

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

**American Aestheticization of Africinity:
Various Artistic Appropriations of West
African Textiles in the United States**

By

Gillian Bryce Smith

August 2022

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master of Arts degree in the Master of Arts Program in the
Social Sciences

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Sophia Azeb

Preceptor: Dr. Marshall Kramer

INTRODUCTION

Cultural memory can operate, generate, and be maintained through various forms of textile. As an archaeologist with experience in textile craft, I have developed a critical and analytical perspective for how the dynamic interplay of style and culture is displayed through our daily applications of textiles. From its vibrant colors and contrasting patterns to specific designs and weaving techniques, African textiles relay visual messages pertaining to traditions and values sustained throughout the African diaspora. On the one hand, these textiles allow Black Americans to reconnect with their identity. On the other hand, this can sometimes reinforce the commodification and politicization of Blackness. I investigate the cultural phenomenon of how African textiles are applied by Black folks in the United States as a fluid medium of material culture used to demonstrate sensations of diasporic unity, ancestral remembrance and longing, and identity-making. To do so, I follow a history of the constructed aestheticization of what it means to be African American. My dual perspective as critical but celebratory is one that further complicates the relationship to West Africa as a facet of identity for Black Americans. I explain how diasporic traditions, values, and cosmologies are illustrated in artworks incorporated with African textiles by Black American artists. My method is to critically analyze a collection of various American artworks that creatively utilize West African textiles with an analytic borrowed from Salah Hassan's investigative model in *The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics* (1995) on the complex relationship between the artists, their work or product, and the audience. Hassan, a Professor in African and African art, addresses a problematic dichotomy I seek to address in this paper with the selection of artworks. It is a

dichotomy between the study of African art classified as from the contemporary era and those classified as traditional arts, or in, other words, resisting historicization and bringing artistic traditions into the contemporary. These traditions recalled by Hassan, those of color, texture, and even resourcefulness of materials, contrast the typical approaches of modernist style. Hassan contends the distortions and historicizations of tradition from the art industry. The artworks analyzed in this paper were selected for they each demonstrate translations and recontextualizations of West African textile traditions and their associated meanings. With the exponential popularity of West African textile traditions amongst Black Americans, the textiles become a medium to (re)assert Africanity via artistic media. The following various forms of textile art, including fashion and quilting, inevitably despite the artists' intentions demonstrate the legitimizing capabilities of remaining authentic to tradition.

In the United States where the implementation of truly universal freedoms for all has been a continuously arduous process, clothing has performed as a significant multifunctional display for expressing cultural identity. Textile also has a transformative quality allowing individuals to materialize the facets of their identities. One of the most exemplary fashion designers in our time who comes to mind in this discussion of bringing past into present utilizing African textiles for identity development and expression is Dapper Dan of Harlem, a world-renowned haberdasher and designer from New York who samples African fabrics in making a style unique to Harlem. Dapper Dan has collaborated these African-inspired aesthetics with well-known retail brands including GAP and designer brand Gucci. Spanning from the 1970s to the present in his brick-and-mortar shop on 125th Street, his work has inspired much of the fashion observed in Black American culture and western popular culture generally with direct visual references to Africa from the selection of vibrant colors to the identifiable geometric patterns

(see Figure 1). He began producing one-of-a-kind counterfeits of the trendiest upmarket brands of the day and quickly became a celebrity fashion stylist for many of the original hip-hop and R&B singers and rappers and even professional athletes of the 1980s and 1990s including LL Cool J, The Fat Boys, and Eric B. and Rakim (Houghton, 2018). In a radio interview with NPR, Dapper Dan thinks like a historian relating every one of his projects in fashion to the cultural and philosophical movements of revolution (Williams, 2022). His unique garments birthed new forms of wearable culture custom to the American Black experience.

