

Methodologies for the Creolization of Fashion Studies

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Abstract

Since its inception fashion studies has occupied niche fields of enquiry that have focussed largely on Eurocentric paradigms of discussion around the engagement with fashion objects and the development and display of status and identity. Pockets of enquiry have focussed on areas outside of the Eurocentric western cannon but largely remain apart from what is considered established fashion studies. With this in mind it is clear that the structures and parameters of what can be determined as legitimate fashion study are based firmly within the considerations of Eurocentric epistemologies. This then shapes all other studies of clothing and determines whether they are allowed a place within the exclusive world of fashion studies.

This poses a challenge which the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora (CIAD) has sought, in some way, to rectify. CIAD has been developed and established to collate research and broaden academic discourse around the development of fashion studies from the perspective of people within the African Diaspora. With that aim in mind, CIAD held its first dress conference on the 4th of May, 2018 in order to bring together researchers in the field with this focus. The conference was entitled Si Wi Yah: Sartorial Representations of the African Diaspora. “Si Wi Yah” a Jamaican patois phrase which translates to “we are here” was a call for the wider fashion studies community to recognise and acknowledge the engagement with the sociology and psychology of dress taking place which doesn’t centre white western hegemonic ideology.

INTRODUCTION

Approaching the field of fashion studies often requires much more than just an interest in the aesthetics of clothing and textiles and wanting to know how to construct garments. Knowledge of the field requires an awareness of the foundational principles such as interpretation of signs and symbols, understanding of phenomenology, theories around appearance and performativity, and the concepts of power and domination. These ideas have become central to the sociological understanding of how people engage with fashion. However, this social insight is almost always predicated on the experiences of the White Western scholars who wrote them; because of this, the theoretical discussions that underpin the general analysis of fashion are applied without nuance or enabled without consideration of the circumstances of a non-White Western demographic. The generality of these concepts is considered to provide the foundation for everyone, everywhere, regardless of experience or belief.

In this article, I discuss how the African Diaspora, itself a multi-layered and multi geographical concept, needs to have particularly self-focused epistemological and ontological perspectives applied to it due to the multi-layered “creolized” aspect of the people that constitute its body.

I suggest that a combination of the historic Black subjugation in the West and the principles of White Western codes of conduct have left many people of African heritage believing that adherence to sartorial and behavioural expectations will enable acceptability and alleviate discrimination.

As a Black female researcher from the United Kingdom, founder of the Costume Institute of the African Diaspora (CIAD), and a member of the Western African Diaspora, I suggest alternative methodologies for approaching fashion studies for the African Diaspora due to the differences in history and experience of Black people. For this, I use the *Dress and the African Diaspora* methodology created by Professor Carol Tulloch in 2016 and expand upon her initial ideas to see how they can be applied. I also analyze and offer a case study using an experimental interchangeable methodology that I created to think more critically about the way a researcher might approach fashion studies in this area. The term “fashion studies” is used throughout, but it must be understood that in this context “fashion” encompasses all items of dress that can often be multifunctional and used in a variety of settings.

CLASS AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

The Costume Institute of the African Diaspora (CIAD) endeavors to be aware of all types of African Diasporas and bring them into focus and consideration when discussing the dress history and culture of people of African heritage. As the African Diaspora itself has no clearly defined borders or designated landmass, it becomes apparent that the concept of the African Diaspora is determined by the people and is therefore wherever the people reside. Discussions on the formation and makeup of diasporas in or outside of the African continent, cannot ignore issues of class as it becomes an important factor in how Black people navigate their societies. Bearing the burden of mainstream perceptions developed through historic consequences and subsequent sensitivities pertaining to phenotypical features has meant that Black people are often relegated to working- or lower-class positions within society. Even through acquisitions of wealth, education, and social activity, they are still likely to be subjected to government legislation which results, in some way, to their disenfranchisement.

Almost as a rejection of the disenfranchisement and enforced class positioning, Tulloch suggests that Black people have a propensity for dressing well and coined the triumvirate of “style-fashion-dress” to discuss the different ways in which Black people engage with clothing and how that clothing then speaks to their sense of style and “cool” (Tulloch, 2010 & 2016). This is not to be read as universal or essentialist; however, the tendency to focus on clothing that makes one stand out or look smart is noticeable amongst many groups within the Western African Diaspora and can be viewed as a way for Black people to escape the subjugation and discrimination of the class constructs they are consigned to. This is not exactly the kind of “conspicuous consumption,” that Thorstein Veblen (1899) describes — where a person wears luxurious or high-priced items as a way

of signaling that they possess a wealthy status — but it does align with the concept of *smaditisation* as coined by Professor Rex Nettleford, who argues that dress and behaviour play an important role in rehumanizing deprived and oppressed members of society, enabling them to adopt new identities as people of self-worth and value (Pinnock 2007: 10). Essentially, they become somebody, or “smadi” in Jamaican patois. The inclination Black people feel towards dressing up also lends itself to the concept of respectability politics as devised by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (Brooks Higginbotham, 1994: 199), which has also become a way for the Black person to divorce themselves from their relegated class positions and use sartorialism to rehumanize themselves within mainstream culture.

