionist	Photoshoot Access to the event site

Table 6.1. [FACEMAP]: A mapping of the Face of AFWL winners, all of whom are UK-based.

The model competition was a commercial strategy deployed by the AFWL organisers not only to brand the event and attract the attention of Black models, but also to promote the event to a younger demographic, precisely because in some respects fashion modelling is ‘prestigious, much desired by many women and especially the youngest’ (Volonte, 2019, p. 11). This younger demographic sees modelling as a form of self-work for realising career desires, negotiating beauty, and collectively identifying with glamour. Modelling competitions such as these serve several purposes, from scouting for new faces, to model management, however I would argue that the key purpose of the Face of AFWL competition is to appeal to a young consumer demographic – 16–24, for the purpose of engendering an interest in African cultural

heritage and black beauty aesthetics The mediation of the competition via Facebook provides evidence of this. The competition is created and mediated via social media – AFWL’s Facebook page – and competitors are required to upload one full length and one portrait image, along with some basic information (body measurements, age, nationality, and occupation) to qualify for the competition, which is open only to UK-based participants. By mediating the event on Facebook, the organisers can allow participants to share their profile pictures from the AFWL competition page so that their contacts can cast votes on their behalf, since the winner is selected through the number of votes received online. This circulation, in turn, helps to promote the AFWL event across social media and other networking platforms. Thus, competitors rely on their network of contacts – family and friends – to cast votes on their behalf, spreading the word about the event across space and time. This becomes a type of consumer agency because the consumer (network of contact) is presented with an opportunity to choose (a face) based on their own preferences, rather than those (faces) selected by model bookers and casting agents. The competition winner appears in AFWL’s official campaigns, advertisements, and promotional materials (tickets, flyers) (See Fig. 6.1; 6.2), and partakes in runway collection presentations alongside AFWL’s cast of professional models, thereby ‘mediating between production and consumption’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 16). As Fig. 6.1 illustrates, the 2012 competition winner serves as a mediator between producer (AFWL) and consumers (other participants).



Fig. 6.1: The 2012 competition winner, Edith Uba, appears in a 2013 advert for the competition. In this picture, the model’s facial profile is accentuated with her lips slightly open. She wears her hair short, and is wearing sunglasses with pink frames. This model’s image is devoid of

artifice: there are no fake lashes, no earrings, no wig; nor is there a full-length picture showing her physique; even her eyes are hidden behind the frames. Here, the focus is on the model's skin colour and the aesthetic work performed is to present an African model look: youthful and short-haired.



Fig. 6.2: The 2014 Face of AFWL advert, featuring the winner of the Face of AFWL 2013. She is pictured here wearing an African print head tie and bangles, and only the top part of her dress is visible. Her body posture is tilted and her gaze averted, looking away from the camera and viewer as if lost in thought. As with the previous competition winner, the work of this model here in this image is to perform and sell an 'aesthetic look'. But unlike the previous winner, this model's face is emphasised. This has more to do with the photographer's style.

The sole purpose of this competition is for the winner to be seen and recognised as the Face of AFWL for that particular year (STWOPR, 2013a; 2013b). Some of the competition winners are returning participants at AFWL fashion shows, and a few have since been signed to UK modelling agencies. As Entwistle (2009, p. 61) argues, 'indeed, fashion model agencies are very exclusive' precisely because the 'model look' is distinct from 'Beauty'; in other words, different types of modelling (e.g., commercial versus high fashion) require different model looks. Model agencies and bookers draw on certain characteristics and physical requirements and translate these as essential and meaningful through their 'selection and calculation' (Entwistle, 2009, p. 61). While Entwistle's 2009 study examines the commercial practices of model agencies, bookers, and clients to analyse how aesthetic value is created, the Face of AFWL competition is about individual self-presentation, and cannot be said to involve fashion

professionals such as bookers and agencies (although these actors may look at a collage of images on the competition page). Participants select and upload their own images to enter the competition, as per the AFWL competition requirements. Indeed, the cultural production of AFWL is ‘rooted in the unique communities of workers embedded in particular localities’ (Scott, 2000, quoted in Entwistle 2009, p. 54). To this I would add that these workers include the family, friends, and strangers who have been called upon to cast votes for the competitors, who are located across several localities, not just the UK. This is reflected in an interview with the 2014 competition winner, who remarks,

I have relatives in Southampton, Uganda and Australia who all showed their support while all my friends in Airdrie and colleagues at work have been brilliant. There were people I have never met in my life who voted for me, and I will never forget the opportunity they have afforded me (Bunting, 2015).

These comments show that competitors can call on their network of contacts, who through their votes help them to realise their modelling ambitions and desires. Interestingly, when the Scottish-based model Maggie Smith (see Fig.6.3) was announced as winner, the Scottish Newspaper, *The Daily Record*, described the competitor mainly as a Scottish indigene (Bunting, 2015). This shows that models (in this case, the winner of the competition) perform the work of mediating between ‘producers and consumer’ (Entwistle, 2009), AFWL and the newspaper publication, – the model and the reporter who writes about the event and provides for its consumers. Strategically, as we have seen, the model competition usefully serves as an AFWL promotional campaign designed to reach audiences across multiple localities. Also, through this mass-mediated competition, AFWL builds up digital social relations with a diverse range of consumers in the UK and beyond, using the competitors’ bodies, desires, and labour. For example, on the AFWL model competition page on Facebook, the page administrator posts weekly reminders and updates about deadlines, which competitors are encouraged to share on their own profile pages and to their network of contacts so that they can receive votes. Other AFWL fans are also encouraged to cast votes for their preferred contestant. At the end of the Facebook competition, the competitor with the highest votes is announced as winner, along with the first and second runners up. Information about the competition and the event is disseminated in an AFWL-generated press release posted on the website and circulated by AFWL media partners, including bloggers (Glam Africa, 2015).



Fig. 6.3: The Face of AFWL 2015 Maggie Smith

Images of Maggie Smith can be described as the most circulated of the Face of AFWL's winners, and this image was used in the 2015 and 2016 promotional campaigns, its flyers, posters, and tickets (Africa Fashion Week London 2015a). Here, the model is highly stylised, and in contrast to previous years, this editorial shoot involved a team of fashion experts and a corporate sponsor. In this shoot, Maggie is dressed in an Etan Bestow design, a long-sleeved dress with double slits on both sides up to the pelvis. The African print cloth material covers her upper body area, to reveal much of her legs, thighs, and high heels. The model's wrists are accessorised with red bangles, and on her neck are two overlaid necklaces: the gold placed over a white cowries necklace in cascading design. The model's posture is not only visually stimulating, with the diamond shape created by her raised arms and contorted knees, but it is also a painful, contorted posture, with both hands raised and bent to grip the back of her head. She looks straight into the camera, her eyes and red-painted lips slightly open, her facial expression vague and emotionless.

As Table 6.1 illustrates, the competition is open to female applicants of all races, with or without prior modelling experience. The table also shows that all have been UK-based Black African descended females with modelling career ambitions. This, to me, suggests that AFWL attracts specific types of participants: those for whom the event can be used to assert and reaffirm not only African cultural identities but also to pursue ambitions in the industry. This is seen in a published interview with the winner of the 2013 competition, Regina Manneh, who remarks about her career ambitions,

I cannot thank enough all the well wishers who voted for me around the world. I am lucky to win because all the other contestants are all very beautiful young men and women who can represent Africa very well. I am honored to compete with them and wish them all the best and continued success in their modelling [sic] careers. I am happy to be part of young aspiring African models to make a breakthrough in the industry. Thank you Africa Fashion Week London for providing us a platform to showcase our beauty and modelling ambitions (*FabMagazine*, 2013; see also Saint, 2013).

The competitor is hailed as a ‘young aspiring African model’, whose participation in AFWL stems from her desire to pursue her modelling ambitions. This explains, at first, the perception of the competition as a platform for Black female models to enact and ‘showcase our beauty’. This implies that the African-centred event is not only a site for consumption, but also for ‘continuing the racialisation of beauty in a society in which skin and hair continues to matter’ (Tate, 2009, p. 26). Tate (2009, p. 27) continues, ‘Racialisation means that there is an inscription of beauty on some bodies and not others so that beauty is always embodied as white’. As Fig.6.1 and Fig. 6.2 illustrate, beauty is inscribed on young, female, Black bodies and facial features, and the model with a short haircut demonstrates a challenge to the White normative beauty ideal of flowing long hair – the model prefers to wear her hair in its natural colour and short - which is a current fashion trend in the Black community. The other model, adorned in an Ankara head-tie, shows the performativity of Black beauty, which is seen here in the manner in which she styles her body and in the wearing of a material artifice recognisable in African beauty norms and practices because it ‘falls outside of hegemonic norms and expectations at which point we become the “other of beauty”’ (Tate, 2009, p. 30).

As a second point, we find that the commentary (as well as the number of competitors) illustrates the wants and desires of ‘young aspiring’ and ‘beautiful young men and women’ to represent Africa, to develop their modelling careers, to perform beauty, and to affirm their racial and ethnic identities through fashion modelling and participation in the production of African fashions at AFWL. The model interviewed above recognises the event as providing opportunities for Black African females who are ‘aspiring models’ to realise their modelling ambitions, described as a ‘breakthrough in the industry’. This, to me, suggests that the competition winner sees modelling at AFWL as a breakthrough in the White-dominated industry, wherein Black beauty has so long been measured in terms of how closely it ‘approximated the white ideal’; at AFWL, the Black physical appearance is highly placed and valued, and its participants are ‘performing a visible beauty which is recognised by the beauty gaze’ (Tate, 2009, p. 26). The aesthetics of Black beauty are ‘therefore central to the production of a whole range of different products and services’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 52), including the commercial practices of African fashions, the dress and design practices of designers and exhibitors, and the collective identities at the AFWL event setting. More precisely, this beauty is about ‘outsideness’, ‘difference’, and it is only ‘visible through its inscription on “the body’s surface”’ (Tate, 2009, p. 26).

Beauty is not, however, simply located on the body’s surface; rather it is also seen as being about character. In a media publication, the AFWL founder remarks on that year’s competition winner as a ‘deserving young woman’ who will represent AFWL in the ‘UK and beyond’:

We are very delighted to have another deserving young woman to represent this year’s event and we do hope AFWL will provide Regina Manneh an equally fruitful platform for her career as it did for last year’s winner Edith. We look forward to Regina representing Africa Fashion Week London in the UK and beyond (STWOPR 2013a).

First, this comment demonstrates that modelling is ‘a specific form of work’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 53), and the model is subsequently interpellated into the subject positions of young woman, model, and AFWL representative within the transnational African fashion network of AFWL. AFWL is also presented as a platform that will provide the realisation of this young woman’s career ambitions in fashion modelling, further re-emphasising the success of the previous winner, who was signed by a UK-based model agency (Fidelia, 2012). In this sense, the Face of AFWL competition functions as a model scout, which, unlike the professional model scouts Entwistle writes about, works through public selection and voting. AFWL’s role in this is to

make Black female models visible to the wider industry – a role that could be said to be performative. More importantly, the comments above draw attention to the notion of beauty as character, thus shifting the focus away from the idea of beauty being only skin deep (Tate, 2009). It is unclear what exact traits or qualities make the woman deserving of being given assistance to realise her modelling ambitions, however, as Table 1 illustrates, she studied interior design and,

[...] was raised in Denmark, Sweden, Ivory Coast and lived in Dubai, the UK-based 24-year-old model and Interior Design student speaks English, French, Danish, Swedish and Wolof. Modelling since 2009, Regina has walked at Los Angeles Fashion Week and Dubai Fashion Week. (StwoPR, 2013b)

This description implies that the winner's modelling experience, as well as her cosmopolitan identifications, makes her deserving of the prize. The Face of AFWL therefore happens to be a young woman expressing multiple identifications, having lived in Africa and Europe, and being multi-lingual. Similarly, the 2012 and 2014 are both UK-based Nigeria-descended competitors: the former was born in Naples, Italy, and relocated to the UK at age seven (Fidelia, 2012); and the latter was born in the UK. As Fig. 6.3 shows, the 2015 competition winner, Maggie Smith, is Ugandan-Scottish and is lighter-skinned, in contrast to the previous winners. Of these models, Smith can be said to be the most successful, in part owing to the corporate sponsored editorial shoot she was awarded as the winning prize (See Table.1). The series of images generated from this shoot were used in the advertising campaigns of AFWL as well as in visual campaigns generated by AFWL participants and were circulated online more than any of the previous competition winners' images. As Tate (2009, p. 34) reminds us, lighter-skinned Black women struggle 'to position themselves within Black beauty as a matter of political identification. Their positioning of themselves within Black Beauty expands its boundaries'. In other words, this competitor's participation in the Face of AFWL competition is a matter of the politics of identification. As is the participation of non-African White designers in AFWL, whose presence further expands the boundaries of African fashion. This public selection of the lighter-skinned Black woman as the winner of the competition reflects some of the political aspects of Africanness, for example whether it should be narrowly conferred or ascribed to dark-skinned Black women, to lighter-skinned women, or to both. To illustrate this, we can see that the wording used by the organisers to announce the 2015 winner differs from that used to describe previous competitors who are dark-skinned women (see Fig.

6.4). In one AFWL press release, for example, the model is described as ‘having won by a landslide’, receiving almost 5,000 more votes than the first runner up. I would argue that the votes, as well as the report of the win, has much to do with her approximation to Whiteness (Tate, 2009).



Fig. 6.4: The Face of AFWL 2012 editorial photoshoot with Edith Uba, photographed by Karyn Louise in Roooi (part of Uber African collective), AFWL promotional shoot at Spitalfields, London.

This image appeared online during my search for AFWL promotional campaigns and press releases. The model once again is tilted, with her hand on her hip and her head and eyes averted, as if looking far away. Here, minimalism is the keyword, since the model is not dressed or adorned with any elaborate dress and props. Instead, the sleeveless Ankara-fabricated double-slit dress with cinched waist shows the beauty of the dress style and the model’s skin tone. In contrast to the 2015 model shoot, however, her facial features are barely visible.

As Fig. 6.3 illustrates, Smith’s lighter-skinned body and her highly stylised, contorted posture and sexualised pose is further indicative of the ways in which the body (a mixture of Black and White – African and European) is implicated in the construction and expansion of the

boundaries of African identity. Smith's appearance is therefore of high value, owing to the value placed on lighter skin complexions in the fashion industry and in African communities. From this brief discussion, my aim is to show how the bodies of young Black women are expected to work, and are made for consumption and commodification in the global fashion capitalist economy. Although these competitors have their own personal reasons for participating in the competition, such as developing their modelling ambitions, the winners become brand representatives interpellated as idealised beauty into the subject position of African representatives, and functioning as mediators between producer and consumer. As signs, the bodies of these young winners express prestige, status, difference, and insertion of African fashion into consumer society because it is 'an important part of the commodity [AFWL] and its consumption' (Tate, 2009, p. 35).

While there are some similarities between the competition winners and the fashion models hired to show the collections on the runway at AFWL, an exploration of Black beauty ideals and the ways in which these are re-fashioned on the bodies of young African Black women highlights the 'complex ways that race intersects with gender as well as social relations of power, agency, identity and changing cultural and economic practices' (Tate, 2009, p. 35). As previously mentioned, Black models and actors dominate the AFWL event and its marketing materials, and an examination of AFWL practices reveals hybrid articulations of identities, as well as the social construction of the hierarchical positioning of bodies and fashion roles at AFWL. For example, artificial difference is created through the model casting practice, demonstrating the differences between practitioners within the field of modelling. The catwalk or 'professional' models are recruited through a casting call and are selected by industry experts comprising an AFWL-designated casting director, a head stylist, a fashion show producer, and other AFWL team members. This group of experts evaluate the models by industry conventions, for example: height (minimum 5'7 for women and 5'8 for men), previous modelling experience, confidence, walking, looks, and body size (the models observed at the AFWL catwalk show are between UK sizes 6 and 10 and US size zero) (Entwistle, 2009). Unlike the Face of AFWL winners, the catwalk or runway models are recruited for one purpose only – to show clothes to spectators at the fashion shows. Although these models also feature in the fashion show media coverage, they are different in that they are selected by industry experts and not the public. Therefore, the public selection and the expert selection of bodies at AFWL illustrate the ways in which some bodies are positioned, or hierarchies are constructed around specific bodies and roles. These disparate groups of practitioners show that the ideal of

Black Beauty is ‘never settled once and for all but is constantly re-negotiated, re-fashioned, and re-inscribed on the surface of the body’ (Tate, 2009, p. 26).