Dapper Dan, like the several other textilists who will be discussed in this thesis, practice resistance via the medium of textile fueled by the forces of Black self-expression and creativity. His intentional manipulations of such luxury textiles into iconic forms of Black fashion were symbolic of challenging the status quo of mediocrity and assimilation. Starting in 1973 Dapper Dan toured Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Tanzania sponsored by New York's Urban League (Houghton, 2018). While in Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia, he met a Fulani tailor from Guinea who made Dap's very first suit. He mentions in a 2021 interview that when he launched into fashion his first inspiration was to borrow the work of African tailors and their local patterns to apply them to the "silhouette of Harlem" (Sadler, 2021). In his blog promoting his upcoming projects including a tell-all book and a biopic, he publishes: "From growing up with holes in my shoes and swimming in The Harlem River, to crossing The River Nile in Africa in search of my identity" (Dapper Dan of Harlem, 2018). While in Africa, he gained a lot of inspiration of how to materialize a modern Black identity, including his inspiration to Africanize premium Western brands. His manipulations of popular designer textiles have resulted in his creations to closely resemble the aesthetics of African fabrics. His textile works have clear references to iconic patterns and motifs of traditional African textiles,

including geometric patterns and line work in addition to a notably vibrant color pallet. The recreations and adaptations of preexisting African textiles by Dapper Dan work to communicate to his consumers a visual message that he has developed to become associated with ideologies of Black socioeconomic success and the Black American Dream. Using an African aesthetic conceptualized by Black Americans' yearning for reconnection to ancestors from the African continent, Dapper Dan has rearticulated luxury fashion popularized in American culture to demonstrate the ideal Black American proud of their African origins and simultaneously living their ancestors' dreams of achieving socioeconomic prosperity. These collaborations between American fashion and African textile tradition are very symbolic of African American history and culture. The vibrancy of African people has been transplanted into the western world where culture(s) morphed and new expressions of identity are able to operate via various textile media.

Figure 1: Dapper Dan in his Harlem haberdashery on 125th Street. Image by Gabriela Celeste. Stats Houghton, 2018. GQ Magazine.



THE SOURCES OF AN AESTHETIC: WEST AFRICAN TEXTILES

The meanings attributed to African textiles have been reformed in U.S. contexts as the aesthetic of Africanity and the meanings associated have been developed and rearticulated by African Americans in United States. The term “Africanity,” conceived by Sarah Fila-Bakabadio (2009) in *The stuff of Africanity*, describes the concept of a universalized African aesthetic developed in Western contexts. The various African textile prints and their production techniques selected to be reclaimed by Black Americans are primarily based in West Africa where most enslaved Africans were forcefully embarked on the Middle Passage westward (Bakabadio, 2009). Consequently, Black Americans select and reclaim West African textile prints and production techniques and, overtime, the reclamation of African traditional textiles on American soil popularized select West African motifs, colors, and types of textiles. A uniquely prevalent example of this popularization of African textile is *kente*, a strip-woven textile intended to be worn by individuals participating in royal rite-of-passage ceremonies throughout western Africa. It is primarily produced by the Ashanti and Ewe peoples in Ghana and made from various strips of vibrantly colorful fabrics woven together to make a complete textile with staggering geometric patterns. Kente comes in many forms and designs. The colors, patterns, the weaving techniques, the warp and weft (or the longitudinal and transverse weaving of threads), and even the identity of the individual creating the textile holds great significance in the various meanings that kente fabrics represent (Smith, 1975). The various designs of the kente textiles in West African each have different meanings associated with particular colors and patterns, and some represent proverbs pertaining to life, death, family, marriage, and war (see Figure 2). Kente, specifically a type of kente made with a red, green, orange, and black colorway, seem to be the most sampled and referenced

African textile in the United States. As in Ghana, it is often used in the U.S. for rite of passage ceremonies like school graduations and weddings. However, the orange, red, green, and black kente designs have become generalized to now represent anything pertaining to Africa and the original meaning of the textile has arguably become lost in transformation. Black Americans innovative reuse of historically significant and culturally particular Afrocentric textiles has reached throughout the fashion and visual art industries and even into the sociopolitical sphere¹.