Negotiating class constructs in the different diasporas stemming from Africa brings its own set of challenges that feed into Black people’s sense of self and informs their dress practices.

As the concerns of people of African heritage have largely been ignored within canonical fashion and dress studies discourses, matters of how they came to be where they are (both metaphysically and geographically) have become secondary to the discussions on the wearing and designing of clothing.

ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

CIAD aims to establish a place for the study of clothing and dress history from the African Diaspora. Having studied dress and fashion from a European perspective and having also researched clothing engagement and ritualistic dress practices from parts of the African Diaspora, it is clear that European perspectives on fashion studies do not sufficiently contemplate the intricacies likely to affect Black people and therefore neglect to understand crucial nuances in Diasporic dress. European philosophers, sociologists, and theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty provide a foundational understanding and introduction to ideas that are utilized within fashion studies in general and have been considered canonical theorists in this field; however, I believe a more targeted focus needs to be applied for African Diaspora fashion studies.

A mode of study and method of understanding dress practices that encapsulate the experiences of people of African heritage needs to be developed to properly understand the intricacies of the history and development of African

Diaspora clothing. That being said, suggesting one style or one type of method is problematic as no group or collective of people faces all the same concerns or challenges; however, there are universal issues that impact more people in the African Diaspora than not. Issues like history, race, social perception, and class are a few factors worthy of analysis when approaching the study of these communities.

Viewing clothing from a purely aesthetic perspective, although very engaging and entertaining, is often reductive. Examining the symbolic nature of clothing fosters important insights into how the wearer feels and the messages they want to portray through their dress. I suggest that engaging with the epistemological and ontological approaches that impact how Black people dress is a necessity for developing our understanding. The prevailing belief about the Black person in the West has consisted of a catalog of negative descriptions and notions that infect the perceptions of non-Black people and Black people alike. These descriptions, which are largely propagated through the media, then form the basis for how Black people think of themselves. In his work on media and representation, Stuart Hall discusses how communication is linked to power and those who control the media control the means by which the public receives their information and determine how certain groups will be represented (Hall, 1981, & 1997). Hall's research and analysis in the area helps us recognize why and how negative prevailing beliefs persist.

The West has presented itself not just as the place of righteousness, civility, and normality but also of avant-garde thought, creativity, innovation, and the basis for all correct thinking. Western ideologies reside in a place where the concepts of existing and appearing have remained unquestioned and seen as the definitive knowledge from which all other knowledge must emerge. The knowledge presents an authority and hierarchy through the domination of its establishment and therefore determines everyone else's status in relation to it. Any widely debated and considered discourse that enters the field after the global sweep of Westernization must align with or defer to Western conscripts to be allowed a platform for discussion. Yet the current cohort of scholarly theories dominating the field of fashion studies does not consider the depth of complexities and intricacies of being that exist for the racialized body. In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) discusses in depth how the work of Foucault is inadequate when seeking the voice of the voiceless. She posits that the European scholars that seek to speak for and about "the other" should attempt to "know" the other and engage them in speaking about themselves. Furthermore, in questioning the validity of White Western scholarship to position itself as the bearers of all knowledge who can speak to the experience of the otherized, Spivak provides a valued critique of what is considered foundational to the field. In her essay *Race-Based Epistemologies: The Role of Race and Dominance in*

Knowledge Production, Shana Almeida echoes Spivak's argument. Almeida states, "Western modernism and culture has deeply embedded normative assumptions and beliefs of the world and one's (white, male) experiences in it" (Almeida, 2015: 83).¹

Almeida is precise with her point about the foundations of acceptable knowledge and how these foundations present a particularly monocultural view. She further states that "Eurocentric epistemologies validate the perspectives of Europeans and/or Euro-Americans as the norm while continuing to invalidate the experiences, ways of knowing and thinking of people of color" (Almeida, 2015: 86).² This discussion on the dominance of Western knowledge highlights the fact that the study of fashion and recognized philosophies around vestimentary engagement are based within a White Western framework that centers itself and determines everything outside of itself as other. Alongside the inevitable discussion on otherising, Bernal also alludes to discussions within some fashion studies circles that consider non-Western dress to not align with the established principles of fashion, yet elements of non-Western dress dismissively labeled "traditional" and "ethnic" have been used in the collections of numerous Western designers many times over. Thankfully in recent years, the understanding of what fashion is has expanded to reject the reductive classification of dress practices outside of the West. However, having centered a Western ideology for so long, fashion scholars still struggle to characterize fashion and dress outside of the West without using the recentring "non-Western fashion."