AFWL Ambassadors: Representing the ‘True African Woman’

Another way in which Black women’s bodies ‘mediate body aesthetics’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 17), as well as identities, is through the appointment of an AFWL brand ambassador. This is a common strategy used in business branding and marketing to promote a brand. Unlike the Face of AFWL model competition, wherein the number of online public votes determines the winner, brand ambassadors are appointed only by AFWL organisers. Although men have sometimes been appointed as AFWL ambassadors, the majority of ambassadors selected since 2011 have been Black women of West African descent, either based in West Africa or Europe, and mostly working within diverse fields in the cultural sectors, such as entertainment, modelling, or film/stage/television. As AFWL ambassadors, these individuals are tasked with promoting the event’s activities to their networks, particularly through social media. Unlike the Face of AFWL, which provides opportunities for young Black African models to pursue their modelling ambitions (modelling experience, being selected by designers for lookbook, etc.), AFWL brand ambassadors are mostly celebrities whose function within the event is to change the ways in which Black African, particularly West African women are represented in popular culture. It could be argued that these Black African female brand ambassadors are supposed to represent an ideal or yardstick for the mass audience of young African women. Increasingly, these celebrities play a key role in brand promotion because actors (to which I would add musicians and philanthropists) ‘add a narrative from their collective movie images, they add character to the clothes and an intensity’ (Sill, 2008, p. 133). Within the AFWL context, these Black female celebrities are known in some fields, but they are not as renowned as the Hollywood White actors and actresses whose faces are prevalent in fashion editorials and the advertising of luxury and high fashion brands.

However, by appointing Black female celebrities as brand ambassadors, the AFWL organisers create their own heroes in the process, adding credibility to the African fashion project. The biographies of these brand ambassadors, for example their philanthropy in Africa, further adds to the narrative of African fashion and African femininity: African women helping, supporting, and being proud of the culture. As part of a virtuous cycle, the ambassador role also reinforces

the credibility and stardom of the celebrity in turn. This is precisely because celebrities are ‘objects of consumption. The star is an abstract concept intended for the public’s consumption. The ultimate reason for the existence of the star is consumption’ (Sill, 2008, p. 139).

Below, I explore this phenomenon using the 2016 and 2017 Nigerian-descended ambassadors (one a musician and the other an actress) as illustrative examples of AFWL’s attempt not only to change the image of Black women, but also to canonise these young women as Black role models for the next generation of African women. As previously mentioned, the ideal of Black beauty is ‘never settled once and for all but is constantly re-negotiated, re-fashioned, and re-inscribed on the surface of the body’ (Tate, 2009, p. 26). AFWL thus selects Black African and Nigerian women who are overwhelmingly of a higher-class status (celebrity) to fashion and inscribe African identities and beauty ideals. For example, in 2016, Nigerian afro-beat artist Yemi Alade was appointed AFWL brand ambassador for both the Nigerian and UK versions of AFWL (see Fig. 6.5) In a press release of the appointment, posted on the AFWN website, the musician is described as a ‘true African woman’.

This year, we chose someone who embodies the true African woman. A strong, intellectual and musically inclined woman; her music reflects what’s good, what’s great and what’s best about the motherland. We couldn’t have chosen anyone more suitable to be our brand ambassador. (AFWN, 2016)

This remark of Olori Aderonke’s above emphasises strength, intellect, and musicianship as highly valued qualities because they ‘reflect what’s best about the motherland’. This reference to the continent and music is one of the recurring themes at AFWL. For example, in 2013 a female British-Zimbabwean musician was appointed brand ambassador and ‘celebrity face’ because she was ‘one of the few women of African descent who has succeeded in garnering mainstream recognition equally for her spectacular work and her unique style’ (S Two Media, 2013). This statement implies that the musician is already an object of consumption, so AFWL organisers have drawn on this capital to promote the event.

The comments above highlight the connections between Nigeria, Britain, and Zimbabwe, and the music and fashion industries. Like music, fashion is a powerful medium for constructing ideologies and reproducing these ideologies, i.e., about the ‘true African woman’. In recent years, the Nigerian music industry (including the diaspora) has become so influential that multinational companies have been increasingly hiring Nigerian music and musicians as brand

ambassadors to influence consumer choices through playing the role of mediator between the brands, products, and consumers. In this sense, brand ambassadors, like the fashion models themselves, are ‘hired for their ability to sell us clothes, via the images they appear in’ [...] they are unwitting complicit components in networks of image production that mediate style, fashion, and body aesthetics’ (Entwistle, 2009, p. 17). Alade’s styled image, produced by AFWL, appeared in the official AFWL and AFWN event campaign and advertisements. This is in contrast to previous years (2012–2015), where the winner of the Face of AFWL competition was used in promotional campaigns (OnoBello, 2013). As Table 6.2 illustrates, West African celebrities have been selected as brand ambassadors, revealing the strong West African influence over African fashion and beauty aesthetics.



Fig. 6.5: Nigerian musician Yemi Alade on the AFWL promotional campaign, 2016. In this styled and staged image, the musician’s posture and gaze invite the viewer to come closer. Her physical appearance includes highly stylised makeup, a hairpiece, and black-and-white garments. In her left hand she holds a black, feathered hand fan tightly to her bust. Here, the internationally renowned artist sells modern ‘African fashion’ to consumers.

Year	Name	Nationality	Education/occupation
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2017	Amira Ibrahim-Alfa Face of AFWL and AFWN AFWN 2016 – Red carpet host	Nigerian	Actress/presenter University of the Arts London (Advertising degree) Middlesex University London (Master of Theatre Arts)
2016	Yemi Alade Face of AFWL and AFWN	Nigerian	Musician University of Lagos
2015	Noëlla Coursaris Musunka AFWL Brand ambassador	Congolese and Cypriot	Model (Agent Provocateur) Philanthropist (established Malaika School for girls in the Congo in 2007) BSc in Business management
2014	Shingai Shoniwa AFWL Brand ambassador	Zimbabwean and British	Musician – vocalist and bassist for the UK indie rock band Noisettes
2012 & 2013	Menaye Donkor Muntari AFWL Brand ambassador	Ghanaian and French	Miss Universe Ghana (2004) Philanthropist

Table 6.2 AFWL's female ambassadors

The multi-award-winning Alade is known for her stylish and fashionable refashioning of the Ankara cloth into contemporary pieces in her music videos and red-carpet events (Togejoy, 2020). Fashion often plays a vital role in the making of music videos, where fashion stylists and designers are sometimes hired to supply the clothing. In this respect, Alade's music videos are visually captivating in part because of the sign-values assigned and expressed through their deployment of African wax prints, African hair styling, makeup, cultures, dance, and sensibilities. Through her foray into the business of fashion, Alade's personal stylistic fashioning of Ankara or African prints have become commercialised. In 2015, she launched YAC as a jewellery brand, in partnership with the online retailer Bland2Glam. Then, in 2016, Alade launched the fashion brand House of Tangerine (HOT) with debut presentation at AFWL. presented at the AFWL in 2016. The commentary by the organiser that Alade embodies a 'true African woman' captures the practices and strategies she employs in her music videos as well as lyrics. More importantly, Alade is of mixed ethnic background, as she is fondly known in Nigeria as the Yoruba-Igbo girl. The musician sings in Yoruba and Igbo languages, as well as incorporating Naija slang into her lyrics. I would argue that Alade's heritage and embodiment of Nigeria's two largest ethnic groups is one of the reasons that she is perceived as a 'true African woman'. She is seen subsequently to navigate between these ethno-national identities in her music and sartorial behaviour, which have traditionally been politically at discord. In a sense, then, beauty, appearance, and fashion consumption can be seen as sites for the bringing together of disparate ethno-national groups – Yoruba and Igbo.

In 2017, continuing the tradition of appointing an African woman as AFWL and AFWN brand ambassador, Amira Ibrahim-Alfa, a Muslim-descended woman was selected (See Fig. 6.7). Ibrahim-Alfa is a UK-university-educated Nigerian actress and presenter, who organisers describe as a 'true representative of the contemporary African youth' because she exhibits qualities organisers perceive to be important: she is described in the AFWL magazine as 'vibrant, vivacious, unafraid to dream and explore' (AFWL Magazine, 2017). The article goes on to describe the brand ambassador's clothing philosophy, her hairstyling preferences ('weave-on and braids'), and her family, while repeatedly drawing attention to her body and appearance, evincing the phrases 'Easy on the eye' and a 'body that belongs to world-class models (AFWL Magazine, 2017). What is rather remarkable about the AFWL promotional

article is that it functions simply as a marketing strategy to sell Ibrahim-Alfa as a role model for African youths by listing her consumption practices: from using clothing and footwear to uplift or reflect her mood, her fragrance preferences, her social network as a child actor, her experience working under the tutelage of Nigerian celebrity actors, and her desire to ‘discover and nurture’ acting talents to build the Nigerian theatre industry. Where her predecessor’s ethnic background was emphasised, Ibrahim-Alfa’s religious background is now foregrounded and used in this AFWL promotional image (see Fig. 6.7). The intricate designs on the model’s hands, known as henna, is commonly associated with the Islamic community in northern Nigeria, where the hands of Muslim brides are decorated in this way. The corset is antithetical to Nigerian Islamic practices, however, which means that this image is a construction of a modern Nigerian femininity, functioning as ‘bricoleur’ (White and White, 1998) precisely because it borrows from different traditions, popular culture, and fashion practices to create and express African femininity.



Fig. 6.7: The Face of AFWL and AFWN 2017.

In this image, the model is adorned with gold jewellery, headpiece, nose stud, earrings, necklace, and wrist bangles. She appears to be dressed in a gold wrapper-dress style or sarong held together with a black-and-gold flower brooch, which draws the viewer’s attention to her waist. On her hands are intricate henna patterns. Organisers describe her look (relaxed posture,

looking straight at the viewer, unsmiling) as a portrayal of the Egyptian goddess Nefertiti. This, I would argue, is a fantasy or hyperreality wherein fashion consumption is usefully deployed to recreate not an original, but an imitation. In this case, Nefertiti is re-created on the Black body, and thus acts as a counter-narrative to the mainstream media portrayal of Nefertiti as White.

When we examine the biographies and editorial images of these AFWL-appointed brand ambassadors, we find four common themes. These are: Black beauty and/or a career in fashion, celebrity, or elite status, an emotional/philanthropical relationship to the poor or developing human capital on the continent, and being defined by creative work (e.g., in music, fashion, modelling, or acting). The concept of transnationalism is useful in explaining these patterns and observations. Through the selection of these educated African-descended women (with American and European citizenship) appointed as AFWL brand representatives, the event enhances the links between social actors: fashion practitioners, producers, and consumers. For example, through their press releases, distributed through the AFWL website and social media platforms, the organisers circulate selected narratives from the biographies of these prominent personalities, highlighting their achievements and contributions to developments in the homeland (Congo, Ghana). For example, in announcing the appointment of the 2012 and 2013 brand ambassador, Menaye Donkor Muntari, the AFWL press release describes her as a ‘champion of African fashion’, ‘an amazing philanthropist giving back to her homeland’, and a ‘glamorous role model for young African women’ (Modern Ghana, 2013). These descriptions serve to indicate the organisers’ judgements on the conceptualisation of elite African femininity: one that is linked to and rooted in a nation-state in Africa through individual charitable contributions. While the brand ambassador’s primary business interest is in property development in Ghana’s capital city, as indicated on her website, the AFWL organisers choose to focus on her consumption practices (a supporter of African fashion and fabrics), her charitable work, and her physical appearance (a ‘glamorous role model for young African women’).

This notion of promoting African achievements recalls the establishment of the (now defunct) *Arise* African lifestyle magazine in London in 2009 by This Day, a Nigeria-based publisher. *Arise* sought to change attitudes and stereotypes by providing countercultural narratives about Africanness, promoting the lifestyles, aspirations, and achievements of global affluent Black

Africans to consumers. Similarly, the AFWL organisers mobilise a segment of the population – Western-educated, career-focused, charity-oriented, affluent Black African women – whom they perceive to personify the modern values they are trying to promote for projecting a modern image of Africa and African womanhood/femininities. These values include self-discipline, hard work, creativity, beauty, community, and the pursuit of collective goals (or shared purpose). This reflects the function of appearance as an important channel of communication (Sadra-Orafai, 2008).

With respect to the representation of Nigerian national identity, AFWL draws on Nigeria's cultural sector, through its appointment of female ambassadors from across the Nigerian entertainment industry: afrobeat music and Nollywood to push the African fashion narrative showing the transnational networks in which African fashions and identities are produced. This reflects Entwistle (2009, p. 37), who argues, 'the field of fashion has leaky boundaries and is connected to other spheres of cultural production'. From these other African cultural fields or spheres of production, AFWL UK Ltd selects Black African bodies that will appeal to Black consumers and foster a realistic beauty image for these women. The argument here is that, while African-American images have dominated much of visual popular culture to display commodities at AFWL, organisers must draw on the cultural and social capital of Black African female inscribed on Black female bodies to project modern Africa and national identities. It can be argued that the women-led AFWL is 'challenging traditional values', and 'urban, educated women' are leading the struggle for equal rights for both men and women, because they are 'no longer willing to accept traditional prescriptions of women's roles, [and] they reject the norms of obedience to men, the rituals and symbols of deference' (Wipper, 2013, p. 343). The organisers of AFWL, as well as its female-led participants, thus work to produce race, ethnicity, and national identity through their gendered performances and activities (King-O'rain, 2006). For example, as Table 6.2. illustrates, the 2015 brand ambassador is an advocate of girls' education in the Congo, a place described as one of the most dangerous places to be a girl, where she founded Malaika in 2007. This shows the role of women in advocating for children's rights: Malaika was established to empower Congolese girls through community outreach, quality education, and health programmes, in part owing to the under-valuation of the life of a girl-child, and the heightened risk of rape and death in the Congo. This is not to say that men are not engaged in human capital development activities, but in the context of this study, these women use fashion to serve a purpose, including the production of racial, national, and ethnic identities.

African women are ‘searching for new definitions of their roles’ (Wipper, 2013, p. 345) from the subordinate place proscribed for them by the fathers, husbands, and traditions of patriarchal society. As Wipper (2013, p. 345) argues, both rural and urban women in east and central Africa ‘are [...] eager for role changes’, indeed, ‘many are actively involved in bringing these changes about, but their endeavours do not receive the same amount of publicity and they focus on self-help schemes at the local level rather than changes in law and political representation at the national level’. What is interesting to note here are the contributions of diasporic women to the changing of women’s roles in African societies, through education provision, charity work, and the promotion of craft-based work that can provide financial independence. This allows women not to be defined by their inherited core values as homemaker, progenitor, and guardian of traditional values.

As will become clear, however, within the ‘bounded space of action’ (Entwistle, 2009) at the AFWL setting, the positioning and framing of women’s bodies is hierarchical, with Nigerian super-elite women being the most visible, acting as symbols of female success and femininity.

‘A Notable Woman: Proud to be a Woman’

Several designer participants interviewed at the event setting expressed the meanings associated with certain brands focused on women: bodies and traits. The language these participants used to speak about their brands is important for exploring and analysing how fashion is linked to the body, as well as the different conceptions of femininities articulated by Nigeria-descended designers at the event. To illustrate this point, I shall focus on one British-Nigerian owned brand based in Kent, Notable Woman. The brand owner, who has lived in the UK for over 20 years, is an investment banker who started her brand making ‘English dresses’, but switched to clothing fabricated in the Ankara fabric because ‘they were not moving as fast as my Ankara piece, so I switched fully into Ankara piece, so that’s where we are now’ (Informant N, 2019). In this respect, Ankara dresses appear to suit the lives of her consumers better, because making dress choices and ‘dressing up’ are social practices, and an intimate experience: ‘when we get dressed, we do so within the bounds of a culture and its particular social norms, expectations about the body and what constitutes a dressed body’ (Entwistle, 2007, p. 277). The designer works with the Ankara fabric in part because of its diverse uses for making dresses, headscarves, jackets, shoe coverings, earrings, necklaces, bangles, and

homeware. Her desire to promote feelings of confidence in young African girls as well as women through her design practices shows what constitutes a dressed body and how fashion and dress work as ‘important sites for discourses of the body’ (Entwistle, 2007, p. 281). Her consumer, she remarks,

It is a woman of note, a woman that loves to look good, that is elegant, that is proud to be a woman. A woman that has come into her own, a woman that is a CEO, a mother, a single lady, a woman of colour, either White or Black, wherever you are from, all over the world, you are notable. I want you to wear my garment and feel notable. And when you wear my garments, people will actually look at you more than twice! To say, Oh my goodness, she looks good. And that is what I want them to feel, to feel confident in themselves. To feel proud of what they are wearing. And be happy when they are wearing my stuff. (Informant N, 2019)

This designer’s commentary above reveals both the cultural and economic aspects of fashion (Braham, 2007, 351). As a business, design is therefore both a commercial and cultural endeavour, where the non-material culture (the personal values, beliefs, and norms held by the designer) is encoded and infused into the design venture to create meaning about a woman’s emotional state as well as physical appearance. This is reflected in the designer’s statement, ‘I want you to wear my garment and feel notable’. She describes a notable woman, her ideal female consumer, as ‘elegant, confident, self-aware, and a head-turner’ (Informant N, 2019). These qualifiers or traits reflect how clothing functions as a means of non-verbal communication for the wearer, though different people will adopt and inscribe meanings other than those prescribed by designer to express their womanhood and femininity as it suits their lives (Entwistle, 2007, p. 274). At the same time, these traits or feelings are considered to be something that can be achieved through consumption of the designer’s garments. More importantly, the designer’s comments reveal an appeal to the idea of a shared experience of womanliness to promote her brand, evincing the statement ‘proud to be a woman’. The specificities of such womanhood are demonstrated by the remarks about a customer who ‘loves to look good’ and ‘has come into her own’. These can be read as common expectations of how women in contemporary society ought to feel and behave – as an autonomous self who expresses her self-conception through her consumptive practices. In this regard, wearing certain clothes can fulfil several practical and aesthetic functions; a ‘good looking’ appearance in dress serves a purpose ‘to avoid social censure’ (Entwistle, 2007, p. 275). This, to me, shows

how the designer assigns her own cultural knowledge as a competent woman in society, capable of ‘the norms and expectations demanded of the body’ (Entwistle, 2007, p. 277). Reading these comments through the lens of the ‘techniques of the body’ described as the ‘ways in which from society-to-society men [women] know how to use their bodies’ (Mauss, 1973, p. 70) is useful. It demonstrates the ways in which designers can construct the female consumer, and more importantly, the activities that can be performed in ‘preparing the body for presentation in any particular social setting’ (Entwistle, 2007, p. 277) to achieve a specific outcome – ‘to look good’. Informant N’s comments suggests that techniques of the body are gendered, and implies (as expressed by the designer) that women can use their bodies to serve many purposes: to look good, to be elegant, to express femininities, to show pride in their womanhood, to express social status, to celebrate singleness, to demonstrate professional status, to convey racial belonging, and to articulate subjective feelings such as self-esteem and worth.