The art of crafting is significant in West Africa as it relates to the creation myths of traditional cosmologies. Kente is one of the many types of textiles from West Africa that has significance in cosmology and that remains in the contemporary practice of textile production. Writer and photographer Shea Clark Smith describes in “Kente Cloth Motifs” her ethnographic accounts from the early 1970s with weavers and chiefs from the town of Bonwire, Ghana, the principal kente weaving center of the Ashanti region (1975). Smith photographed textiles made by or belonging to her friends Manwere Moses and Chief of Bonwire Nana Okai Abadio. Ashanti kente is like all West African kente in that it is manufactured in narrow strips approximately four inches wide which incorporate weft designs arranged so that when the strips are sewn together, the completed cloth has a patchwork appearance. However, Ashanti kente is unique in the intricacy of the designs, the fineness of the threads, the color variety, and the perfection with which the weave is executed. Each kente design has a name usually associated with the Ashanti peoples’ natural environment and history, like *Nnwdtoa*, or “snail’s bottom”

¹ One of the many controversial misuses of kente fabric to represent American Blackness occurred on Capitol Hill when members of The Black Caucus handed out sashes of kente to lawmakers when entering the Congressional Hall to introduce a quite broad police reform bill after the public execution of George Floyd in 2020 (Paquette, 2020). House Speaker Nancy Pelosi read a speech in the Capitol rotunda and invited all the congresspeople to kneel. This was certainly an interesting demonstration intended to unite the nation and acknowledge racial violence. Regardless of whether one finds this to be a bit awkward or hypocritical, this was a televised performance appropriating kente as a symbol of hope for the American public.

(Figure 2). Some of the names of the cloth are quite ambiguous but many do not ultimately correlate to the circumstances in which the cloth was made for, like *Eka obi nko anka m'awu*, "Somebody wishes my death," and *Owu nhye da*, or "Death has no fixed date" (Figure 2) (1975). *Owu nhye da* is a proverb said to encourage people to live hardworking, positive lives as death may come unexpectedly and allow no time for penance (1975). From Shea Clark Smith's ethnographic accounts, there is a correlation between the design themes of the kente textiles and the names given to them illustrating a narrative associated with Ashanti proverbs. The Ashanti's production of textiles and cultural values that these textiles function to express demands a respect for the process.

Figure 2: Artist unknown. *Owu nhye da*, "Death has no fixed date" (top). *Nnwdtoa*, "snail's bottom" (bottom). Circa 1970.



The crafts of patchwork and applique are traditions that developed in the post-contact era when certain groups native to the Gold Coast produced flags. According to John Gillow, a scholar on African and South Asian textiles, the Fante flags from Ghana exemplify this patchwork tradition which remains in practice today. The Fante developed a religious cult

devoted to military power and they sampled from European military organization by dividing themselves into companies known as *Asafo* (Gillow, 2003). They became rivals to each other and sported flags to represent themselves. They would depict the Union Jack and sometimes the company number. The appliques and patches on these flags would also depict pictorial proverbs applied on both sides of the cloth. Further along the West African coast, the Fon of Benin are also fond of their applied cloths, which depict arrangements of birds, animals, and human figures or a grid depicting the Fon kings with the dates of their reigns (2003). The patchwork tradition has also maintained its significance on American soil by enslaved Africans. American and African American Studies historian Sarah Fil-Bakabadio explains that the patchwork technique of producing quilts was practiced by slaves on plantations who reused pieces of fabric to make blankets and clothes for themselves, and, little by little, they personalized the patterns. The technique was used for communicating to other slaves about escape routes that were mapped within the garments' patchwork (2009). It has since remained a symbol of hope and freedom to practice patchwork. It is commonly produced by contemporary artists who are maintaining the tradition that has practical beginnings in continental Africa, such as the design and production of Fante flags. Diasporic artists also utilize the patchwork tradition as a method of expressing the continuity of the values that the tradition has come to represent, like survival, continuity of legacy, and storytelling. As with the selection of African prints, the practice of patchwork creates a non-spoken language specific to a community and whose rhetoric reflects its particular experience between Africa and America (2009).