Perhaps the defining of fashion systems is in itself a problem and yet another factor of Western fashion studies that needs to be dismantled.

The progenitors of this knowledge (being invariably White, male, sometimes female, but almost certainly middle class and upper class) become gatekeepers, determining what can be classified as part of the fashion system. In her essay *Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research*, Kim V. L. England, whilst acknowledging White male dominance, discusses the use of a

¹ This statement by Almeida was inspired by the article: "Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Theory, and Critical Raced-Generated Epistemologies: Recognizing Students of Color as Holders and Creators of Knowledge" by Dolores Delgado Bernal, 2002.

² See above footnote; this statement was also inspired by Bernal (2002).

feminist and poststructuralist approach to engage with “the other.” England asks, “can we incorporate the voices of ‘others’ without colonizing them in a manner that reinforces patterns of domination?” (England, 1994: 242) This is a valid question and one worthy of further discussion, yet it still seems to suggest that domination by White Western epistemologies is inevitable.

As if in answer to England’s question, Almeida states:

Most, if not all of the epistemologies currently legitimated in academia do not arise out of the histories of racialized groups. This is not to say that those who employ a range of epistemologies from positivism to post-structuralism are racist. It says something about the “natural” (see: dominance as natural) tendencies to use epistemologies from the social and historical experiences of whites. We need to ask ourselves what negative consequences this might have for people of colour, as well as scholars of colour. (2015: 98)

England’s article agonizes over the problem of executing a satisfactory approach to marginalized research subjects, without objectification or fearing appropriation of the marginalized voice, whilst to Almeida the solution is simple: decentralize White Western knowledge and include diverse epistemologies that offer a more global perspective.

An understanding of African Diaspora dress and clothing viewed through the lens of Whiteness is complex as the diaspora, certainly the Americas but specifically the Caribbean and Latin America, is historically informed by the geo-political, cultural, and economic conduct of Europeans, therefore Western concerns or expectations when discussing ideas of dress or behaviour become paramount. I would suggest that it is the preference of the “gatekeepers” that people of African heritage strive to maintain the behavioural and sartorial structures that form the expectations of being a “good” and “acceptable” person. These beliefs align with the analyses performed by Franz Fanon when discussing sectors of the Martinican and French communities which were central to his work *Black Skin White Masks* (1952). Here he establishes that the belief in an adopted Whiteness was seen (by both Black and White people) as fundamental to the basic value of a Black person. Thus, for the Caribbean, adoption of and alignment with European values in terms of dress practices and fashion analyses helps maintain the current status quo.

The Western African Diaspora is the site of creolization for the continents of Africa, Asia, and Europe and as European ideologies have formed the basis of knowledge throughout the Western world, the strictures that are placed on creolized Black bodies are of European extraction and designed to support European-based expectations and ways of being. The impact these rigid expectations and limitations have on the Black body suggests that Black people are continually

attempting to adhere to standards of behaviour and appearance that don't align with what they need to live a fulfilling existence. The expectations of Black existence can often cause physical and mental harm and social and economic disenfranchisement. They might range from the straightening of hair to the bleaching of skin or the surgical adjustment of the body or facial features. These procedures are of course always personal choices of the individual, but when one is raised in an environment that never centres one's natural appearance in an enduringly positive way and actively seeks to demonstrate that the skin, hair, and body one lives in is unacceptable, the question remains how much is personal choice attributed to conditioning?