In addition to this, the importance placed on women’s bodies as an object of culture can be seen in the promotion of Notable Woman, through the designer’s statements ‘proud of what you are wearing’, and ‘happy when wearing my stuff’. These quotations reflect the designer’s ideals and her desires for her consumers to be proud and happy when dressed in one of her Ankara pieces. Ankara fabric itself has a colonial history associated with African identity (Gott *et al.*, 2017), which I discuss more in the next chapter. Here, clothing the body is a practice for women who love to look good and want to convey their subjective feelings and emotions. In speaking this way, the designer invokes common-sense assumptions that are prevalent in consumer culture – that clothing and shopping are the pathway to happiness. On the one hand, a woman is expected to be an autonomous being, who makes rational decisions for herself and in her own best interests; on the other hand, she is expected to be happy and self-confident, and to express these subjectivities through her clothing consumption practices.

While this, to me, highlights the performativity of womanliness, reproduces gender roles, and suggests the idea of manufactured happiness, it also calls upon female consumers to be proud to be Black and to wear Ankara pieces, as well as drawing attention to a Black Nigerian woman-owned fashion brand that amplifies an African material culture in the Western-dominated world. For example, during my two visits to the event setting in 2018 and 2019, I observed new developments in the Ankara cloth, which varied from the traditional 100% cotton to incorporate silk and synthetic fibres. This shows that the original meaning of Ankara as a cotton-based fabric has shifted, incorporating new textile printing strategies. Thus, like the

designers who employ the Ankara for its exoticism to establish ‘different and unique design identities’ (Jansen, 2019, p. 2), technological advances in textile printing have facilitated the introduction of new innovations, recalling the assertion that ‘African-print designs have gone through many cycles of rebirth in response to political, economic, cultural, and aesthetic trends’ (Gott *et al.*, 2017, p. 49). In the next chapter, I discuss in detail the societal expectations of women and the ways those women are depicted in the media, thus promoting these ideas about women and feminine traits.

As has been mentioned above, because commodities are ‘destined for bodily display’ (2009, p. 3), they affect and shape how fashion markets operate. To this I would add that they also affect and shape how identities are constructed and experienced. At the individual level, this is reflected in Informant N’s (2019) promissory statement that ‘when you wear my garments, people will actually look at you more than twice! To say, Oh my goodness, she looks good’. This reflects the feminist argument that women dress their bodies to be seen, to be looked at, because ‘beautification of the self is conventionally perceived as expressions of subordination’ (Wilson, 2007b, p. 396). However, as Wilson further argues, oppression is not gender-neutral, and men are also implicated in fashion. Informant N’s statement therefore encourages women to feel confident because they will be gazed upon whether they want the attention or not, and in turn, it falls upon the woman to create and manage a positive favourable impression of herself through her appearance. The fact that a woman’s appearance will undergo external validation by onlookers is commonly perceived by the designer as an important impetus for a woman to dress her body and feel ‘proud to be a woman’. The importance placed on a woman’s bodily appearance is therefore underpinned by an exchange between a woman’s self-conception and the societal expectations placed upon her: how she should act, what she should feel, think, and value. For these reasons, a woman makes and remakes herself through her dress practices, under the guidance of the fashion industry - designers in the fashion system. One way in which bodies are made and re-made at AFWL is through the catwalk collection presentation, wherein young Black models – male and female Black bodies – are altered through the workings of fashion stylists, makeup artists, and hair stylists, who create the runway look and inscribe ideals of African dress. These Black bodies are not only gazed upon by the fashion show spectators, including photographers, but they also provide spectators with cues on how to adorn the body.

At another point in her interview, Informant N highlights some reasons a woman ought to look good – it reflects personal agency-, drawing parallels between the body, Black girls, cultural identity, and material culture. In doing so she references what Wilson suggests the feminist theorisation of fashion misses: ‘the richness of its [fashion] cultural and political meanings’ (Wilson, 2007b, p. 396). I shall discuss this further in the next chapter.

‘Hardworking Women’: Labour, Designers, and Tailors

The discussion so far has focused on consumers of African fashion and the ways in which the interviewed designers produce meanings about the objects of fashion, as well as defining the meanings associated with womanliness and femininities. The final category within the theme of feminine agency, mentioned at the start of this chapter, is the idea of the ‘hardworking woman’. Female consumers of African fashion are therefore not the only subject of the discourse, as informants also speak about their own practices and emphasise the role of the local Nigerian tailor as a hard worker involved in the production of the ready-to-wear garments and dresses. This allows us to analyse the traces of labour that led to the designers’ products, rather than erasing these important factors (Rabine, 2002). While designers describe their consumers in terms of elegance, confidence, and uniqueness, they speak about their female clothing producers in a different way. These descriptions usually relate to their occupational role as tailor and highlight their own relative position as a business owner, as self-employed, or as a working parent. One British-Nigerian designer who has lived in the UK for over 20 years remarks, ‘I studied finance in uni, and I worked in investment banking. And up ’til now I still have my job’ (Informant N, 2019). This statement conveys the sense that, as well as spending time on her fashion business, this hardworking woman has a full-time professional occupation. Another designer remarks, ‘This is a full-time job for me, it is also very convenient for me because I have four children, so this allows me – I don’t know if you know in England you are a slave to your kids. So, if you can stay home and take the kids to school yourself, not a nanny, better’ (Informant F, 2019). In this case, the hardworking woman is a full-time mother as well as self-employed, and these roles are in constant negotiation. The comments above suggest that the fashion design profession allows these individuals some flexibility to work for themselves, choose their working hours, organise their business operations, and take care of their families at the same time. The environment (in England, as Informant F notes) also factors in shaping and dictating parental expectations and responsibilities. Traditional gender roles

appear to come into effect here, where mothers are expected to look after their children and take them to school themselves, or if not, arrange a nanny to look after them. The two British-Nigerian women quoted above also share something else in common: as well as being hardworking mothers, their designs are produced in Nigeria, by Yoruba women tailors. This causes them both to see their fashion venture as one that supports local tailors, especially women clothing-makers, and contributes to the Nigerian fashion industry. Many UK-based Nigerian fashion designers engage the services of tailors in fabricating their garments, while their own work involves designing, selecting materials, selecting tailors, communicating the design with the tailors, organising shipping to the UK, and marketing their garments. This demonstrates the transnational nature of Nigerian and African fashion production and consumption.

Not all of the designers I interviewed work with local tailors in Nigeria, however. One British-Nigerian designer interviewed in 2018 started her brand with no formal training, to connect her Nigerian roots with her Black British identity and create a sense of belonging to both places. When asked how she became involved in fashion, and if she studied fashion design, she replied:

No, I did psychology! Honestly, I won't lie, it's been very hard and difficult. I had no background in the stuff – I was running into, like, blind spot. I failed along the way, and I learned from my failures, and I got back up. At the same time, I reached out to some people to ask for help. So, I have a lot of people around me who are helping me make decisions on whatnot, 'cause I can't do it by myself. (Informant A, 2018)

As the remark above shows, setting up a design business with no formal training can present some challenges, and running a viable, sustainable business often requires support, whether financial, technical, or emotional. Another female designer I interviewed explained the overwhelming presence of female producers and designers at AFWL by highlighting a behavioural or social difference between men and women. Her description of Nigerian women conveys them as diligent, and implies an obligation to the community:

[AFWL] is dominated by women and especially, if they are Nigerian, I don't wanna say a lot of Nigerian women are hardworking or compared to the men, but that is what I am going to say. You do have one Naija man over there [she points to one of the male exhibitors], and he does the male line. (Informant F, 2019)

While this comment might sound like an assumption that is taken for granted in everyday speech, many of the women I interviewed similarly define their commitment to their gender group, as well as their national origins (Nigerian) through their fashion practices. The general opinion is that the reason for the dominance of women at AFWL event is because these women are simply hardworking. Although Informant F was reluctant to admit her judgement, stating, ‘I don’t wanna say’, I would argue that this was primarily because she was aware of the male exhibitor occupying the exhibition booth across from hers, and she did not want to generalise. Her statement, which she uttered nonetheless, stems from her personal experience as a full-time mother and sole trader. Fashion designing business offers an opportunity for control and ownership of something, outside the home.

Two male designers I interviewed also work with locally based tailors, yet compared to their female colleagues, I found there to be differences in the ways in which they spoke about their production process and the tailors who manufacture their garments. Let us, for example, contrast the British-Nigerian female designer’s remark above with the Nigeria-based male designer’s below. When asked about his design process, this male designer remarked, ‘I design everything myself. It’s all made in Nigeria, I have the tailors, we have a store, a warehouse, and everything is done under my roof’ (Informant K, 2019). While both male and female designers place a strong emphasis on their items being made in Nigeria (which will be discussed in the next chapter), and both mention that they design their collection themselves and would wear these garments, the female designers I spoke to expressed a strong emotional connection to the locally based Nigerian tailors they employed. Several female designers in these interviews describe their practice of employing local women and contributing to the development of their trade, and express a desire to create economic opportunities for them through ethical practices of fair pay and good working conditions.

When asked if she had any formal training, Informant F, (2019) responds: ‘no I haven’t. Say, for example, I work with a set of tailors, and I normally scan, I can visualise what I want. And basically, we sit together, or WhatsApp together and we put it on paper somehow. Or we translate what I can see in my head’. While this designer’s methodology or fashion process may seem rudimentary, it shares some similarities with that of the Japanese fashion designer Rei Kawakubo, of the high-end brand Comme des Garçons. Kawakubo has no formal design background, but communicates her ideas with her dressmakers through sketches and verbal cues (Zborowsk, 2014). For the British-Nigerian designer above, a technological

communication tool like the messaging app WhatsApp is useful for mediating communication with her Nigeria-based tailor. In this way, I would argue, technology offers further opportunities for women to engage in transnational fashion practices and knowledge exchange, avoiding the expenses of travelling to Nigeria or employing in-house dressmakers and tailors. This is one of the main differences between Nigeria-based and UK-based fashion designers engaged in the making of African fashion. Informant K, for example, operates what could be described as a mini factory employing tailors, where everything is made ‘under my roof’; he also runs a retail store where these garments are sold to the public. In contrast to this, the UK-based Informant F works collaboratively with self-employed tailors.

The ease of communication in aiding the design process is not without its challenges, however, and nor is a lack of formal design training. Informant F, (2019) remarks, ‘Is like I say to my tailor all the time, she messes up. You know she will mess up the sizes, the style or whatever, and I always say to her, You do it right, I make money and you make money. That’s how it works. But if you take it to China, forget about it.’ From these words, one might wonder whether the failures described are not a result of the lack of technical skills on the part of the tailor, but instead the lack of training on the part of the designer. Nevertheless, despite the failings of the tailor, who ‘mess[es] up the sizes, the style’, the designer finds a way to engage and motivate them, evincing the remarks, ‘do it right’ and ‘I make money and you make money’. This reflects one aspect of the social dynamic between the UK-based designer and the Nigeria-based tailor, whose relationship is based on monetary transaction and knowledge exchange. Rather than engaging the services of a Chinese firm, however, the designer opines that she would always prefer to ‘promote our [Nigerian] tailors’, hence the remark ‘if you take it to China, forget about it’. This involves some internal negotiation on the part of the designer between technical mastery, which the Chinese garment workers possess, and ownership and protection of design from Chinese copying. Speaking about her garments that are made by Nigerian women, Informant F remarks, ‘I refuse to take it, you know there’s loads of people now who take it to China, because China can copy anything. But I refuse to do that’. This refusal to take her garments to China, or elsewhere as has become the norm amongst Nigerian diaspora designers, because designers’ desire to promote economic opportunities for Nigeria-based female tailors tends to prevail, evincing the question, ‘how about our tailors back home? Let’s give them some money, lets help them’ (Informant F, 2019). Also, another designer informs that ‘I could have chosen Turkey, I could have chosen Ghana, I could have chosen anywhere, but I love my country, well. I love Nigeria’ (Informant N, 2019). The rationale for

engaging Nigerian-based producers and tailors is affirmed by another informant who opined that, Nigeria has a lot of tailors, however, they are largely unknown. This to me suggests an obligation to Nigeria, the homeland, and an emotional attachment to the country of origin, which many diaspora communities express through charity donations, remittances, and trade (Falola 2013). The debate about products ‘Made in Nigeria’ will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Another British-Nigerian woman who engages the services of local Nigerian tailors and artisans also reiterates this view on trade. She remarks:

I mean I didn’t realise that until much later, just say I wasn’t making clothes, but really, I was changing lives. People that will usually wait in the shop, wait for one garment to come in today, another garment will come in tomorrow, but I will come every month and say make me 70 dresses, make me 50 dresses. So, they are busy, so when I pay them, I pay them in lump sums. So that lump sum is a lot. They pay school fees, they buy a land. They buy machineries, they buy things, to make them go to the next level. I didn’t realise it until one of them told me, sis you have changed our lives. You know a lady that used to be the only one sewing you know now she has six employees working for her, all because of the Notable Woman. And not just her but others, like that (Informant N, 2019).

These comments reveal that the designer sees her fashion brand as something that enriches and contributes to the lived experiences of the local tailors whose services she engages. In contrast to the designer whose tailor makes mistakes, this designer emphasises the positive outcomes of the transactional relationship for her local tailors: ‘they pay school fees, they buy a land, they buy machineries’ for moving ‘to the next level’, often employing more people to work in the local mini factory, and thus ‘changing lives’. This illustrates one aspect of homeland nationalism and patriotism as it can be expressed through fashion clothing production. This transnational exchange flows both ways, from the British-Nigerian fashion designers in diaspora host lands, who engage the services of tailors in the homeland in Nigeria, and from Nigerian designers, who travel with their products and promote them in diaspora spaces such as AFWL in London. This process reflects Rabine’s (2002) observation of the way African fashion operates in an informal transnational commodity fashion circuit, as opposed to the mass-produced and mass-marketed European and American fashion culture. This implies that ‘small African fashion producers’ are not ‘entering global competition under the aegis of

corporate retailers' (Rabine, 2002, p. 118). This is because their marketing practices 'separate the producers from consumers' and 'affect[...] the production of the clothing's meaning', thus giving corporate retailers 'market power' over the producers as well as consumers (Rabine, 2002, p. 110). Unlike corporate retailers, Nigerian fashion producers entering into the global competitive market do so under the sponsorship of charity organisations and non-elected officials, who partake in promotional activities at AFWL. I now turn to a discussion of one particular way in which the 'hardworking' Nigerian female producer is constructed and manifested at AFWL.

[A Nigerian Women's Initiative: Step Up Ladies African Bags](#)

Building on the discussion above, concerning the production practices of African fashion practitioners at AFWL, this section focuses on another aspect of consumption – a recurring pattern I have observed in the culture of AFWL. This is the issue of promoting trade opportunities for the economic empowerment of Nigerian women, which may reflect the substantial population of women both at the event and engaged in fashion entrepreneurship in Nigeria – often informally. This increasing recognition of the economic benefits of the business of fashion is reflected in the growing number of public Nigerian institutions engaged in the promotion and sponsored the participation of Nigerian designers at AFWL as national representatives.

Both official and non-official representatives and organisations combine at AFWL to promote the Nigerian state, Africa's largest economy at the national level. These include governmental agencies such as National Export Promotion Council and National Tourism Development Corporation (see Chapter Six), as well as state-level charity projects initiated by Yoruba women (whom AFWL press releases describe in relation to their role as governors' wives and First Ladies). Taken together, these initiatives geared at promoting the Nigerian economy are largely led by Nigerian women and targeted at women for accentuating women's labour and contributions to the national economy. To illustrate this, the 2016 AFWL included in its line-up of exhibiting brands a Nigerian poverty alleviation initiative called Step Up, which helps people (mostly women) from low economic backgrounds and was established in 2009 by the wife of the Acting President of Nigeria – Mrs Dolapo Osinbajo (Afrika Fashion League, 2016) In addition to exhibiting and selling locally-made African print bags at the trade segment of

the event, the brand's products also featured in a catwalk presentation, and provided accessories for Tubo, another Nigerian brand. In a closing speech addressed to audiences at the catwalk show, Mrs Dolapo Osinbajo, who describes the fashion industry as an economic tool, remarks:

Step Up beautiful ladies' bags in African fabric, a delight to many, is the proud product of our trainees from our bag-making course. We have trained several beneficiaries and they have become entrepreneurs locally and internationally. Some are already employers of labour (Osinbajo, 2016, [0.31:1.00]).