Another of the many ethnic communities in western Africa is that of Yoruba. The people of Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria, hold many of the values and traditions that have become significant as they disseminated throughout the diaspora. Among these diasporic sister religions

of Yoruba spirituality include Brazil's Candomblé, Haitian Voodoo, and Afro-Cuban Santeria (Capone, 2007). Much of Yoruba values, traditions and cosmologies associated with craft production are intertwined with the natural landscape of the region in southwest Nigeria. In Aretha Oluwakemi Asakitikpi's research on hand-woven textiles among Yoruba women (2007), they propose a contrary thesis to the misperceptions from past European explorers that women wove merely for domestic purposes while their male counterparts wove as professionals. Yoruba women still dictate and influence fashion trends while also ensuring that the traditional hand-woven cloth is always part of Yoruba fashion. Yoruba women's hand-woven textiles were produced in large strips, like panels. A single panel of cloth may be used as *oja*, (a piece of cloth used by Yoruba mothers to strap their babies to their back), *gele* (head ties) *iborun* (a type of shawl) *osuka* (cloth rolled into a bun and placed on the head for loads to be set on) and towels (Asakitikpi, 2007). Contemporarily, a single panel of cloth may even be used as a backrest for a chair or a cover for protection against inclement weather or mosquitoes. There are also cloth forms used for prestige or ceremonial purposes. For example, *Sanyan* is regarded as the king of cloths made from the cocoons of the silkworm and holds a natural beige color. Another is *Kijipa*, made of raw handspun cotton giving a natural beige or white color, which religiously performs as a preventative measure for miscarriages or cure for infertility (Asakitikpi, 2007). Anyone who goes to the priest for spiritual assistance is usually advised to bring *Kijipa* woven in a prescribed way for ritual exercise. Yoruba concepts of femininity including fertility, virginity, menstruation, child-rearing, and marriage are commonly associated with the craft production of these Yoruba textiles. Women who are menstruating are restricted from entering the room where the loom process is taking place. Women are also expected to practice abstinence when producing these cloths in addition to abiding by a specific diet as well (Asakitikpi, 2007). The important spiritual

meanings embedded in the textiles reflect in the production process of these textiles. In other words, the weaving process is part of the ritual in which ritual textiles are intended. In the production of these specific types of textiles attributed to womanhood and femininity show that the artisan has a pivotal role in the non-verbal communication realized through the display and use of crafted textiles. Women weavers are actively “materializing” ideologies pertaining to femininity, womanhood, and life-creating capabilities (Costin 1998). Femininity and the identities of women thus appear to coincide with the production of certain textiles where the process of weaving on the broad loom is in itself as a spiritual ritual process of creation. Gender identity, cultural unity, family legacy, and many other significant concepts are communicated through the textile designs and their subsequent purposes.

When the textile traditions of design and production are performed throughout the diaspora, the various meanings attributed to these textiles are believed to remain as well. Joni L. Jones in “Performance: The Case for a Spiritually – and Aesthetically—Based Diaspora” claims that it is not surprising that Yoruba diasporic aesthetics are linked to spirituality because Yoruba ritual performance itself, and in the case of the production of textiles, is linked with spirituality (2005). Via the ritualized production of textiles, Yoruba spirituality connects the material world with cosmic forces on the spiritual plane. This blend of ritual, aesthetics, and agency is the soil from which contemporary Yoruba diasporic performance is cultivated. The spiritual figures of Yoruba, called *orishas*, are stimulated through symbolic or mimetic representations that can be observed in textile designs. There are dozens of different spiritual figures in Yoruba religion and these orishas are often intentionally or adjacently referenced in the motifs created in craft arts. Notably integral to Afro-Cuban spirituality, each *orisha* has associated colors to represent them. Among them is *Shango* or *Xangô*, representing defense, strength, and trickery, and is associated