An ontological analysis reveals how the creolized Black person develops their understanding of themselves, the basic principles that determine their reality, personal and social perception, world view, and beingness. Who is the creolized Black person and are they allowed to be who they are or who they want to be without restriction or hindrance? There are countless incidents of Black children and Black women being removed from school or reprimanded at work because their hair didn't align with the accepted dress code, the shape of their bodies and the clothing they chose to wear clung too readily and thus was deemed unacceptable, their accent too regional highlighting their class and background, their skin not quite the right shade to be considered attractive or trendy enough for the latest fashion shoot, etc. In recent years, certain magazine editorials and advertisements (across multiple media and genres) have sought to rectify the decades-long glaring omission of dark-skinned models by using very dark-skinned models in almost every fashion shoot. Although on the surface these models make a much-needed addition to the fashion landscape, these young people are getting work, and very dark skin is being seen in a positive light, the sudden influx of very dark-skinned models raises questions about fetishization, which again demerits Blackness. The models themselves have reported not being catered to by makeup artists and hairstylists at fashion shows and photoshoots and there is a general feeling that the use of these models amounts to a superficiality that not only doesn't see the models for who they are, but has objectified their skin shade as a trend, which continues the surreptitious commodification of Blackness that has existed since enslavement.

The social reality and the concept of "being" for Black women specifically, relate directly to the way the Black woman has been portrayed and received in the West. The beliefs of a patriarchal society have projected innate lasciviousness and hyper-sexualization onto Black women's bodies that have robbed them of their agency and continue to do so. Even though positions of the Black woman in popular culture have changed from chattel used as breeding stock or wet nurses to the plantation owners' children in the Americas, to arriving as the first Black First Lady of the United States and the first biracial female Vice President of the

United States, the Black woman has occupied a space that has required her to oftentimes show inhuman strength (Romero, 2000; Ashley, 2014). Yet, the Strong Black Woman sits uncomfortably next to the Angry Black Woman whose anger partly stems from the expectation to demonstrate unmitigated strength without quiescence. The point where strength and anger converge is often where Black female-led movements, institutions, or creative expressions arise, but enforced trauma should not be the catalyst for positive change.

These binaries represent various negative descriptors projected onto Black women and girls that don't offer consideration for their social, economic, or political circumstances but strongly suggest that their realities are only ever self-generated and not the legacy of historical consequence. These descriptors, designed by the global power structures of white supremacy and sustained and policed by those power structures and other Black people through the expectations of respectability, don't allow for softness, vulnerability, or innocence. Right across the Western African Diaspora, Black girls are not afforded the innocence or the care that accompanies childhood. Black girls are often accused of being "fast," that is being sexually active before they're mature enough, or "looking too grown," which is purposely dressing in a way that will cause them undue attention, or even "stealing" the affections of their fathers, brothers, uncles or whoever the nearest male in their family or extended family group is. A 2017 report from Georgetown Law Centre found that "adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their White peers" (Epstein et al., 2017). Unfortunately, these accusations can act as justifications for why abuse of Black girls is sometimes not believed when reported to their families or rarely reported at all (Blackburn Center, 2020).

In adulthood, the Black woman might seek to reclaim this innocence or some form of correctness through her appearance and behaviour that enables her to be seen as someone worthy of the care and consideration she was denied when younger. In an attempt to navigate the minefield of the negative descriptors that seek to pigeonhole Black women and girls into a particular existence, I would argue that in adulthood some Black women have clung to behaviours dictated by respectability that they think will elevate them from negative perceptions of their Black femaleness. In an attempt to reclaim innocence and worthiness, they have adopted respectability. Although it has been highlighted numerous times, one cannot dress or behave away racism, prejudice, or abuse, the dominance and violence of epistemology based on White-centered principles have imposed a false belief that if Black people acquiesce to expectations, they will be acceptable.

The adoption of other cultures' tendencies as a way to avoid otherization and discrimination could arguably promote alienation and or loss of connection to their own culture whilst still being otherized in some way (Fanon, 1952).

In the context of Black people in the West, this presents several challenges at which attempts to rectify are often demonstrated through dress and behaviour. The need to mitigate against racialization, discrimination, and prejudice can and has often caused some Black people in the diaspora to attempt to blend in with the host/mainstream culture. This undoubtedly involves dressing a particular way, speaking with a particular accent, and moving and adopting behaviours of the host/mainstream culture.

What is misunderstood about this behaviour is that the signs and symbols of the host/mainstream culture have a particular meaning when worn or expressed by them. These meanings are not then transferrable to another group when associating with the same signs and symbols as the connotations change due to the understanding and beliefs about that group within the host/mainstream culture.

Current debates around signs of expression, symbolism, and the mediation of self in front of others don't consider the historical or social perspectives of the Black body or parameters that the Black person has to operate within.

Despite discussions around social movements like Black Lives Matter and decolonizing curricula offering to rewrite the playbook of study and analysis, pushback remains since concepts like Critical Race Theory are espoused as creating problems for cultural cohesion. Between ideas of reality and idealism, Whiteness seeks to remain foundational to all discourse. The pushback to inclusive curricula or consideration for marginalized lives represents the contraction of Whiteness demanding to be kept in place as the arbiters of knowledge and the paragons of standardization.

ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF FASHION STUDIES

Although the factors discussed here may not affect all Black people in the African Diaspora at all times, the likelihood is that considerations of class, politics, race and/or ethnicity, colourism, economic ability, social expectations, and limitation of agency will have an impact on the Black sense of self, dress styles, and engagement with clothing.

In her 2016 book *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*, Tulloch offers a methodological model (Figure 1) for analyzing pertinent issues for the African Diaspora. She states that the methodology was developed to illustrate the transnational and transcultural connections between individuals and cultural groups across historical time zones of the African Diaspora (Tulloch, 2016: 8).

Tulloch’s methodological diagram enables us to think about the interconnectivity of different aspects of the lived experience when applying fashion studies to African Diaspora dress cultures. Although the methodological

model was developed some years ago, all aspects of it are still relevant and are likely to remain so for years to come. The model demonstrates that there are clear similarities in many of the factors that emphasize a truly interconnected and intersectional aspect to this approach. In so doing, this model highlights the influence that each element has on another and that none can be viewed in isolation.

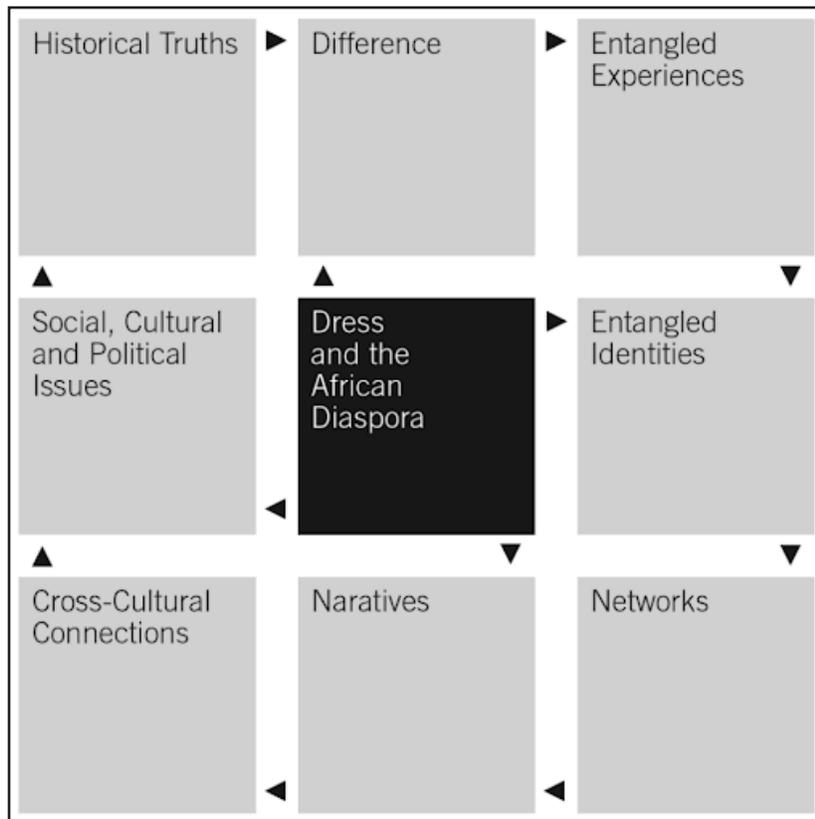


FIGURE 1 DRESS AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA: A METHODOLOGICAL DIAGRAM. COMPOSED BY CAROL TULLOCH, DESIGNED BY SYD SHELTON.

Analysis of the elements in Tulloch's model and how they may impact the engagement with African Diaspora fashion and dress studies suggests that *Historical Truths* element represents not just a history of enslavement, colonization, and discrimination but also the inescapable circumstances and assumptions that impact how Black people are received by others and how they see themselves and each other. The impact this has on fashion studies manifests itself through the non-establishment or erasure of archives or the lack of readily available research about the ability of Black people to engage in the Western or global fashion systems.

The *Narratives* element may include the personal, collective, and projected narratives that highlight commonly held beliefs about the group, ideologies held within the group, or even how different understandings of the same circumstances can reveal distinct beliefs. The collective and personal narratives across the African Diaspora lend a particular depth of analysis to the understanding of fashion studies as they urge a more heterogeneous approach. Moving away from essentialist ideology enables us to allow Black people the full range of human experience.