The wording above reveals the type of product as well as the intended consumers – the women's market segment. With these words, however, Osinbajo focuses on the outcome of a particular training program in which women start as trainees in a certain craft and emerge as entrepreneurs, catering to local and international markets. As entrepreneurs, the graduates of the course go on to make economic contributions either in the formal or informal economy (Rabine, 2002; Lindell, 2010) through employing others. This reflects a type of African fashion market practice in which social and material practices, combined with the economic actions of Nigerian actors, generates 'aesthetic value' (Entwistle, 2002, p. 11) and empowers women economically. The First Lady's skill-acquisition training initiative has received extensive media coverage in Nigerian newspapers, as well as some diaspora news publications such as the *New African Woman* magazine. This is in part because African fashion is a lauded economic tool that contributes to GDP, provides jobs, and improves the quality of life for women. As such, the initiative focuses on women, whom the First Lady in her speech conceptualises (based on economics and class), as a poor woman with desires and wants, who happens to be impeded by the lack of opportunities for self- and economic empowerment. The Step Up initiative thus targets a specific type of woman from a rural village, low socio-economic background, 'educated or not, but can watch and learn, many who cannot speak English' (Osinbajo, 2016, 3.44:3.51) and, by training her in craft skills that can be converted to commercial gain, they can empower her to make economic contributions to the country and becoming 'employers of labour' (AFWL, 2016, 4.38:4.40). The types of courses on offer are beadwork on fabric, basic sewing, and soft furniture, with the aim of providing a 'quick source of income through skills that can be acquired quickly' (AFWL, 2016, 5.49:5.51). Significantly, these types of handmade objects and crafts enable the craft makers to express individual creativity and artistry, and communicate certain ideals and meanings associated with the objects. The words 'Step Up beautiful ladies' bags in African fabric', communicate important meanings and ideas about the

usefulness of craftwork in enabling lower working-class women to construct and represent the Nigerian national identity through their labour and bodies. I would argue that the social position occupied by individuals such as the Nigerian First Lady and AFWL's founder, which Dosekun (2019, p. 101) defines as a 'personal place at the highest social economic strata of Nigerian life', enables them to reinforce and project a stable, nationalist imaginary of women supporting women in Nigeria, rather than the image that is mired by successionist agitations, incompetent government, disharmony, and economic inequalities.

There has, therefore, been a particular emphasis on Nigerian women's craftwork in Nigeria in recent years. Since the initiative launched in 2009, a series of events has been created to promote this revival in Nigeria, along with the hashtag #handcraftsng, with women at the helm. Fig. [Handcraftsng] shows Osinbajo demonstrating how crochet can be applied to a traditional Yoruba dress style to transform the style or make it more contemporary. Fig. [SitAndStitch] illustrates handwork being presented to the Chibok girls as a healing tool, where perhaps the logic is that such craftwork is an independent activity and not a Western-influenced practice. Fig. 6.8 also appears to demonstrate how the Step Up initiative is targeted specifically at helping Nigerian women of low working-class backgrounds, who may have been confined by their religious dogma and affiliations. This kind of promotion of an enterprise culture by Nigerian elites is seen as 'granting greater autonomy to the worker' (Entwistle, 2007, p. 215). For a lower-class Nigerian woman or girl, 'power is located at the level of the body and rooted in individualism' (215) because these objects, produced from her own handcraft, reflect her ability to perform in the enterprise culture and make something of her life. She will therefore be able to 'pick herself up' out of poverty, lack and needing as Mrs. Osinbajo states in her address.



Fig. 6.8:[Handcraftsng] Dolapo Osinbajo’s Instagram post portraying her handmade crochet lace edge on buba sleeves. #HandmadeByMe.



Fig. 6.9 [SitAndStitch] Dolapo Osinbajo’s Instagram post, which reads ‘in the company of the chibok girls. Knitting, crochet and beadwork’.

Here, the Christian, Nigerian Vice President's wife is seen demonstrating the art of crocheting to an attentive group of young Muslim girls. The girls are all leaning in: two are diverting their attention to their own work, while the other three are looking more closely at the demonstration.

The commercial site of AFWL serves an important role in facilitating the cross-border exchange of commodities - African fabric bags and clothing - across 'borders in space and time' (Rabine, 2002, p. 136). The event thus provides a commercial space for the promotion of crafts and artisanal workers from Nigeria, however, it also allows for the reproduction of certain aspects of status and class. For example, the words 'First Lady' or 'governor's wife' frequently deployed in AFWL marketing materials tend to focus on a woman's position as somebody's wife rather than recognising her for her personal achievements and agency. In doing so, AFWL actively reproduces the traditional role of the woman as wife, mother, and caregiver. In contrast to AFWL's portrayal and the Nigerian media coverage of her, Osinbajo herself does not self-identify as a 'wife of' anyone on her Instagram page (see Fig. 6.9). Instead, she expresses her own agency and self-recognition by performing her femininity and reflecting the liberatory and empowering potentialities of the 'integration of digital connectivity into people's lives', thereby facilitating their own identity work (Bernal, 2019, p. 3).

More importantly, as promoters of the nation, and members of Nigeria's 'super-elite' (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2014) attach value to the labour of poor women, because through the Step Up training programme they bring 'a range of cultural things to market: goods, images, tastes and aesthetics' (Entwistle, 2009, p. 15). In this case, these are the Nigerian-made ladies' bags fabricated in Ankara textiles, which are displayed at the AFWL fashion show to global audiences and mediated via digital media technologies. This medium not only accentuates 'The transnational African fashion network [AFWL] but also, served to 'denaturalise the all too normalised processes of global corporate capitalism' (Rabine, 2002, p. 136). Communication of the Nigerian Step Up initiative via Instagram (See Fig. 6.10) also facilitates the circulation of information to audiences beyond Nigerian geographical borders. Crucially, this Instagram post depicts a particular type of social exchange between the Nigerian society and its London diaspora. The social media platform thus plays a key role not only in the transnational practices of Nigerian fashion practitioners in the diaspora, but also in constructing and reproducing narratives of Nigerian identity, because,

Instagram has become a powerful tool for building brands [...] it comprises a new site and surface for the production, seeing and sensing and circulation of glamour and allure – processes that are critical to the aesthetic and attention economies of contemporary consumer capitalism. (Dosekun, 2019, p. 96)



Fig. 6.10: Dolapo Osinbajo’s Instagram post in 2016: ‘So proud of Nigerians helping Nigerians’.

The phrase and tagline ‘So proud of Nigerians helping Nigerians’ further reflects the narrative of nationality and national unity being promoted and circulated on this new site. In the context of this Instagram post, the act of ‘helping’ suggests a unidirectional exchange rather than a bidirectional, economic transactional exchange – the elites helping the poor, or the AFWL organisers helping Step Up trainees to promote their handmade products (the exhibition stand for Step Up’s product display is sponsored by the AFWL organisers). This reflects one way in which Nigerian diasporic actors ‘nurture [a] transnational social field with the homeland’ (Patterson, 2006, p. 1891).

Further to this, while the notion that these one- to four-week craft-based training courses can be translated into economic advantage appears ludicrous, the initiative epitomises the way in

which people can be inserted into a system of global capitalism that exploits workers and sees their labour as an end to ‘alleviating poverty’. It appears to me that passion as a requisite for going into fashion production appears to be a luxury that can be afforded only by those with the economic means. For some of the women enrolled in the Step Up Initiatives, social economic policies, unemployment, and absence of governmental support, have all contributed to their lack of economic agency, and this initiative – craft based training which might not be their first choice, if indeed given a choice,- might offer a means out of poverty. This presentation of Nigerian women through the construct of ‘trainees’ serves multiple purposes in producing a particular construction of Nigerian women and labour – a kind of ‘feminine subject’ (Entwistle, 2007, p. 211), following Entwistle’s analysis of ‘power dressing’ as a new technology for the construction of the feminine subject. The discourse surrounding the Step Up initiative constitutes its own ‘technology’ for the construction of a Nigerian feminine subject; ‘technologies of the self’ refers to how individuals, ‘effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conducts and way of being so as to transform themselves to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18).

This narrative and idea that Nigerian women can be empowered through skill-training programs and translate these skills into income renders a particular view of the feminine subject – the empowered woman, the craftworker, the entrepreneur, etc. This kind of discourse in turn makes women more visible within the male-dominated Nigerian social structure. This initiative can also be read as the promotion of human capital (i.e., the skills, knowledge, and experience that are of value to society) facilitated by ‘others’ – in this case, Nigerian elite women in the upper strata of society – who encourage lower working-class women to transform their lives through crafts. I would argue that the initiative produces the Nigerian feminine subject in a ‘regime of work which emphasises internal self-management and relative autonomy on the part of the individual [...] and [is] characterised by a high degree of external constraints and management’ (Entwistle, 2007, p. 212). This demonstrates the ratification of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 2015) defined as strategies to ‘build economic growth and address a range of social needs including education, health, social protection, and job opportunities, while tackling climate change and environmental protection’. I would further argue that elite Nigerian women such as Osinbajo, who are at the forefront of promoting gender equality (one dimension of the SDG), do so by instigating an enterprise culture. This focus on

Entrepreneurial activities of women is pivotal to driving the Nigerian economy forward through production and manufacturing, albeit on small micro scale.

In summary, the Step Up initiative communicates the social condition and position of certain women who are generously provided with training and support in pursuing their entrepreneurial dreams by non-elected elite women in positions of power. The Governor's office, and therefore the office of the First Lady, is only a ceremonial position, however several women in this type of role nevertheless use their newfound prestige to address societal issues through the creation of charitable organisations, particularly those addressing women's empowerment. Lastly, the initiative serves to accentuate the idea of the self as a professional, skilled economic contributor in a large society like Nigeria.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how African women designers interviewed at AFWL conceive of their work, their selves, their cultural identities, and their conflicting ideas about femininity and womanhood. What is important about these insights is the fact that the systems of production and consumption of dress and fashion are interlinked, revealing the different ways in which female Black African fashion designers speak about themselves in relation to their group membership. In consumer culture, it is generally accepted that shopping makes you feel good, want to be looked at, and be able to command the viewer's gaze. On the other hand, the makers and producers of consumer items are seen as hardworking economic contributors to the nation. This chapter has also discussed how the Nigerian fashion system is socially stratified in its women-led initiatives, with different women occupying different social statuses: the 'Nigerian super-elite' at one end of the spectrum, and the women tailors and craft makers at the other. While the high value placed on women's bodies is evident, this also means that bodies can be differentiated by their social status. Although women's fashion is a more dominant segment of the global fashion market, the women-led fashion activities at AFWL reflect the opportunities fashion work provides for African women producers in the labour market. In contrast, male designers constitute a minority at AFWL, but they are also producers of women's collections, and thus contribute to the discourse of the construction and representations of femininity.

Chapter Seven

‘Made in Nigeria’: Nigerian Transnational Fashion Circuits

Introduction

As discussed in the Introductory chapter of this thesis, AFWL emerged partly to proffer a solution to ‘fashion’s race problem’: the under-representation, exclusion, and marginalisation of Black African fashion designers and models in mainstream fashion shows, despite their socio-economic contributions to the global fashion economy (De Greef, 2020). The institutionalisation of an African diaspora fashion event that caters to the commercial ventures and cultural needs of Black, African, and non-African fashion designers and African commodities in London generates visibility for Nigerian designers and intermediaries and brings African stories to global consumer markets.

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, I discuss the role of Africa in the transnational fashion chain, and how Nigerian fashion practitioners utilise fashion as a means of nation-branding in the highly competitive global fashion market. Next is the notion of ‘Made in Nigeria’, where I analyse and discuss the ways in which the Nigerian national brand and image is marketed variably by Nigerian AFWL participants. These consist of independent fashion brands, state actors, and non-state actors, all of whom draw to some extent on their ethnic, regional, class, or gender identities to project a contemporary Nigerian identity and national brand image for the global capitalist economy. In fact, I argue that the ‘Made in Nigeria’ narrative is not a single narrative but a series of conflicting stories about nationhood, class, gender, and fashion. These contradictory formulations articulate Nigeria as a ‘Source of Origin’ for clothing production to perform and represent Nigerianness. Taking the informant’s commentaries, my own participant observation at AFWL, and AFWL’s media coverage and interviews as the basis of analysis, this chapter presents the argument that Nigerianness is constructed through differences, and that these conceptions of Nigerianness are shaped by individual interests, ethnonational political group interests, and international norms. In this regard, I find that the construction of Nigerianness is driven by the desire to alter the image of Nigeria, its international values, its norms, and local practices on the global stage. Here I examine how the slogan ‘Made in Nigeria’ is deployed by different actors to reconstruct and position Nigeria’s Yoruba states within the polycentric globalised world. I argue that, on the

one hand, this regional promotion reflects the federal government's national policy to diversify the Nigerian economy and foster economic growth; on the other, it reflects the incorporation of Nigeria's informal workers (artisans, craft women, and tailors) into the formal economy. To supplement the discussion, I draw examples from other African national agencies and practitioners.

Hassan and Mahrous (2019) point out that the forces of globalisation have heightened the competitiveness between cities, nations, and businesses. Among these are macro factors including 'market competitiveness and complexity resulting from globalisation forces, domestic and international government policies, and challenges in the natural environment' (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019, p. 146), which continue to hinder the acceptance and visibility of African fashion practitioners within the global economy. The authors posit that, to achieve sustainable market competitiveness, businesses and individuals must turn to national branding as a strategy. They go on to define the notion of 'nation branding' as the overall image and reputation of a nation:

[...] nation branding is about building a sustainable differential advantage that defies existing or pre-existing national or regional stereotypes. In this context, the nation's brand identity is strategically balanced to effectively communicate with diverse target audiences/stakeholder groups in ways that bring about positive perceptions. (Hassan and Mahrous, 2019, p. 147)

As discussed in Chapter Five, one of the factors motivating AFWL practitioners is the negative portrayal of Africa circulated by the Western media and internalised by global consumers. As Iqani (2019, p. 23) writes, 'unsurprisingly, colonial tropes and narratives about Africa are dominant in Western commercial and advertising discourses'. African consumers have long been exposed to these Eurocentric marketing and advertising discourses in their own consumption practices (e.g., on television and in the press), and have subsequently internalised the ideology that Western and foreign is superior to something that is locally made. However, through their fashion business practices, AFWL participants are attending to these structural, attitudinal, and representational challenges, building competitiveness in global markets in different ways, and with varied results. The Nigerian state is an ideal case study for exploring such strategies for integrating Nigerian-African fashion designers into the global fashion market, as well as the obstacles they may encounter. The abundance of Nigerian practitioners at the event allows us to examine and unravel how ethnic, gender, class membership,

regionality, and citizenship can be variably deployed to articulate competing versions of Nigerianness and modern Nigerian national identities.

Africa in Transnational Fashion Chains

In his study on fast fashion and global clothing transnational chains, Andrew Brooks (2015) highlights the second-hand clothing supply chains linking the Western nations to Africa and connecting the developed global North with the emerging economies in the global South. Brooks makes distinctions between the used-clothing networks and other clothing trade patterns: the former is characterised by the reversal of the flow of commodities in which clothing goes from the rich to the poor; in contrast, the latter is a commodity network in which new clothes manufactured in low-income countries are sold to consumers in developed economies. These trading networks reveal ‘intimate bonds of connectivity as they physically link consumers who wear new clothes and who are dependent on buying and re-wearing the same garments’ (Brooks, 2015, p. 4). The same applies to the Nigerian consumer market, which is dominated by second-hand, mass-produced clothing made in China and other low-income countries.

In the Nigerian context, then, consumer goods from America, China, and the UK dominate domestic markets. This is in part due to unequal power dynamics, and the strong national image and economic positions of these countries. Foreign clothing items are thus used by the elite in Nigeria as status symbols, as well as for more practical reasons such as safety. In a media interview, the Nigerian textile artist and fashion designer Patience Torlowei outlines and explains the negative impact of this dominance of foreign firms over Nigerian consumer markets. Patience is a lingerie designer, reportedly described by Andre Talley as displaying the ‘true essence and mystery of femininity while staying true to its African heritage’ (Torlowei, 2020b). She remarks that,

Nigeria will be a name in the world in perfect lingerie manufacturing. Lingerie fit for the bank MD and the bread seller, all done in non-poisonous materials safe for use, edging out the cheap and nasty undergarments from China that have flooded markets across Nigeria. Lots of poisonous materials are in those bras and knickers. I’ve had them tested.