with the color red. In addition to *Shango* being associated with red and white, analysis on Yoruba beadwork in the Americas commonly reference the *orishas* and their associated color representations. Among the many include *Oshun*, the riverain goddess is represented by blues and gold, and the god of purity and the sky, *Obatala*, represented by the color white (Mason, 1998). An artist can even illustrate Yoruba narratives of the orishas by creating a crafted piece of any medium with specifically placed colors and patterns, like in the warp and weft of a textile or in beadwork (1998). Yoruba practitioners in the diaspora often experience their spirituality as a specifically counterhegemonic political strategy that reflects the warrior spirit that is essential for survival. For example, in Brazil, practitioners of Candomblé hold annual carnivals celebrating each of these *orishas* where attendees would decorate themselves and their parade sails with fabric made of the associated colors of the corresponding *orisha*. Jones (2005) mentions that in the diaspora, such a spirit like *Shango* was needed to brace against oppression, to retain cultural and spiritual sanctity, and to perpetuate tradition. In textile art and art more generally produced by Black artists in the Americas utilize specific representative colors to retell diasporic narratives that draw from Yoruba cosmology.

These orishas are often intentionally or adjacently referenced in the motifs designed in crafted textiles and wearable garments intended for special occasions. *Oshun*, the riverain goddess represented by blue and gold, many women associate their gender identities with as she symbolizes purity, femininity, and the life-giving quality of childbirth (Mason, 1998). A Yoruba artist can even illustrate narratives of the orishas by creating a crafted piece of any medium with specifically placed colors and patterns, like in the warp and weft of a textile or in beadwork (1998). One of the most prominent examples of craft connecting to the orisha *Oshun* is with indigo-dyed fabrics: the dyeing process of indigo has become attributed to women's labor for the

Yoruba and, to recall, blues are a representation of Oshun, the goddess of womanhood (Jones, 2002). The dyeing process can also leave a semi-permanent blue stain on the hands and feet of the dyers. Thus, blue hands have come to be very symbolic of women's labor, especially for those throughout the African diaspora who faced forced labor through chattel slavery. Seen in Figure 3, we see an example of how this indigo-dyed fabric connects to Yoruba spiritual conceptualizations of gender and sex. The image was taken at the Osun Osogbo festival in Nigeria's south-western Osun state (BBC). The two-week festival is the biggest annual traditional religious event of the Yoruba people especially as it is sponsored by UNESCO (Aleshinloye, et al. 2017). Depicted here is the main attraction of the festival: the *Arugba*, a virgin maiden who is supposed to help the people communicate with the deity Oshun, who leads a procession of devotees to offer sacrifices to the river. In the image, we can see that the Arugba wears the iconic indigo blue fabric intended to directly represent Oshun (Jones, 2002). The Arugba wears over her head the 'calabash carrier', which is the large calabash on her head underneath a colorful veil to protect her femininity and preserves her modesty by protecting her from the male gaze. Like the ritual traditions expected from women weavers, every Arugba is expected remain a virgin during her time in the role maintaining her sexual purity and in obedience with the goddess Oshun. In the Osun Osogbo festival, we see how her indigo-blue garment represents a greater concept of preserving women's sexual purity in obedience to Yoruba cosmology and spirituality. The ritual praise of this goddess is still religiously performed today in Yoruba as the orisha of great wealth and commerce as well as being the goddess of the rivers and oceans. It is said that whoever worships her would be brought with children, good health, riches, and other blessings (Capone, 2007).