Understanding *Difference* highlights the concept of otherization, as for something to be different there needs to be a universal agreement on what is considered conventional. A subject that can be considered conventional or typical occupies a dominant position in a culture, anything that does not align with that often lies outside of that culture's range of acceptability. This factor asks that we understand what the differences are and how those differences are attributed to the fashion studies of this community.

Awareness of dress practices across the African Diaspora not only highlights historical connections but also enables people from diverse groups to develop ties and alliances that support learning and understanding. Although the development of *Networks* isn't something that has happened formally on a large scale, various scholars and researchers across the diaspora are thankfully making valuable efforts at rectifying the deficit.

As with the analysis of *Narratives*, *Entangled Experiences* suggest that the encounters of any particular group within the African Diaspora have been intrinsically intertwined with others who may or may not also be a part of the African Diaspora. An analysis of this element might also suggest experiences that have involved conflict or development of close ties, such as race riots or unity/solidarity marches, and understanding how those ties have influenced a group or individuals' relationship with fashion.

It could be suggested that *Cross-Cultural Connections* can lead to *Entangled Experiences* as inevitably the proximity and mixing of cultures fosters the development of close ties and a stronger awareness of other cultures' nuances. This element speaks directly to Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridization where two different cultures, perhaps the culture of an immigrant or otherized person, combines with the host/mainstream culture, thereby developing a third culture that is neither completely one nor the other but an amalgamation of the two. This is seen across the Western African Diaspora where creolized cultures have developed in the Americas from a mixture of African retentions, European characteristics, and Asian and sometimes Indigenous influences.

Entangled Identities suggests understanding how people of African heritage establish their sense of self. This may be through employment, education, social activities, expectations, and codes of conduct of their families or communities or how their beliefs impact how they see themselves. I understand entangled identities to speak directly to the various intersectionalities of Black identities and how these considerations might impact fashion studies for a particular group. Again, it becomes necessary to think about the ability of access, limitations to being or development of self, the impact of their identity on their knowledge, or the epistemological violence they may have faced.

I would also suggest that entangled identities relate directly to the creolized self, the person of mixed heritage, and the person who passes as one race but understands themselves to be another. Identities based on skin colour come with a projected set of expected behaviours that can be limiting to the person who feels they don't fit into the acceptable expected appearance or who doesn't want to adhere to the projected expectations.

Finally, when approaching *Social, Cultural, and Political Issues*, comprehension of the real-life impacts of social and institutional racism, discrimination, hatred, social disenfranchisement, colourism, and lack of opportunity needs to be understood. This element brings the overall analysis back to the beginning with Historical Truths, as the social, cultural, and political issues are almost certainly derived from the historical relationship between the people in the African Diaspora and the white supremacist power structures of the West.

Incidences of racism and discrimination become impactful and sometimes debilitating to the engagement and understanding of fashion studies. Without wanting to be too controversial, the fact that I am writing an essay about the need to creolize and reconsider the approach to fashion studies when thinking of the African Diaspora could itself be considered a cultural and political issue as in 2022, one would hope this approach would be obvious. However, it is clear that fashion studies as we've known it is a niche, exclusive club that has been slow to change or believe it needs to.

Being a Black researcher in this field can be exhausting as the bank of resources is very scant to assist one's focus or one is often operating within the existing miasma of limiting beliefs and projections which can hamper one's progress.

Understanding the social, cultural, and political issues of the African Diaspora means acknowledging the struggle to access.