I want Nigeria to be a hub in lingerie manufacturing. I am ready to do whatever I can to make Nigeria a name in the lingerie industry. I know I have to stand next to any big name you can think of in the world. A lack of creative ideas is not my problem. (Enwonwu, 2019)

Patience Please is a Nigeria-based luxury brand founded in 2008 by Patience Torlowei, a diaspora-returnee. The brand is the first business of its kind to be registered in Nigeria. Torlowei was born and educated in Nigeria, and in 1990, she relocated to Belgium, where a neighbour taught her to sew, read patterns, and use a sewing machine. Torlowei went on to attend Dutch government-funded training courses in industrial sewing machines, ironing, pattern cutting, interior decorating, and computer-adapted design. After working under two high-profile Dutch ateliers and learning about their fabrication processes, sewing, and machinery, she returned to Nigeria with a mission to establish the Patience Please lingerie brand. The artist and designer of Igbo descent is also the creator of a hand-painted silk ball gown known as the 'Esther Dress', the first piece of couture to join the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African Art's permanent collection (Olaniyan, 2019; Torlowei, 2020a). This is significant, as it reflects the flow of African fashions and their conceptualisation in global discourse, and more importantly, it recognises the contribution of Nigerian fashion as an object of art.

In 2012 the brand presented its collection of racy, nude, and erotic underwear styles: bra sets, comprising panties and brassiere;⁶ bustier⁷ sets; basque⁸ sets with hosiery;⁹ negligees;¹⁰ and underskirts or petticoats (see Fig. 7.1). In these designs, Torlowei utilises a variety of materials including feathers, African wax print fabrics, recyclable textiles, lace, chiffon, satin, and silk. The visual presentation of this Nigerian brand reflects a different construction of African femininity through the production of underwear: the collection can be described as either concealing or accentuating the private parts through dress items. This reflects how an object of dress – whether bra, panties, bustier, or tights – plays a role in fashioning the female form, her femininity, and her identity. It also brings into the public view/gaze items of clothing that are

⁶ A close-fitting garment that is worn to help lift and support the breasts.

⁷ A form-fitting garment used to push up the bust and to shape the waist.

⁸ A tight, form-fitting bodice or coat.

⁹ A close-fitting, elastic garment that covers the feet and legs.

¹⁰ A dressing gown, usually floor-length.

usually described as private and intimate. As such, this clothing is a type of body modification that functions both to cover the body and to communicate meanings associated with the culture.



Fig. 7.1: Patience Please Clothing Presentation at AFWL 2012

In terms of meaning-making, Utoh-Ezeajugh (2009, p. 117) argues that adornment of the body conveys ‘a specific role in the community, celebrate[s] the passage into sexual maturity, or confirm[s] spiritual experience’. This is because designing the body through fashion and clothing is ‘central to the socio-cultural existence and perpetuation of traditional African societies’ (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2009, p. 130). Although the author focuses on adorning the body through design, such as scarification and temporary tattoo practices, this work still applies to the discussion of lingerie, because ‘the body is the message’ (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2009, p. 117). In this sense, dress and clothing are symbols used for expressing a wide range of meaning concerning culture and cultural identities.

Patience Please is now one of a few African designer brands producing lingerie as an expressive object to communicate certain subjectivities and to challenge attitudes about private and public clothing – sexual aesthetics – for a Nigerian or African market. Scholars Christian Jantzen, Per Østergaard, and Carla Sucena Vieira (2006) argue that the consumption of lingerie enhances women’s experiences of inter- and intra-psychological identity, including their internal and subjective desires. Drawing from Foucault’s concept of the technologies of the self, the authors thus define lingerie as an important instrument in the construction of identity. The categorisations women use for choosing the right lingerie or the right cloth for the right occasion, all constitute certain types of knowledge. The authors conclude that ‘purchasing and wearing lingerie may furthermore fulfil or generate longings, thus potentially leading to intensified experiences, feelings, and sensations of “who I really am”’ (Jantzen et.al, 2006, p. 177). This aligns with Torlowei’s remarks about her brand being fit for both ‘the bank MD and the bread seller’ (Enwonwu, 2019).

From the designer’s point of view above, one problematic issue arises in particular within the Nigerian consumer market: the uncontrolled and unregulated market that has generated a consumer environment saturated with ‘cheap and nasty’ undergarments (Enwonwu, 2019). Torlowei considers this to be a problem that can be resolved through quality design and local manufacturing. In this regard, her vision for Nigeria is to be recognised not as a dumping ground for cheap undergarments, but as a producer of quality lingerie for the world. It is worth noting that the designer specifically mentions Chinese imported clothing products, rather than second-hand clothing; perhaps she is not aware that undergarments also constitute part of the commodities sold in second-hand markets. As Brooks (2015) points out in his examination of fast fashion, most consumers and sellers are not concerned about the point of origin or the materials used in the making of these goods. These cheap clothes simply provide economic opportunities for the sellers and convenience for the buyers, permitting them to plug into the global Western consumer culture.

Further to this, the designer of Patience Please’s comments above also highlight another salient aspect of Nigerian society – its stratified culture and resultant inequalities. The sentence, ‘lingerie fit for the bank MD and the bread seller’ brings notions of gender and class into the dialogue about fashion. Within Nigerian society, there are salient differences between these roles: the bank MD represents a highly educated individual with an air-conditioned office, doing important business with highly influential people; the bread seller, also known as a street

vendor, is stereotypically depicted as uneducated and poor. These social and occupational roles thus delineate the social status, appearance, and expectations concerning certain women in Nigerian society, where educational background, social position, beauty choices, and fashion practices are tools for marking class distinctions. Torlowei's ambition to position Nigeria as a manufacturing hub rather than reinforcing its position as a consumer market for Western brands (Iqani, 2019) is significant because it reflects a national branding strategy to situate Nigeria as a production centre, where international retailers and brands can outsource production to Nigeria, thereby promoting the 'Made in Nigeria' tagline. The issues discussed above are not unique to Nigeria, but are a characteristic of nations with colonial histories, where clothing and textiles are well used symbols of protest against patriarchy and colonialism, and for forging national identity (Allman, 2004). For example, to promote Indian national identity and liberate India from British exploitation (particularly its control of the textile industry), the 1890 Swadeshi movement urged the nation to boycott foreign goods and to buy only Indian-made products. This self-reliant movement aimed to revitalise the textile economy and address the poverty and mass unemployment of spinners and weavers caused by the British textile industry's exports of low-cost fabric to India. However, unlike the Indian movement, such a boycott of foreign imported clothing and textiles would not be feasible in the Nigerian context, owing to the ever-increasing globalisation of cultures.

Although Nigeria has made it illegal to import used clothing importation to protect its domestic manufacturing, second-hand clothing and shoes are still illegally smuggled in from neighbouring countries (Togo and Benin) and continue to represent a key site of consumption and fashionableness for low-income earners. While the second-hand and fast fashion commodities trade networks operate in parallel within the Nigerian consumer markets,

The relative poverty of Nigerians, with their low incomes and weak purchasing power, means the consumer clothing market is serviced by illegally imported used clothing transiting through neighbouring countries (as well as imported new clothing), which, even with all the associated transaction costs, represent a cheaper alternative to the relatively expensive new local domestic production. (Brooks and Simon, 2012, p. 1273)

According to Brooks and Simon (2012, p. 1285) the trade liberalisation of sub-Saharan economies in the 1980s is what shaped 'Africa's subservient role in the global economy and reflects the asymmetric power relationships that dictate trade policy'. In the postcolonial epoch imports from China out-compete local production, which further led to the decline of local

manufacturing, ‘declining local purchasing power and the opening of African markets to cheap new clothing imports, as well as imports of used-clothing’ (Brooks and Simon, 2012, p. 1268). The importation of both used clothing and new clothes have increased across Africa (Frazer, 2008), with Nigeria’s large population accounting for nearly a quarter of the market in sub-Saharan Africa. The Nigerian regulatory authorities are thus faced with the challenge of regulating the consumer market and trying to halt smuggling in the context of trade liberalisation. In 2019, the Nigerian economy reportedly imported over 1.9 billion US dollars in food (World Bank) and \$4 billion on imported textiles and ready-made clothing (CBN, 2019).

Some of these consumer items – plastic rice, painkillers, soda drinks - are in fact made in Nigeria but are fabricated from cheap materials and chemicals imported by Nigerian businessmen for consumption in the Nigerian market. This is one of the reasons the Nigerian upper classes (those with disposable income) favour European imported products, including clothing¹¹ and even pizza (Baker, 2019; Owoseje, 2019) over locally made goods. These Euro-American consumer, imported goods are perceived as safer owing to European regulatory policies concerning health and safety, which is absent in Nigeria.

I would argue the lingerie brand manufacturer, Torlowei seeks to address another issue besides the above. This would be the domestic market’s unregulated access to untested consumer products, which can cause adverse health-related illnesses for consumers (See Adepoju and Monks, 2017).

Nigerian authorities prioritize tackling counterfeit goods, including the destruction of fake Vlisco African print materials, to safeguard the intellectual property rights of the multinational corporation. This involves raids on shops and local market sellers, primarily aimed at protecting the interests of the corporation rather than the low-income traders. Sustainable fashion discourse highlights the fashion-clothing industry as a major environmental pollutant due to the use of synthetic chemicals like formaldehyde. These chemicals, intended to enhance clothing’s wearability and functionality, have been linked to negative health impacts. Lawsuits have emerged, accusing certain firms and retailers of high levels of formaldehyde in their

¹¹ Nigerians import fashion clothing, shoes, engineering facilities, vehicles, and hundreds of other items from the United Kingdom. It is estimated by the National Bureau of Statistics that, in 2015, Nigeria imported goods worth N283.759 billion from the UK.

products. In a Greenpeace investigation of Victoria's Secret, hormone-disrupting phthalates were discovered in its underwear (Greenpeace International, 2016).

This discussion highlights the transnational commodity networks and chains affecting Nigeria and Africa, and explores how Nigerian designers, who are unequally positioned within these networks, are challenging, and resisting them through their dress and design practices. It focuses on one diaspora returnee's experience in attempting to contribute to her homeland through the development of a manufacturing hub. As a result, she has been able to import knowledge as a resource gained from living elsewhere, which she then uses to construct new meanings of nationhood for Nigeria.

'Made in Nigeria'

A recurring theme emerging from the data is the meaning behind 'Made in Nigeria', which I discuss in the sections below. As Barnard (2002) points out, fashion and clothing are cultural items in the sense that they convey some of the ways in which the values and identities of certain groups may be communicated both to other groups and to members of those groups. This suggests that an item being 'Made in Nigeria' serves to reflect Nigerian economic values and identities to audiences globally. The association of consumer goods with Africa and Nigeria is instructive because of the 'growing role of fashion as an ambassador of a country' (Segre Reinach, 2011, p. 270). For example, in a published interview in the Nigerian press, the AFWL founder, affirms that one of the motives behind the AFWL event is to showcase the beauty of items made in Nigeria and made in Africa. She remarks,

The idea behind it perhaps, for me and my team is to showcase the beauty of made in Nigeria, made in Africa, our fabric, our fashion, our design. It is also to show how vibrant our fabrics are and to showcase to a global audience our rich culture, creating more awareness and exposure for our indigenous designers for sustainability in the industry as well. (Onuoha, 2017)

Olori Aderonke's statement above is important because, in promotional materials including press releases, the AFWL event organisers usually try to present an impartial and inclusive representation of African fashion in order not to overshadow any one African country or race. As discussed in Chapter Five, African and African-inspired fashion are keywords used to

signpost and market an event as inclusive. As a result, both African and non-African designers are visibly present at the event.

Nevertheless, Olori Aderonke's specific reference to items 'made in Nigeria' within a Nigerian press publication could be construed as pandering and posturing to the Nigerian readers of the newspaper. On the other hand, however, the statement suggests how important a role fashion plays in the nation branding of Nigeria. As already mentioned, Nigerian designers and practitioners tend to dominate the event in terms of numbers. The diverse indigenous and non-indigenous fabrics and materials used in the clothing collections, however, offer a rich exhibition of Africa's heterogeneous cultures, traditions, and histories. As Crane (2010, p. 113) argues, fashion differs from common types of production and commercial activities in part because 'fashion expresses a very elaborate culture, composed of symbols, ideologies and lifestyles'. Bovone (2012, p. 79) adds that fashion goods, when considered in terms of material culture as opposed to the culture industry, 'refers to the numerous artefacts we use in our everyday life which mostly have a function connected to our needs – namely subsistence, home, work – but are specifically chosen and appreciated by us because they enrich our lives by giving them meaning'.

These views are applicable to the Nigerian context, as has been shown above, because the construction of African fashion is diverse. Indeed, the many contrasting images of Africa, its cultural histories, its regional identities, its interests, and lifestyles represented at AFWL reveals the practitioners' own versions – real or imaginary – of Africa. I do not read these myriad views as conflicting but instead as a rich display of multiple truths and realities. Fashion, as 'an identity-making tool' (Goodrum, 2010, p. 462), is thus mobilised in the Nigerian and African diaspora to connect Africa and its diaspora. As well as to define and construct the image of the continent and Nigeria through design, aesthetics, and fashion. Simply put, the AFWL event is not only concerned with the marketing of African indigenous textiles, national designs, fashion brands, and commodities to international audiences; it is also about the expressions and reproductions of African cultural identity in 'the relational structure of the market' (Skov, 2006, p. 781).

With that said, I still wish to unpack AFWL founder's comments above to draw attention to the Nigerian clothing manufacturing industry and how this specific cultural intermediary's practice is framed to reinforce her own Yoruba-Nigerian identity. First, from Olori Aderonke's point of view, fashion promotion is a means to circulate information and knowledge about the

aesthetic qualities of Nigerian and African-made fashion commodities and indigenous designers. The slogans ‘Made in Africa’ and ‘Made in Nigeria’ convey the ‘nationality of goods [which] is indeed important for consumers because it connotes value, image and information, like brands do, thereby influencing sales both negatively and positively’ (Donze, 2019, p. 855). In a similar way, I would argue that the expressions and representations of nationality are important to African fashion designers, in part because it gives them a sense of connectedness and embeddedness to Africa and Nigeria. For example, one British-Nigerian designer interviewed at AFWL, who uses the Ghanaian Kente cloth in her design practice, affirms:

My fabric – I used to live in Ghana for a few months or years – so that did my influence my choice. I really love Kente, because Kente, the way it’s made is really expensive, because it is really heavy and handwoven. So, I use Kente prints. So, they are like the Ankara prints ones, which are lighter and whatnot. (Informant A, 2018)

From this designer’s point of view, some of the reasons for adopting the Kente cloth in her design practice include having lived in Ghana and seen and felt the materials and techniques used. The designer uses the Kente print cloth in fabricating both male and female clothes and accessories such as earrings and necklaces, which she sells to consumers via social media platforms. Kente is an indigenous handwoven textile local to the Ewe people in Ghana. Its modern version – machine printed -, the Kente print, is a highly commodified textile and thus a common fabric choice for AFWL design participants, who see it as an expression of African cultural identity. Whether handwoven and locally made or printed industrially, the variations and availability of indigenous and modern African textiles continue to influence the choice of fabric adopted by designers.

Through their fashion practices, Nigerian fashion practitioners in the diaspora seek to reconstruct Africa’s and Nigeria’s national image, rather than dissociating completely from Africa (or Nigeria) because of the prevailing narratives of poverty, disease, corruption, and aid dependency. In other words, they seek the beauty of the concept ‘Made in Nigeria’. The Nigerian clothing manufacturing sectors (both formal industrial producers and informal low-scale producers) are geographically dispersed across the Hausa/Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba state regions (Penne). Each in turn has an area of specialisation, for example: the Yoruba are known to specialise in adire (tie-dye) and aso Oke; the Igbo people are known for their leather goods; and the Hausa/Fulani are known for embroidery. In this way, fashion clothing production across Nigeria is fragmented and regional.

Another important clothing cluster relevant to my study is ‘Made in Aba’. Segre-Reinach (2015, p. 135) highlights that, in the formal structure of the Italian fashion system, ‘development is made up of continuity, but also discontinuities’. Continuity is evident in the production of quality goods; discontinuities appear within varied fashion cultures, through production and consumption, marking the phases of its development. Like the ‘Made in Italy’ of the Italian fashion system, ‘Made in Aba’ sits within the intra-Nigerian fashion system. Since its development in the 1980s, Aba has been recognised within the Nigerian and African markets as an Igbo-Nigerian-led region. Unlike the formalised clusters in Milan or London, the production clusters in Aba consist of a small-scale and informal fashion economy of workers producing finished goods (shoes, bags, and garments) informed by popular trends and fast fashion.

Over the course of its development, however, Aba products have come to be perceived as low quality, owing to their rudimentary production processes and the lack of industrialisation in the region. Despite these practical issues, including the lack of infrastructure and electricity, ‘Made in Aba’ practitioners nevertheless continue to shape production and consumption practices in Nigeria, particularly among the non-elite consumer segments. In the absence of basic amenities such as electricity, these practitioners adapt by deploying manual labour and non-automated types of machinery, allowing them to continue expressing their creative labour and accruing their livelihoods. Broadly speaking, these practical, infrastructural issues also explain Nigeria as a whole. For example, in Aba, shoe-making is considered the largest industry, followed by tailoring. It is ‘estimated [that] more than 100,000 shoemakers are producing different kinds of shoes in the six shoemaking clusters in the town’ (Omeje, 2017). The Aba shoe industry received a boost when it produced 60,000 military boots for the Nigerian Army in 2016 (Meagher, 2012; Omeje, 2017). While the Aba creative clusters, which operates largely in the informal economy might not resemble those found in London or Milan, they comprise small-scale independent artisans working together to produce the concept ‘Made in Aba’ and express their ethno-national and regional identities and membership (Meagher, 2012). As mentioned above, one of the discontinuities marking the phases of development of ‘Made in Aba’ is performed by the state governor, who advocates for the promotion of Igbo entrepreneurship and creativity, thus shifting the focus from oil to human capital development. Private institutions, including the African Development Bank and Zenith Bank, are among the core partners capitalising on a sector built on the skills of local artisans. My emphasis here is that regional governmental agencies can co-opt the local heritage to attract foreign investment

to the area (Dickson, 2019) and develop the region into an economic city. However, there are still structural issues in these areas that are not addressed, such as a lack of power, road access, and amenities, which continue to affect the development of the industry. Instead, the political elites only promote the region as an economic centre with creative workers ready to sell their labour for capitalist accumulation. By so doing, it is probable that the aim is to formalise the informal sector for entrepreneurial development and taxation.