Figure 3: Image (circa 2018) of the Arugba of the Osun Osogbo festival, a traditional celebration that is thought to be 600 years old is held in Nigeria's southwestern [Yorubaland] Osun state. Image Retrieved From: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49367967>



From the dying process of indigo to the ritual requirements of women weavers in the looming process and to the Yoruba religious festivals that utilize indigo-dyed fabric to represent and give praise to Oshun, the gendered ritual performances of women all connect to the salient concepts in Yoruba spirituality regarding the feminine authority of Creation—both of craft and of life itself. The Osun Osogbo Festival is one of many Yoruba commemorative events where the celebration of the arts and crafts occur within the ritual performance of memorializing the spiritual figures associated with the creation of art and the ritual activities of craftsmanship. The attendees and major festival leaders and figures are wearing certain textiles, like indigo-dyed cloth, are visually demonstrating their religious loyalty, representing the textile's authenticity, and reasserting their social identities.

A MISSION THROUGH A MEDIUM: U.S.-BASED ARTWORKS WITH WEST AFRICAN
TEXTILE TRADITIONS

To reiterate, the methodology to critically analyzing African textiles in American art is borrowed from African diasporic art historian, critic, and curator Salah Hassan's investigative model which interprets the visual expressions of aesthetics observed in African art on the relationship between the artists, their work or product, and the audience and that these artistic creations facilitate a visual communication operating through the African textile tradition (1995). Hassan argues to resist historicization and to bring artistic traditions into the contemporary. He argues that the lively traditions of African art should be understood as rooted in social life rather than in time alone, and tradition should not be used simply as a naming of *objects*, but also and more fundamentally as a naming *process* (1995). Authenticity is thus no longer the quest for basic essence of tradition or traditionality, but of the sensations emoted from the arts to and for the people. Accordingly, as demonstrated in the history of West African textiles, what makes a certain artifact or cultural item "African" or "non-African" is to a great extent dependent on how the Africans themselves perceive it. Going forward in analyzing the upcoming artworks by American textile artists and their explicit utilization or reference to African textile motif and production techniques, I maintain that the production of African art is viewed as a complex process in which artists, audiences or critics communicate and articulate their consciousness, aesthetic values, and judgments (1995). As all art, the textile traditions in the following art pieces are vulnerable to subjective interpretation, but I seek to highlight the consistent use of African textiles in terms of consistency in style, iconography, and technique and the recurring symbolic themes associated with these design details.

The first art piece analyzed is Bisa Butler's *Southside Sunday Morning* (2018) (Figure 4). This quilted tapestry constructed out of various pieces of different colorful African fabric prints, depicts five young Black boys wearing suits, ties, and hats posed seated facing forward. In a 2021 interview with NPR, she mentions that she based this quilt off the white photographer Russell Lee's image called "Negro Boys on Easter Morning" depicting a group of young boys on Easter morning in Chicago 1941. Butler describes her quilted creation saying that "The boys dressed in their Sunday best — suits and ties and hats — sit on a car on the South Side of Chicago... And this piece it talks to me about how our community loves our children." (Corley, 2021). In this tapestry Bisa Butler creates almost a pop art style² portrait by mimicking the eye-catching designs of commercial advertisements. In other words, the tapestry's design and intention is very similar to that of a billboard ad utilizing vibrant contrasting colors to depict the portrait's depth and to accentuate the youth in these five young boys' postures and faces.

Figure 4: Bisa Butler. *Southside Sunday Morning* (2018)



² Pop, a diminutive of the word "popular", expressed a realism of society, a society drawn to cartoon romance and tabloid scandal and glamour. And like pop music, beneath its raucous or laughing or shimmering surfaces, its craft was sophisticated (Madoff, 1997). Pop art will be discussed later in the paper.