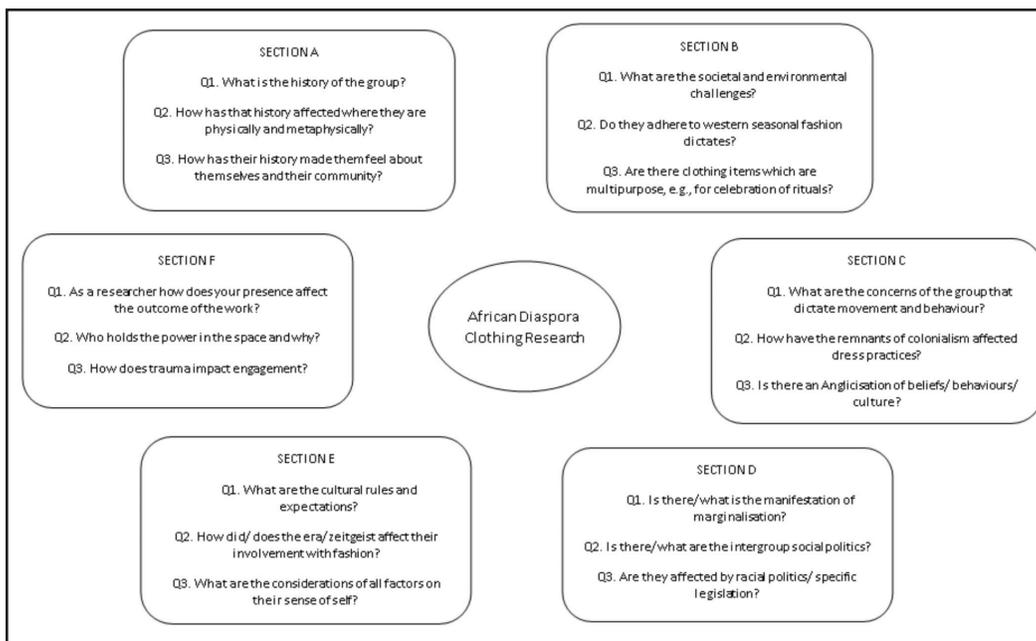


FIGURE 2 THE CIAD AFRICAN DIASPORA CLOTHING RESEARCH MODEL.

The CIAD Model (Figure 2) for African Diaspora fashion research uses a few of the same factors that Tulloch had included in her model but expands them into questions for the researcher to consider when approaching any particular group. Although the model is in continual development, as all models and methodologies need continual reassessment and revision, the usual elements such as history, culture, societal, and environmental challenges are present. This model has been developed from field research I have undertaken in Africa, Europe, and the Americas where I have learned that my presence as a British Black woman presented challenges to my ability to engage with the information without disruption. Thankfully these challenges were dealt with relatively quickly, but it presented an interesting dynamic I hadn't considered which changed my approach to the research.

It should be understood that whether through archival footage or with live participants, studying the clothing of people who have been marginalized and traumatized in a myriad of different ways requires rigorous ethical consideration. Oftentimes, the creative expressions and material cultures of the African Diaspora and Black people can be approached in an overly casual manner which can be inappropriate and insensitive. This may come from a desire to relate or present oneself as approachable, but it can also suggest a lack of sincerity when engaging with the culture of dress or fashion studies of this group.

What is important is that studies that focus on African Diaspora fashion are treated with the same reverence and respect as fashion studies originating from or focusing on the fashion of anywhere else; doing so will help enable African Diaspora fashion studies to have greater access and viability.

CASE STUDY: LONG WIDE SKIRT

As an example of how I have used this approach, I offer this case study of a skirt, variations of which I have seen in many regions of the Americas. This case study is by no means exhaustive as a full analysis would occupy more words than I have space for here, but hopefully, this brief example provides an adequate snapshot. The methodology approaches the clothing from the culture and history of engagement first, less so from the aesthetic quality although consideration of the aesthetics is necessary to fully understand the impact of the garment.

Due to the nature of the methodology, the questions are designed to be interchangeable depending on the circumstances or community being engaged with. The interchangeability of the research questions means that not all questions may be appropriate for every dress item and so only a few questions can be asked. Conversely, all questions may help provide insight for a particular dress item and so all may be necessary. It would depend on the depth of analysis and the development of the foregrounded knowledge that the researcher has been able to obtain.



FIGURE 3 A DANCER PERFORMING MOVEMENT FROM THE YEMAYA AFRO CUBAN FOLKLORIC DANCE WEARS AN OVERSKIRT AND PETTICOAT WITH FLOUNCE AND UTILIZES THE SKIRT TO MIMIC WAVES OF THE OCEAN. IRVEN LEWIS, CIAD ARCHIVES. .

The long wide skirt (Figure 3) is seen in dances, rituals, celebrations, worship, national costume, or work wear. The skirt is usually made up of anything from four to eight long wide panels of fabric that are usually trapezoid in shape, smaller at the waist, which is usually elasticated or drawstring, and wider at the ankle. Depending on the style of the skirt it may also come with a flounce at the hem.

For this brief example, I will take a question from each section and apply it to the analysis of the long wide skirt.

SAQ1: What is the history of the group?

These are descendants of enslaved Africans who were taken from the West coast of Africa and brought into the Americas to work on the various plantations in the region. Memory retentions of enslaved African ancestors have been passed down through the generations and have developed along with the symbolisms of beliefs.

SBQ3: Are there clothing items which are multipurpose, e.g., for celebration of rituals?