The development of the Nigerian fashion-clothing industry has also been hindered by several other factors, both historic and contemporary. As Van Nederveen Meerkerk (2017, p. 1219) points out,

nineteenth-century imperial policies and economic globalisation de-industrialised the global periphery. European metropolises extracted raw materials and tropical commodities from their overseas territories, and in turn, indigenous consumers bought their industrial products, textiles in particular.

Walter (1972, p. 149) also writes, 'Colonialism went much further than trade. It meant a tendency towards direct appropriation by Europeans of the social institutions within Africa'. In other words, the subordination of the African continent by European imperialism, through trade and trade policies, created the conditions for implanting European values and commodities into African markets and thus displacing African producers. On top of this, the appropriation of Africa's clothing textiles, produced by European businesses and resold to African consumers, has also further contributed to the decline of the sector. As a result, from the nineteenth century onwards, the globalisation that led to the displacement of African indigenous textiles and producers has in turn conditioned Africans to be consumers of Western products and commodities (Byfield, 1997).

As Donze (2019, p. 855) demonstrates in his study of the Swiss watch industry, 'brand image and the nationality of the headquarters give value to the corresponding goods and a country's image also has an impact on companies and brand equity'. If we are to relate this to the present study, we can see that to brand Africa and Nigeria as fashion design nations, African clothing and fashion workers, predominant in the informal economy, must first be 'defined as valuable in relation to the global economy' (Meagher, 2016, p. 473). This implies that better infrastructure and facilities would enable the development of technical skills in clothing and textile production. The reconstruction of the African workforce has been attended to variously

by regional and federal state agencies, as well as in the private sector and in international development. Such a repositioning of Africans as workers rather than consumers serves to capitalise on economic development opportunities in global capitalism. More precisely, Nigerian regional states are engaged in promoting the discourse of locally produced commodities by artisans and craftswomen. I would argue that fashion promotion offers one such way for reconstructing the African workforce, invigorating Africa's image and national branding through trade, investment, and tourism. Returning to the Olori Aderonke's comments above, we find that the event founder's desires and aspirations for the visibility and recognition of Nigerian design, the fashion industry, and indigenous practitioners in the global fashion economy reflects such a negotiation of her own dual belongings. As mentioned in the Introduction, the event organiser is Yoruba, Nigerian, and British, and negotiates these cultural identities and senses of belonging through her fashion practices, establishing the AFW in both London and Nigeria. This notion of showcasing Africa's vibrant culture to a global audience in an increasingly media-mediated age is demonstrative of the changing dynamics of fashion communication today (Huang and Janssens, 2019). This is to say, fashion (and its promotion and legitimation) is a knowledge-intensive activity that is no longer the preserve of a few selected Western publications. However, the contradiction remains, within global fashion, economic, cultural and symbolic capital continues to be associated with the established Western system, centres and brands as spaces for the production of material and symbolic fashion.

While African print fabrics, also known in Nigeria as Ankara, are commonly associated with African cultural heritage (Gott and Loughran 2010), a further examination of Olori Aderonke's dress and design practices shines a light on another underrepresented Yoruba fabric – the adire. The adire fabric is indigenous to the Yoruba people of Osogbo, Osun state, Nigeria. Before colonial contact, the area was revered as the centre for the mass production of batik adire, with female highly skilled artisans as both consumers and producers of the cloth. In 2019, the Adire Oodua Textile Hub (AOTH) was established in Ile Ife, Osun State, described as a:

[...] resource and educational facility dedicated to the preservation of the traditional techniques of adire textile manufacturing. The hub raises awareness and understanding of the sustainability of Adire production through creative educational programmes for adults and children. (AOTH, 2019)

Olori Aderonke's establishment of a textile hub in the ancestral Yoruba land is reflective of her commitment not only to reviving the indigenous local textile economy, but also to preserving Yoruba cultural heritage through the professionalisation and modernisation of adire textile production techniques. As well as this, the event founder also established the Moremi collection in 2017, a brand that employs local Yoruba artisan producers, designers, and indigenous textile workers in fabricating modern styles for global consumer markets. As Taiwo Bamidele and Tajudeen Gbolahan (2013) highlight, the production of indigenous or traditional textiles (defined as locally produced textiles involving traditional methods perceived to be native to that area) provides economic and psychosocial benefits for its practitioners. Economically, it generates employment opportunities, while psychosocially, it provides an aesthetic and creative expression of cultural heritage because 'Indigenous textiles are mainly handcrafted with symbolic meanings and aesthetic qualities' (Bamidele and, Gbolahan, 2013, p. 3). In Yoruba land, in Nigeria, these textiles Adire and Aso Oke, are among the textiles used in regions for the annual festivals which attracts international tourists from across the world. The authors conclude that these Yoruba textiles constitute the Nigerian culture and should be promoted by the government to showcase the Nigerian culture.

Also, in their examination of indigenous textile, Solomon Marfo Ayesu, et. al (2021:267) argues that textiles such as the Kente, highlights the 'value and heritage of the indigenes in the communities. These fabrics are embedded with historical symbolic connotations that help the people to relate effectively and know their past'. For her construction of African fashion made in Nigeria, therefore, Olori Aderonke draws on pre-colonial, ancient Yoruba textile traditions, employing this as an important symbol for African fashion, and making connection to rich traditions, values, and history of the Yoruba people. This (AOTH) shows one of the many ways in which contemporary Nigerian diaspora practitioners contribute to the development of the home country region (Lampert, 2010).

In her analysis of the British fashion retailer, Mulberry, Goodrum (2001, p. 188) reports that, 'The 'Made in Britain' label - the very crux of Mulberry's sales pitch - is [...] fast becoming obsolete' as production shifts to countries with cheap labour. However, these British fashion brands (Paul Smith and Mulberry) continue to emphasise their 'national provenance', that is being British because the "symbols and characteristics of Britishness are significant factors in the export, and consumption, of luxury British fashion in Japan' (Goodrum, 2009, p. 463). By arguing this, Goodrum draws attention to that fact that a combination of structural and cultural factors has caused British firms to have to look to more developed fashion systems and new

markets outside the UK. These factors include the ‘undervaluing of the design profession by government and industrialists, to a concentrated retail environment dominated by middle-market chain stores [...] to a consuming public wedded to the notions of quantity rather than quality’ (Crewe and Goodrum, 2000, p. 27). As a result, brands such as Mulberry and Paul Smith seek to capitalise on elements of British identity in their export activities, despite their clothing being manufactured elsewhere. In this sense, their Britishness does not refer to the origins of production, but to the ‘accompanying export of British signs, symbols, and characteristics, all of which feed and fuel a geographical imagination in which Britishness is inextricably linked to a golden age of empire’ (Goodrum, 2001, p. 161). For example, in his brand’s marketing export strategies, the designer Paul Smith emphasises his local roots in Nottingham, his connections with local art colleges, and his associations with clothing firms in the Lace Market, Nottingham’s fashion quarter. Together, these ‘form a dominant discourse throughout much of the company’s marketing and promotional literature’ (Crewe and Goodrum, 2000, p. 34).

In this way, the slogan ‘Made in Nigeria’ is an engagement with social and cultural issues in Nigeria to foster economic nationalism through the production and consumption of domestic and locally produced textiles. Unlike the British brands in Alison Goodrum’s (2009) analysis, Nigerian fashion practitioners emphasise their distinct ethno-national heritage and employ Pan-African orientation, signs and symbols and colonial history (as already mentioned in Chapter One) in constructing their national design practices. In his examination of the competitiveness of Nigerian textiles in global market, Suraju Abiodun Aminu (2016, p.2), argues that developing countries such as Nigeria ‘do not benefit equally from trade’ in contrast to the developed countries such as Britain. The challenges for Nigerian export to regional and international markets are precipitated by ineffective policy interventions, lack of infrastructure, scarce training facilities for upskilling, an unregulated market, diminished access to finance, and erratic business policies (Onuoha, 2013). Doing business in the Nigerian environment is thus itself a challenge. Just as British fashion brands have looked to external markets to develop their brands (Crewe and Goodrum, 2000; Goodrum, 2009), Nigerian designers such as Duro Oluwo have also explored external opportunities. While Ade Bakare, a British-Nigerian designer has returned to home to establish a fashion design academy and boutique. However, these brands do not proclaim that their garments are ‘Made in Nigeria’, and this is partly due to the aforementioned disrepute of the Nigerian image globally. Depending on the context Nigeria’s global image and reputation can be both positive or negative. For example, on the

one hand, Nigeria is described as the giant of Africa, boasting the second largest movie-production industry in the world, and producing Afrobeats music, which is consumed by youths globally (Falola, 2011). These creative producers, in the private and informal sectors are vital to adding value to the Nigerian economy and image. On the other hand, in international politics and economic discourse, Nigeria has been described as ‘fantastically corrupt’ by the ex-UK Prime Minister David Cameron (Martin, 2016) and ‘a shit hole’ African country by former President Donald Trump (Dawsey, 2018; Le Miere 2018).

As Qian Huang and Alice Janssens (2019, p.125) show in their analysis of the role of new media technologies in the responses of the Chinese luxury consumers and the fashion media to Dolce and Gabbana’s (D&G) racism and stereotypes of China, the author posits, ‘in the early 2000s, opportunities brought by the internet fostered the development of independent fashion websites and retailers own digital magazines which joined the above agents’. These agents of fashion diffusion include ‘publications and journalists who communicate fashion – selecting, editing, and circulating information to the public via magazines, newspaper, television stations’ (Huang and Janssens, 2019, p. 128). The author argues that the access to the internet by Chinese citizens and consumers – celebrities, Chinese media and producers - has increased the capability of Chinese consumers and less established influencers, as agents contesting established norm and ‘to challenge the symbolic capital of brands and established fashion media, presenting the conversions of capital possible’ (2019, p. 133).

Although the focus of the above study was on the luxury Chinese consumer market – the largest fashion market globally -, their assessment is equally applicable to AFWL– for example, the reach of AFWL (both the physical event and its dedicated website, event magazine publications) encompasses several hundred websites, bloggers, influencers, diaspora communities, and international and national media publications. Through advances in digital media, African and Nigerian fashion practitioners can shape the ways Nigeria and African fashions are framed – championing ‘Made in Nigeria’.

Made in Aba: Regional Promotion and ‘Local’ Production

Meagher *et al.* (2016, p. 473) highlight that ‘It is important to remember that the engagement of African workers in the global economy is nothing new’. African workers have long engaged with the ‘global system of production and exchange’ as traders, slaves, migrant workers, and

farmers; rather, ‘the specific mechanisms and terms on which African workers are being incorporated into the globalised system of accumulation’ is what is novel (Meagher *et al.*, 2016, p. 473). Within these processes of contemporary incorporation, digital media technologies and fashion play vital roles in enabling self-expression, creating symbolic value, and facilitating the exchange of ideas and information across and beyond the confines of a nation-state.

For example, one British-Nigerian male designer whom I interviewed at the event in 2019 describes his brand – Ethnicity Clothing – as a movement invested in transferring knowledge to elevate the clothing production practices of male tailors in the Aba region, his hometown. He remarks that it is

[...] a movement in terms of why Ethnicity was born. African clothing in terms of styling is good, but in terms of finishing we are lacking that. So, this was born to show that with the technical knowledge, and technical capacity we can make it up to standard. It’s not about the creativity side.

And again, why I say it’s a movement is, if you buy into Ethnicity you are helping – because what I am doing is trying to transfer technical knowledge back to Africa – the guys that are working for me are being trained on this. So, it’s like they are understanding what it is to match the European standards and beat it as well. So, it’s a grassroot thing that I am doing, instead of waiting for the government to help or do the training, I am putting my hands on the ground and it’s a movement. So, if you buy into this, if you like what we are doing, I ask you to encourage them back home. (Informant E, 2019)

This commentary above highlights several pertinent issues relating to creativity, standardisation, trade, skill acquisition, marketing, cultural preservation, and consumers in African fashion. In this section, I organise my discussion around the issue most relevant to the study, supplementing it with examples. Ethnicity Clothing is a UK-based, Nigeria-made clothing brand, developed by an Igbo-descended male fashion designer and consultant from Abia state (Aba is a city in Abia state), in the eastern region of Nigeria. The designer is a regular participant at AFWL, where he displays and sells his Aba-made, ready-to-wear garments for women, men, and children.

From the designer’s point of view, African clothing manufacturing is weakened by lack of technical mastery and expertise in producing high-quality garments. He contrasts African-

made clothing with the international standards set by other European fashion-clothing production nations. This issue of local amenities such as training centres, design schools and financial resources to foster expertise in the Nigerian garment production industry has been identified as among the main constraints undermining Nigeria's position in the global clothing industry. This is why, in 2017, the Lagos Fashion Week - established in 2011 by Omoyemi Akerele - (Simpson 2021) and the Nigerian Export Promotion Council (NEPC) partnered to work on developing Nigeria's garment production capacity. Although the NEPC established a fashion training facility in Lagos in 2006 called the Human Capital Development Centre (HCDC), its partnership with LFW reflects the interconnectedness of production, consumption, and dissemination (Braham, 2007) in the Nigerian fashion system. As we have seen, among the challenges that constrain the growth of the textile sector are issues with imported clothing, a lack of clothing production amenities and infrastructure, and limited opportunities for education for domestic tailors to develop their expertise and improve their crafts (Amimu 2016; Ezinwa and Ikechukwu, 2017). These, in turn, have led to a decline in the productive capacity of its workforce.

The designer of Ethnicity Clothing (Informant E) quoted above considers the symbolic meaning of his brand to be defined by outstanding and exceptional standards. This meaning is constructed from his business-related training activities and practices, which he describes as advancing the technical mastery of the clothing production process from sewing to finishing. For this brand, it is imperative 'to encourage them back home' – a sentiment that reflects the designer's emotional tie to the home country, as a member of the Nigerian diaspora fashion community in London (Informant E, 2019). But this raises the question of who speaks for the nation: those left behind, or those in the diaspora, who bring knowledge and expertise to improve practices and development in the homeland. The reference to the home country – 'back home' – is a means of forging transnational ties, something the designer emphasises in his grassroots approach to his design practice. In addition to this, though, Ethnicity Clothing's marketing approach also appeals to the consumers' emotions. Through our conversation, and while observing the designer's interactions with his customers visiting his exhibition display, it became clear that he was eager to communicate the fact that, by purchasing his fashion clothing, his consumers were helping artisans and tailors back home. This marketing of the UK-based brand to consumers in the UK is akin to the strategy deployed by Western brands who align themselves with charity organisations to sell their products to consumers. These clothing retailers and organisations appeal to Western consumers through the idea of 'doing

good’ – consumers are encouraged to shop with the promise that proceeds from the sales will be donated to local charities such as the Red Cross (Mercer, 2012; Abrahamsen, 2012,). Just like the Western fashion brands analysed in the book *Brand Aid: Shopping to Save the World*, a project to raise consumer awareness of the Aids pandemic in Africa (Richey and Ponte, 2011), the Ethnicity Clothing brand seeks to raise awareness of the competition Nigerian clothing producers face in the globalised fashion economy. Having identified the lack of technical skills and government support hindering the growth and international visibility of the Nigerian clothing production industry, this designer proactively seeks to resolve the problem through his design practice, providing training and employment for local tailors. This tactic both celebrates African clothing styles and creativity, and also posits that the consumption of African clothing will stimulate the development of African fashion clothing production. In addition, Ethnicity Clothing promotes the notion of ‘trade not aid’ to international development (Duval Smith, 2009). As Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo (2010) argues in her book *Dead Aid*, the international aid industry is ineffective and malignant because it positions African nations – particularly the poor - in a cycle of poverty and dependency. It is probable that the development of business and entrepreneurship in Africa, is a threat to Western countries, where Africa has serves as consumer market for Western brands.

Informant E received his formal design training at the London College of Fashion. He was also exposed to design at a young age because his father was a tailor in Aba, Nigeria’s commercial clothing and shoe manufacturing region (Meagher, 2012). The designer considers technical knowledge to be what separates certain roles, because the different stages of the clothing production process require different specialisations. He remarks, ‘Starting from a sample machinist, and you move up to a pattern cutter, a garment technologist, you start understanding there is a distinctive difference between one job and another in the industry – there is a specialisation in each of them (Informant E, 2019). From the designer’s point of view, the Western industry represents a yardstick and model for a certain quality, evincing the statement, ‘to match the European standards and beat it as well’ (Informant E, 2019). The designer adopts this project of standardisation as a way to address why African, or more specifically Nigerian clothing production and producers are not competitive in the international market. In his mind, they are not competitive because they lack the technical capacity and knowledge of conventions established by the international clothing industry. I would argue that the designer's ambition to position his home region in Nigeria as a major player in the global fashion industry are truly commendable. By embracing European standards and incorporating them into their design

practice, they demonstrate a strategic understanding of the international market dynamics. Importantly, the integration of European standards does not diminish the rich cultural heritage and authenticity of Igbo, Nigerian and African fashion. Instead, it serves as a catalyst for showcasing the immense talent and creativity that exist within these regions. By internalising these standards, the designer is effectively leveraging global trends and preferences to amplify the global appeal of Igbo creativity, Nigerian and African fashion.

On the other hand, the designer's commentary reflects to the view put forward by Huang and Janssen (2019) about Western dominance in both the material and symbolic production of fashion commodities.

This is resonant with the discourse of the World Bank in its assistance of African producers to compete in the international economy and produce items for export to international markets (Rabine, 2002). As Rabine (2002, p. 109) asks, 'why does the World Bank find it so important that Africans produce for export on the international market? Unlike the World Bank's *Africa can Compete* project, which sought to help the 'beleaguered corporate retailers' such as JC Penney and Walmart target the African American market segment, 'utilising a global sourcing network that increasingly favours low wage, quota-free countries, including selected African nations'. In this regard, the designer of Ethnicity Clothing wants to pursue industrialisation and standardisation for skilled garment workers in his home state - Aba city. On one hand, this can be described as 'the domination of Europe in the mind of Africa' (Molefi, 2009) wherein the informant, who is British and Nigerian, perceives Europe as an ideal. On the other hand, the designer demonstrates an understanding that adopting Europe as standards should not be at the expense of indigenous African culture and practices. He emphasised that creativity is not an issue for African design practitioners, but rather, technical skills in design and manufacturing. He remarks that

[...] its not that other African countries doesn't have creativity in them, but either they are not been promoted well or help to stand out.

one thing I have known over the years since I have been in fashion especially in the technical side is why Africa is not a manufacturing hub for these western companies like Marks and Spencer is because the base don't have the support function , which is people who are trained in understanding the technical side which is like pattern, needling, how things are made properly, So we don't have that. And they [western

companies] will not be the ones to build it for us. But if we create that, they will come. Definitely they will come.

I would argue that contemporary Nigerian diaspora practitioners, see their role as cultural intermediaries between Nigeria and the rest of the world. Unlike the other fashion-clothing industries that have developed in Milan or New York, the industry in much of Africa is hindered by a lack of government support and incentives for local artisans and tailors to develop advanced skills that would improve their livelihoods. As the designer remarks,

So it's a grass root thing that I am doing, instead of waiting for the government to help or do the training, I am putting my hands on the ground and it's a movement. So If you buy into this, if you like what we are doing, I ask you to encourage them back_home, because I travel a lot. I am actually not a designer, but I trained as a designer, but I call myself a fashion production consultant. That is where my experience lies. The technical side of the industry.

From the designer's perspective, spearheading a grassroots movement becomes an indispensable catalyst in fostering the development of the fashion clothing industry in Nigeria. Instead of passively awaiting inadequate government aid or the non-existence of formal training programs, they embody the spirit of proactive change. By employing the title of fashion production consultant, the designer distinguishes himself from traditional designers, to highlight his focus on the operational side of the industry. This positioning allows them to carve out a unique niche, showcasing their proficiency in areas crucial to the success of fashion businesses, such as optimizing production efficiency, ensuring quality control, and managing costs. The designer brings this expertise to make contributions to homeland development.

Moreover, the designer's approach holds immense potential for economic growth and development. By developing the position of Aba, Nigeria, and Africa as mass producers of quality clothing for export, the designer is actively contributing to job creation, skill development, and increased revenue generation. This not only benefits the fashion industry but also has a positive ripple effect on the overall socio-economic landscape of the region.

Much scholarly research has focused on the role Western governments have played in the internationalisation of their clothing and design industries, for example, Teunissen (2011) notes

that the transformation of the Belgian and Dutch fashion industries in the international market has had much to do with their own government initiatives. Such government support of clothing and textile industries is reflected in financial incentives such as art grants, economic missions, and trade shows like the London and Paris fashion weeks. These incentives provide artisans and fashion designers with support and help to conceptualise their own 'national identity in fashion' (Teunissen, 2011, p. 158). Within the Nigerian context, private investments – by diaspora returnees and private companies - are increasingly being made to raise the profile of Nigerian fashion and clothing system. Fashion thus offers a means for Nigerian workers both to establish a recognised fashion national identity and to 'adjust old stereotypes to global interactions' (Segre Reinach, 2011, p. 271).

As has already been explored, the concept of 'nation branding' refers to 'the systematic process of aligning the actions, behaviours, investments, innovations and communications of a country around a clear strategy for achieving a strengthened competitive identity' (Anholt, 2008, p. 22). I would argue that this is reflected in the 'Made in Africa', Made in Nigeria, Made in Aba slogans employed by diverse stakeholders including tailors, artisans, designers, and producers in the private and public sectors. These individuals and collectives are working together to create positive perceptions of Nigeria's and Africa's growing fashion system, to increase the competitiveness of Nigerian and African-made goods, and to position these workers and producers as tastemakers of African fashion. These actions challenge the prevailing generalisation of Nigerians as mere consumers of Western commodities and producers of raw materials for the developed metropolises and centres elsewhere and offer a completely alternative view (Rodney, 1972). They present Nigerian-African fashion practitioners as participating in globalisation on their own terms – as independent producers of fashion and clothing commodities. From an economic development perspective, promoting products that are made in Nigeria aims to stimulate domestic production, create job opportunities, and reduce dependency on imported goods. It supports the growth of local industries, boosts the country's GDP, and contributes to overall economic self-reliance.

The idea of Made in Nigeria, and Made in Aba, also carries cultural significance and contributes to national identity. It highlights the unique products and craftsmanship associated with Nigerian culture, promoting cultural preservation and pride. It can also serve as a means of countering cultural imperialism and asserting local cultural distinctiveness in a globalised world.

Barnard (2002, p. 42) highlights that,

Fashion and clothing are ideological, and then, in that, they are also part of the process in which social groups establish and reproduce positions of power, relations of dominance and subservience. They are, moreover, part of the process in which these positions of dominance and subservience are made to appear entirely natural, proper, and legitimate.

The quote above applies to the Nigerian and diaspora contexts, wherein fashion and clothing are mediums not only expressing ideological beliefs but also contributing to the establishment and maintenance of power dynamics within social groups. Fashion reinforces positions of power, dominance, and subordination, and it further normalises and legitimises these hierarchical relationships as natural and appropriate. Increasingly, Nigeria-based fashion organisations centred around African aesthetics, luxury, and tastes, such as the purpose-built luxury retailing space Alara, and events such as Lagos Style and Design Week, Arise Fashion Week, and Africa Fashion Week Nigeria, act as intermediaries and agents 'in the authoring and projection' of contemporary Nigerian fashion's image and sense of Nigerianness in the 'commercial sphere' and the global fashion market (Dosekun, 2019, p. 103). Nigerian fashion practitioners use fashion as an 'image-creating event' (Skov *et al.*, 2009) to develop Nigeria's national image in the global market through symbolic representations. As Goodrum (2005, p. 31) asserts, 'marketing images are one small part of a larger [fashion] system [... where] the production of identity is an ongoing process, continually being made and remade across and between all the stages that go to frame a commodity'. In other words, fashion activities are part of an ongoing process involving diverse actors, all of whom play different roles in transforming Nigeria's image on the international market. I would argue that fashion practitioners in the Nigerian diaspora are uniquely positioned because of their dual/transnational orientation - belonging to the homeland and host country -, allowing them to employ different 'techniques of inscriptions' in their symbolic constructions of Nigerianness, and sell Nigerian fashion to international consumers in London (Goodrum, 2009). But first, to do this, Nigeria's image must be redefined.

Skov (2006, p. 770) argues that fashion fairs or trade fairs constitute 'a platform that enables multiple types of meetings, all of which have a place within the market'. These fashion fairs

facilitate three types of encounters: trade, sustaining relationships between buyers and vendors, and knowledge exchange about trends, technologies, and markets. These encounters are intertwined within the market context of the fair, which enables the buying and selling of commodities, creates interactions between designers, state, and non-state actors, and facilitates the exchange of material and intangible between people. Although Skov (2006) sees the knowledge-exchange function of fairs in relation to how fashion trends are constructed in general, I narrow this definition down further to consider way in which AFWL fosters the positive representation of both Africa and Nigeria's image and their economic development. The fair thus features as an interface in the fashion value chain for knowledge exchange, which can be seen in my respondent' comments. As I have already pointed out in Chapter Four, my data collection methods involved participant observations and informal interviews with participants at the event venue. During these conversations, the Nigerian designers I spoke with were able to share knowledge about their design practices.

In sum, the AFWL event is used by Nigerian fashion practitioners and non-state actors to challenge established social norms, raise expectations, and accentuate the visibility of Nigerian designer fashion into global markets. More than that, it seeks to reconstruct and define Nigeria's image in the international market, as well as reconfigure opportunities and the terms of engagement for African workers in the global fashion economy. As has already been discussed, Nigeria is a multi-ethnic nation containing diverse groups competing for political power. Considering this, we may ask what role fashion can play in mediating these socio-political divides, if any? The response to this question, and the reasons for raising awareness of Nigerian-made products and indigenous designers, are elaborated through the event's activities, its seminars, and conferences.

Conclusions

This chapter sums up some of the many ideas this thesis has offered and considers some further areas of research.

In our increasingly integrated and polarised world, fashion provides new avenues for global engagement, exchange, contestation over meanings, and assertion of various cultural identities and values. Contrary to classical conceptions of fashion, fashion systems – African, Asian, or Western – do not operate in isolation and are not mutually exclusive, particularly in this epoch of globalisation of the media and international migration.

Has the exploration of AFWL yielded any substantive knowledge? I would argue that it has. In August 2021, the AFWL event was held in person and live-streamed to audiences around the world. This virtual and digital activation of the 11th edition of the event brings my exploration of African diaspora fashion production up to date. Most importantly, the meditation of the event through digital media draws together several of the themes that I discussed in the preceding chapters regarding cultural identities and the role of the diaspora in linking the home to the host countries. When asked what attracted her to the event remarks, a Trinidad-based designer partaking in the exhibition and fashion show,

I followed them on Instagram, I think there is a pride attached to fashion week designed for us and our taste, where we get to show our flamboyant and cocktail mixture and its good and our space. And I thought I like that, I wanted to be a part of that (Diane Carlton, Interviewed at AFWL 2019)

From the above, the growing trend of celebrating identity through fashion reflects foremost that economic activities are not independent of culture and cultural values. Also, it highlights the role of fashion week in challenging marginalisation and hidden discourses about African fashion aesthetics and identities. Fashion Week provides a space for producers within the global African diaspora to represent and showcase their cultural heritage, traditions, and unique tastes, to influence what consumers view as desirable or acceptable products and services. Further, digital media technologies offer new opportunities for the dissemination of African designer fashions to audiences across space and time. In this vein, AFWL is an ideological system enabling the transnational activities of African fashion producers to shape tastes,

express their experience of the world through creative practices, and refine consumer perceptions of African fashions and the continent.

The overarching aim of this doctoral research was to critically interrogate the emergence of Africa Fashion Week London (AFWL), and its significance as a commercial and creative arena for fashion practitioners in the Nigerian diaspora, who are dislocated from mainstream fashion (Lewis, 2003) to construct, represent, and affirm their fashion design and cultural identities in the 21st century. This thesis shows the significance of AFWL in centring the images, aesthetics, narratives, experiences and creativity of African fashion design practitioners and institutions in the 21st-century Eurocentric global fashion structure. The research demonstrates that the Fashion Week platform is employed by African diasporic fashion practitioners and institutions because it facilitates the construction, representation, and resistance to dominant and problematic constructions of African fashion as static and unchanging. It explains the role of the Fashion Week apparatus in fostering the visibility of fashion designers and producers from Africa to Western mass markets. It illuminates some of the impacts and challenges that social structures like colonialism, class, economy, education, religion, ethnicity, gender, and diaspora space have on design practitioners and how they as agents go about negotiating their subjective and collective identities. This thesis illuminates how the creative design and dress practices of the contemporary African diaspora fashion practitioners serve as a bridge linking the homeland with the hostland through their formal and informal labour practices. In this vein, AFWL offers fashion practitioners in the Nigerian diaspora, particularly African diaspora women, an affordable commercial and creative space for creative expression and innovation and to resist dominant power structures.

This thesis allows catching glimpses of social change they are occurring, I argue this because in dominant notions of fashion, African fashion practitioners, and institutions remain subordinated and marginalised in varied ways. In exploring fashion design producers at AFWL, specifically British-Nigerian, and Nigeria-based producers who are making conscious efforts to re-defining the image of the continent, and examining how they are formulating their plans through strategic partnerships and affordances offered by digital media technologies, we get a glimpse into the lived experiences of African fashion producers and representation of transnational fashion identities in the global fashion and knowledge economies.

This thesis sought to critically examine AFWL, the research design, methodology and findings of this study have effectively allowed the study to achieve a comprehensive understanding of

the production and representations of modern African fashions and African diasporic fashion cultures created by African designers and those of African heritage. Significantly, AFWL facilitates the encounter of networks of local, national, and transnational actors involved in African fashion production (Aspers and Skov 2006). The study has also achieved a nuanced understanding of the systemic barriers and power structures influencing the visibilities of African designer fashion within global transnational fashion circuits, and the function of AFWL in deepening public engagement with contemporary African and non-African producers, communities, and aesthetics.

Although Fashion Week is a subject of notable interest in academia, little has been written about its materialisation and manifestation in the diaspora context. This study on AFWL from a diaspora and transnational perspective contributes to the study of African fashion, and fashion systems. This study reveals AFWL as an artistic and commercial site for the visibility of African design practitioners and shows that for the Nigerian diaspora, fashion week plays a pivotal role in the expression and representation of Africa's image in the 21st century.

That fashion is a collective activity encapsulating the production, consumption, and dissemination of symbolic and material objects of clothing should be clear from Chapter Five, where the key players – Nigerian fashion practitioners such as the event founder, fashion show producer, publicists, bloggers, and designers – engage in meaning-making activities at AFWL to positively affirm their multiple allegiances and African ethnonational cultural heritage. African designer fashion is a system and a network of fashion practitioners, organisations, events, practices, and groups working together to create a belief in African fashion. However, African fashion production in the Nigerian diaspora in the UK has been found to have a dynamic of its own. It is necessary to fully accept the implications of the multiple meanings and nature of African fashion.

This thesis adds to the existing literature on the fashion system, fashion week, fashion cities, fashion entrepreneurship, transnational fashion cultures, African diaspora fashion cultures and diaspora fashion media. The aim was to bring into focus the important role of a contemporary diaspora fashion production – AFWL – on both the host and homeland economies and to emphasise the importance of the contemporary Nigerian diaspora and digital media in the identity construction, representations and expressions of African fashions and cultural heritage.

One of the most definitive contributions to knowledge that this thesis makes is that through its empirical and qualitative methodology, and deliberate focus on meaning-making in the

contemporary Nigerian diaspora fashion economy and transnational fashion circuits. It affords a deeper look at the historical, social, cultural, economic, and political factors that coalesce to produce particular transnational identities for British-Nigerian and Nigeria-based designer practitioners and institutions. It is through this interdisciplinary fashion approach and lens that we can observe and acquire in-depth understandings of the micro-level over the systematic modelling of the whole' (Aspers and Skov 2006, p. 803). The methods employed in this research also allowed for acquiring firsthand accounts of the phenomenon of African fashion – production, consumption, and dissemination – as they occur in natural real-life situations (Kawamura 2018).

This thesis has critically interrogated the mission, vision and strategies employed by the British-Nigerian organisers of Africa Fashion Week London to communicate African designer fashions, and fashion producers to a global audience. It emphasises the key role played by the event founder, Olori (Queen) Aderonke Ademiluyi-Ogunwusi, and how her cultural and social capital is leveraged in her mission to nurture African fashion design practitioners in the 21st century. The research has provided valuable insights into how Nigerian fashion practitioners are positioned as tastemakers and cultural intermediaries of African fashions at AFWL.

The study's in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations, and textual and visual analysis have illuminated the motives, desires, tastes, and practices of the participants, how participants negotiate their identities through their homeland networks as well as the processes underpinning the production, consumption, and dissemination of African fashion at the Fashion Week event. This has allowed for a nuanced understanding of how the Nigerian transnational fashion value chain is produced and reproduced. Furthermore, the analysis of interactions, activities, and practices at the event has demonstrated how ethnicity, gender, national boundaries, and class hierarchies are constructed and reinforced. Finally, the interrogation of AFWL media coverage, media campaigns and promotional strategies, have illuminated the symbolic production of meanings surrounding the gender, femininities, masculinities, black bodies, and representations of Nigerian and Yoruba cultural identities. Crucially, rather than taking AFWL at face value and celebrating its emergence to shape the global discourse around African fashion. The findings contribute valuable insights into the complexities, nuances, and underlying contextual and systemic challenges in the production of African fashion. The findings will inform future research on how in the global digital age, media technologies provide opportunities for marginalised fashion communities in non-Western fashion systems

to self-organise, empower themselves, and challenge dominant Eurocentric narratives in the industry.