The shape and fullness of the skirt could be considered Georgian or Victorian in appearance and has a distinct resemblance to the type of skirts and petticoats that would have been worn by plantation mistresses. It can therefore be deduced that the style of skirt is drawn from the type of clothing that would have been worn during the height of the enslavement era. To compound this point, depending on the wearer or the purpose the garment is being worn for, the skirt can contain an overskirt and a petticoat adding to the appearance of the fullness.

SDQ1: Is there/what is the manifestation of marginalization?

It could be argued that the wearing of an item of clothing that aligns a people to their enslavement history is in itself a manifestation of historic marginalization. As a cultural item of clothing the skirt positions the wearer in a particular period and environment and connotes a specific history. This history which speaks to the marginalization is conveyed through the style of the skirt, therefore depending on how the skirt is worn and what it is worn for it can be viewed as a symbol of marginalization.

SEQ1: What are the cultural rules and expectations?

When the skirt is worn for folkloric dances, the movements performed with the skirt can become symbolic, signifying the waves of the ocean which alludes to the crossing of slave ships during the Middle Passage. Cultural rules dictate that everyone involved knows and understands this. Depending on the specific representation the wearer is trying to convey, one of the cultural expectations is that the skirt is a particular colour or is made from a certain type of material. During my research I have seen skirts of this type in many different variations: they may be the brightly colored skirts of the Palenqueras in Colombia, the bright white cotton lace of the Candomblé practitioners in Brazil, or even the maroon, white, and navy blue bandana fabric of the Jamaican Folkloric singers. The purpose and cultural expectations of each group suggest what the skirt should look like.

SFQ2: Who holds the power in the space and why?

The performer/practitioner/worker is the one who holds the power in the space. Again, depending on why the skirt is being worn it becomes an item of occasion wear that although sometimes worn casually is usually worn for a special event, and so suggests that some type of activity is going to take place. The skirt contains so much symbolism and history that the wearer immediately commands attention by wearing the garment. It is not a modern fashion item, and some may argue not a fashion item at all, but in the context of an “item of dress,” it is able to be worn in several styles and iterations and speaks directly to an African Diaspora cultural history and legacy.

CONCLUSION

Colonialism provoked semantic and ideological shorthand for the differences amongst people of African heritage by lumping different factors, beliefs, and ways of describing ourselves together. As with much of the propagation of ideas about Black people, this has been demonstrated through the media and has largely worked to further diminish concerns and considerations for individuals and separate groups of African descendants. Not only is the use of shorthand reductive, but it does not allow for the comprehension of variations of factors that are prevalent within the discourse around Black people or African Diaspora fashion studies.

The laziness of shorthand has sought to categorize all people of African heritage the same and in so doing has led Black people and non-Black people to believe in the categorizations and reduce themselves accordingly. Everyone needs to understand that Black people are not a homogeneous mass, and discussions about our subtleties as well as our similarities allow us to deal with our trauma, reclaim part of our humanity, and further establish our beingness.

When approaching fashion studies for the African Diaspora the considerations of any particular group within this global community have to become paramount over the expectations of what is considered “right” or “correct” ways to engage with academia or canonical theoretical frameworks.

The creolization of the Black person in the Western African Diaspora requires a multi-layered approach to clothing analysis.

New models of analysis centered on African Diaspora dress practices, its histories, and norms are needed; but such modes of analysis must themselves offer a myriad of branches to investigate and analyze different aspects of clothing including class, colonial influence, subcultural affiliation, hierarchies, and environmental adaptation. With the decentring of European ideologies in mind, we now need to either reduce colonialist white supremacist ideology that presents its epistemologies as the key knowledge for all groups or abandon its importance to our foundational understanding all together.

Applying interchangeable self-designed forms of analysis to make sense of sartorial practices from the African Diaspora may seem abstract and experimental and suggest that an overturning of established methods of inquiry is the only solution but doing so helps to empower the field of African Diaspora fashion studies and enable the researcher to understand how notions of dress operate outside of the formalities of Western modalities.

Using Tulloch’s *Dress and the African Diaspora: A Methodological Diagram* as the basis for an extensive inquiry has made it clear that the amalgamation and legacy of these issues foreground the Black reclamation of self and development of Black personhood. These models highlight the primary considerations when approaching the study of dress from the African Diaspora. The CIAD model, having used some of the same evaluation factors, offers transposable elements for even more of a comprehensive analysis.

Although the methodologies discussed here are focused on people of African heritage, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay the elements contained within these models are capacious and interchangeable and therefore can be applied to the thorough examination of any group’s dress culture. What is clear from the arguments developed here is that the approach of the study should contain the knowledge of the history and culture of the people it is based on as its foundation.

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