Areas for Future Research: This thesis primarily focused on British Nigerian fashion design practitioners at AFWL, providing limited information on non-Nigerian designers. Further research is needed to explore the symbolic production of African designer fashion, particularly with other African-national groups like TIKZN (the South collective), highlighting their transnational activities and processes of creating and attributing meanings to products, designs, and events within the African diaspora fashion system.

Future studies could compare diaspora design practitioners, specifically British Nigerians, with American Nigerians or Nigerian producers in other countries. This could interrogate some of the impacts of the transfer of knowledge of the diaspora fashion communities to their home country of origin on work practices and entrepreneurial outcomes. A comprehensive comparative study could investigate the symbolic production of African fashion in each Africa Fashion Week event hosted in major European capital cities such as New York, London, Italy, and Paris, thereby contributing to our understanding of the transnational dynamics of contemporary African fashion.

Additionally, a comparative study could examine Nigerian diaspora design practitioners by comparing male and female designers in the UK and analysing the transnational supply chain employed in their design practices. This would shed light on the gendered aspects of design and the broader implications of the transnational fashion industry for Nigerian diaspora designers.

Appendix A - AFWL Exhibition Stands/Arena (researcher's pictures)





The Robing room at the Freemason Hall, where exhibitors display their commodities and models pose for photos.



Freemason Hall - The layout of exhibitor stands on the 1st Floor Vestibule. The gates create a physical border or boundary between the TIKZN collective on the other side and the luxury brand. The arrangement of minimal exhibiting stands serves to illuminate the architectural designs and aesthetics of the room.



Aurelian (2019)
Story



Azzi Glasser – The Perfume



Seychelles Enterprise Agency (2019)



Vanessa Gounden exhibition display (2019)



Freemason Hall, Stairs leading to the ground floor open space exhibition and food hall, AFWL 2018



Dawn Eseff Exhibition Stand at AFWL 2018 – designer's photo on Facebook



AFWL STAFF Badge during my Volunteering at the 2017 edition of the event



Oyela exhibition display at AFWL 2018. The Spanish vendor informed me during an informal conversation that she travels across Asia and Africa to source for these exclusive African jewelleries produced in small quantities.



KitengeStore - Sian at her exhibition stall display at AFWL 2018, Photo from the Kitengestore's Facebook page

Appendix B - Clothing Collections



Nigeria-based design Label Valerie Azinge Atelier at AFWL 2017. The collection is a print and monotone colour mixture.



Ghana Brand Turbo at AFWL 2017 =



Nigeria-based Design Label Becca's Apparel AFWL 2017



Palse Hommes at AFWL 2017 Menswear





AFWL 2017 Catwalk presentation – George Adesegun Nsibidi inspired garment

The nsibidi is the communicative device and writing system (Kalu 1978) developed and created by the Ekoi (also known as Ejagham) people of the northern Cross River region in present-day Nigeria. It is a ‘system of recording, hiding and transmitting knowledge’ (Okpu 2015, pp. 88-89)

Nsibidi is a pictographic artistic expression used in the pre-colonial era for different purposes, but because it was tagged as a secretive cult means of communication especially by the missionaries, many people avoided the usage, which is contrary to the present-day ideology.

The sign system developed among the Ejagham people and became demonised by foreign missionaries after contact with British colonialism. The use of the ancient script by the British-Nigerian designer and the presentation of the collection within the context of AFWL catwalk show reflects the affordances provided by contemporary fashion for self-expression and reclamation of symbols of cultural heritage.

Appendix C – Selection of AFWL Media Campaign and Posters



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- JENNI DESIGNS
- ANAISARTS
- COTILDA'S FASHION
- CONTINENT CLOTHING
- DENMAR DISTURBING
- DAVIVA
- DJALIS CREATIONS
- KITENGE
- KNIT & WAX
- LE EKHAYA
- LAURA JANE FASHION
- MEME BETE
- SLUU
- JENNI DEZIGNS
- MOTHER NATURE
- COUTURE
- NEWELL ACCESSORIES
- SET UP
- PEPPER FRUIT
- RICOTON
- SETTLERS STORE
- SHERENE MELINDA
- SIGNATURE SECRET
- TRYBAL TRENDZ
- VICTORIA GRACE
- AFWL
- H.O.T BY YEMI ALADE
- JUSTINE SPARROW
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- PRINTED SOLES
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AFWL 2017 - SHOW SCHEDULE:
www.africafashionweeklondon.com

(DAY 1) FRIDAY, 11TH AUGUST 2017		(DAY 2) SAT. 12TH AUGUST 2017		
5PM		3PM	5PM	
7PM		7PM		
ACE COLLECTION BY TOUR NIGERIA PRESENTS				
1. ADESEGUN GEORGE	1. REGALLIA BY FAL	1. NEVICE	1. VALERIE AZINGE ATELIER	1. BLINGSHIKI
2. GREY ON GRAY	2. KOLA KUDUS	2. YEMZI	2. LUVITA CREATIONS	2. SOBOYE
3. DE- BEAUHARNAIS MABHUNU	3. ARAEWA	3. DAHRIO	3. BECCA APPAREL	3. MARY MARTIN
4. PURPOSE	4. GODWIN GREEN	4. I-KOLLECTION	4. TOBHAMS COLORS	4. NEO PELE
5. IBRAHIM MUSA	5. MAUFECHI	5. TALANSI	5. JUTU	5. TSITSI FRED
6. NAADOLEY	6. BIJELLY	6. BIBINI	6. ABISOLA AKANNI	6. VATACASE
	7. MON' AMI FOR MOREMI	7. ILLICIA	7. TRIBAL PIECES	7. STITCHES
		8. SIGNATURE SECRET	8. TUBO	8. CAESAR COUTURE
				9. PALEDI SEGAPO

AFWL
AFRICA FASHION WEEK LONDON
PRESENTS

HOW TO BUILD A

Fashion Brand

FRI.10 AUGUST,2018
4:30PM-5:30PM



**ANDRE HUMPHREY
MODESTE**
*Co founder & Creative
Director THIRDS*



BIDEMI ZAKARIYAU
Founder of LSF PR



MARIAM MOLA
MentorMatcher



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AFWL Seminar poster 2018

AFRICA FASHION WEEK LONDON 2018 SCHEDULE

FRIDAY / AUG 10

Designer	Representing
Kachi Blazers	Nigeria
Mercy Azupwah	Ghana
Sista By Eyoro	Nigeria
Sarayaa	Senegal
George Amua	Ghana
Belois Couture	Nigeria
Evelyne Babin	Tanzania
TIKZN	South Africa

FRIDAY / AUG 10

Designer	Representing
Pearl Of Africa	Angola
Mavaro Bags	Italy
Awa Kermel	Luxembourg
Michi Knitwear	USA
Queen Diambi	USA
MIA London	Nigeria / UK
Onyx By Valentina	Nigeria

TIME: 3:00PM

TIME: 6:00PM

SATURDAY / AUG 11



Designer	Representing
Ethnic Revival	France/ Cameroon
Afrodite	Congo / UK
Preline	Zimbabwe
Rusuvero	Namibia / UK
House of Yaya	Sierra Leone
De Velasco Gallery	Morocco
Aphia Sakyi	Ghana
WB Collection	Ghana
Kiannara	UK
Fresh and Different	Somalia

TIME: 1:00PM

SATURDAY / AUG 11

Designer	Representing
Ganiyat	Nigeria
Erenti	Nigeria
Becca Apparel	Nigeria
Catherine Monique	Ivory Coast / Cameroon / UK
Atelier Julieta	Cameroon / UK
Manassas	Angola
Nedim Designs	South Africa
Abby Lewis	Tanzania / USA
Jesu Segun London	Nigeria / UK
Beau Sapeur	Uganda / UK
Baoba Brasil	Brazil

TIME: 3:30PM

SATURDAY / AUG 11

Designer	Representing
Van Else	Netherlands
Soboye	Nigeria / UK
Mary Martin	UK
Blingshiki	Nigeria
Signature Secrets	Nigeria
AdaChic Designs	Nigeria / USA
Lady Biba	Nigeria
Mamadou Fall-	Senegal
Tobams Color	Nigeria / UK
Moremi Collection	Nigeria

TIME: 6:30PM

AFRICA FASHION WEEK LONDON 2018 EXHIBITORS

Exhibitor	Representing
Rare Culture London	UK
Ebi by Avu Clothing	UK
Kitu Kali	Kenya
Ethnicity Clothing	West Africa
Bakwai Bags	Nigeria
ATM Kollectionz	Nigeria
Dawn Eseff	UK
Gooding and Mai	UK
Lady Biba	Nigeria
Hakiza/Oyela	UK
All4Yeshua	UK
Pearl of Africa	Angola
VanElse	Holland
Beau Sapeur	Uganda
SARAYAA	Sierra Leone
Akpos Okudu	Sierra Leone

Trade & Investment KZN Representing South Africa
Divu
Gugu Mobile Boutique
Izembatho
Leather Touch
SHWE
Style n Pride Fashion
Yadah Praise Exclusive Designs

Exhibitor	Representing
Black Bamboo Clothing	UK
Kitenge	Tanzania
Melina Hope	UK
TemAD Collections	UK
Fans Face	China
TheAfroStylist	UK/Africa
Atelier Julieta Manassas	Angola
MsEDivine	UK
TOBAMS COLORS	UK
Ahjaye	UK
Ganiyat	UK
Signature Secret	Nigeria

Exhibitor	Representing
Soboye	Nigeria/UK
Aso	Nigeria
Jesu Segun London	UK/Nigeria
Becca Apparel	Nigeria
N'NANYA	Nigeria
Utopia Cosmetix	UK
Aiinomoh Accessories	UK/West Africa
Emma Bird Accessories	Dubai
Acquilla Jewellery & Accessories	UK
Food Junkee	Caribbean

AFWL exhibition 2018 digital listing: participating vendors/exhibitors are depicted as representatives of specific countries. Nigerian is well represented at the exhibition stands.



Africa Fashion Week
London 2019

9-10th August
Freemasons' Hall, 60 Great Queen Str.,
London WC2B 5AZ

DOORS OPEN FROM **1PM** TICKETS AVAILABLE @ **EVENTBRITE**

FASHION

SAVE THE DATE! London's biggest Africa Fashion show takes centre stage

AMOR Magazine UK – AFWL 2019 publicity



FASHION

**This event is not to be missed:
Africa Fashion Week London
(AFWL) 2019**

2ND JULY 2019 2 MINUTE READ

MelanMag 2019 AFWL publicity

Selection of AFWL MEDIA COVERAGE.

African fashion Guide (2011) Africa Fashion Week London Event Update,
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Appendix D: The Event Venues: Gibson, Olympia and Freemason Hall



AFWL Catwalk Show at the Gibson Hall, 2011 (Image source AFWL website)



AFWL Catwalk Show at the Gibson Hall 2011 (Image source AFWL website)



AFWL Catwalk Show at the Olympia Hall 2016 (Image source AFWL website)



AFWL Catwalk Show at the Freemason Hall 2018 (Image source AFWL website)



AFWL 2018: Music performance (Image source AFWL website)

AFWL 2018 CALL FOR DESIGNER PARTICIPATION

Text:

BE A DESIGNER FOR AFWL2018

Are you a designer who wants to present a collection at the biggest African fashion event in Europe? Applications are now open for shows taking place 10-11 August 2018.

Applications will be reviewed and narrowed down to a set of designers who will be selected to participate in the show, conducted by independent professionals in the industry. The panel of professionals will help make final selections for AFWL 2018. Designers who are chosen to participate will be notified as soon as possible. AFWL will make a public announcement of these designers with a press release.

*Think you have what it takes to get your collection on the runway? **APPLY HERE!***

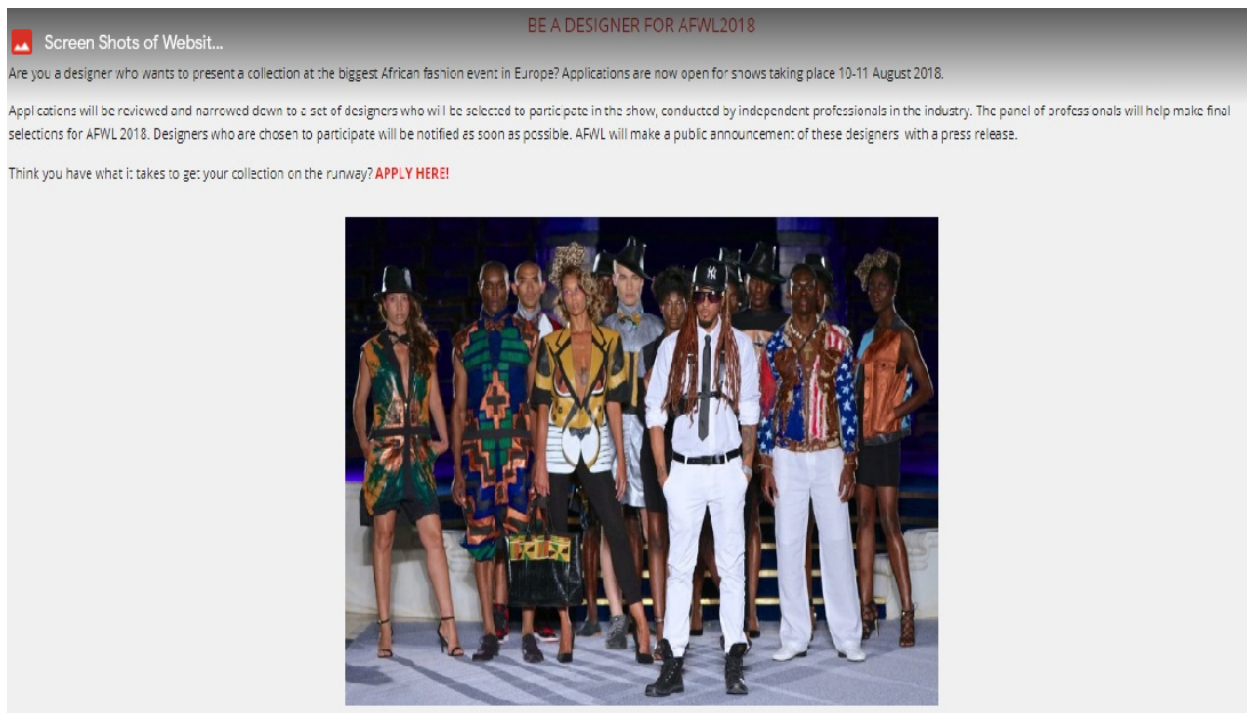


Image. Screenshot of call for designers taken from the AFWL website.

AFWL Call for Exhibitors

Text:

EXHIBIT AT AFWL 2018

Showcase your merchandise in front of a vibrant and eclectic audience during the biggest Africa Fashion show in Europe. AFWL 2018 will be promoting exhibition participants through all available offline and offline [sic] channels, including website, social networks (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Brand Influencers) along with magazine, media outlets and email blasts to fashion enthusiasts and lovers.

To secure your exhibition space or advertising space contact us.

EXHIBIT AT AFWL 2018

Showcase your merchandise in front of a vibrant and eclectic audience during the biggest Africa Fashion show in Europe. AFWL 2018 will be promoting exhibition participants through all available offline and offline channels, including website, social networks (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Brand Influencers) along with magazine, media outlets and email blasts to fashion enthusiasts and lovers.

To secure your exhibition space or advertising space [contact us](#).

<h4>SHOWCASE AT AFWL 2018</h4> <p>All our Exhibitor packages include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2x3m metric space including;• Hanging rail or Table & Chair• Overnight security• 2 Dedicated Exhibition Managers• Volunteers to help you setup, if necessary• Promotion on our social media platforms, website and newsletter lists• Distribution of your promotional material• Access to all Official AFWL Exhibition Photography & Video <p>**you will be able to bring your own mannequins or display settings or we can provide at an additional cost</p>	<h4>A TYPICAL AFWL AUDIENCE BY NUMBERS:</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 5,000 Attended AFWL 2017 over 2 days<ul style="list-style-type: none">◦ 63% Female and 37% Male;◦ 69% UK based, 21% European visitors and 10% African & Rest of World visitors◦ Age range: 25-45 years• 7,987 mentions of #afwl2017 on Twitter over event week• 12,439 images tagged #atwland #atwL2017 on Instagram over event week• #afwl & #africafashionweeklondon reached over 50 million impressions in 2017	<h4>ADVERTISING IN AFRICA FASHION WEEK 2018 MAGAZINE</h4> <p>Gain exposure to 40,000 fashion fans in the AFWL only glossy magazine dedicated to covering the African fashion scene.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Full page ads are available for the 2018 issue <h4>BY THE NUMBERS</h4> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 5,000 readership of Africa Fashion Week 2017 Magazine• 93,000 Facebook Likes, 95000 Followers, 15,000 post impression a week• 100,000+ strong email listbase• 36,366 Twitter followers• 100,000+ unique website visitors annually	
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A screenshot of AFWL's Call for Exhibitors, 2018, taken from the AFWL website. Benefits of participating include an exhibition stand at the event venue, support setting up, and promotion across multiple AFWL media platforms.

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