Firstly, Butler's utilization of fabric as the medium for this piece recalls traditions of textile in Africa and the diaspora. The intentional selection of African prints in addition to her description of how the quilt "talks" to her about "how our community loves our children" relates to the continuity of a Black legacy. Recalling Fila-Bakabadio's "The Fabric of African Identity," African textiles serve as a visual link to our ancestors and Bisa Butler reinforces this tradition as she creatively selects fabrics that artistically function in illustrating these portraits with contrasting colors and prints. The vibrancy of these African prints radiates a sense of joy, playfulness, and youth from these boys which the original black and white photograph lacked. Simply the choice to use textile as the medium gives this group portrait a tangible dimension and depth that the one-dimensionality of a photograph cannot. The chevron pattern of the portrait background resembles the geometric pattern of contrasting colors notable of the kente cloths produced by the Ashanti people of West Africa discussed by Smith (1975). The original photograph is literally from the lens of the white gaze observing these young Black kids in Chicago's Southside reinforcing habits of fascination of their exoticism and their deviation from the conditioned default of American whiteness. Butler's choice of remaking this photo notably rearticulates the 'facingness' of these boys where instead of the onlookers observing them from afar as objective beings, they are now instead reclaiming their personhood in gazing back and on a quilt-sized scale (Mercer, 2016). In addition to expressing their youthfulness, their new vibrant patterns recast a sensation of personal autonomy and recognition of their being. The colorful display of African prints provides an expressive medium for these boys to demand acknowledgement of their personhood and youth—qualities that Black boys and men are stigmatized as having without. Butler successfully expresses the salient diasporic values of survival and continuity of legacy with the African prints, her method of patchwork, and her

selection of recreating the portrait of the young Chicagoan boys. *Southside Sunday Morning* aptly fits with the ethos of cultural belonging and the radiancy of life markedly observed in diasporic art.

Bisa Butler gained lots of inspiration for her quilted pieces from Faith Ringgold who, born in 1930 in Harlem, New York, is a painter, mixed media sculptor, performance artist, writer, teacher, and lecturer. Ringgold notably created political paintings during the 1960s. She also notably created paintings depicting Black life on quilted canvases and produced tankas framed in richly brocaded quilted fabrics (inspired by a Tibetan art form of paintings generally of Buddhist deities and symbols). Before quilting, and like many artists during the 1970s, she traveled to Nigeria and Ghana where she sought to observe the rich tradition of masks and mask-making. There, she gained inspiration for most of her work going forward produced in the 1980s. Her devotion to creating masks and quilts after this trip to Africa reveals the inspiration that she received from Nigerian and Ghanaian traditions, one being of patchwork and textile as a medium. One of her quilts is *Woman Flying with Bouquet* (1988) depicting, as the title implies, a woman wearing a white gown with a flower bouquet in hand as the bouquet carries her over what appears to be the Brooklyn Bridge in New York (Figure 5). As the petals of her bouquet fall towards the bridge beneath her, the woman's white veil appears to be caught in the wind billowing behind and above her. The painted image is on fabric and bordered with a colorful blend of various fabrics. The production process and motifs of *Woman Flying with Bouquet* is quintessentially diasporic art, from the utilization of textiles resembling those of West Africa like those of the Ashanti people, to the symbolic references to diasporic artistic values of flight, femininity, and freedom. Ringgold created this piece utilizing the process of the patchwork tradition, once again recalling Gillow (2003) and Fil-Bakabadio (2009). Like kente made by the

Ashanti people, she sews a multipatterned mixture of fabrics each made of contrasting prints. Her placement of these different prints on the border of the centerpiece depicting the woman creates a greater geometric pattern of various triangles. Even the precise details of the two thin seams, one black and one white, sealing the edges of the quilt resemble the functional motifs of the *Asafo* military flags of the Fante in Ghana (Gillow, 2003). To the best of my knowledge there are no available accounts from Ringgold confirming this inference, but the motifs appear to have a distinct resemblance.

Figure 5: Faith Ringgold. *Woman Flying with Bouquet* (1988)



The painted depiction of the woman flying above the bridge with her bouquet conforms with recurring values in Afro-diasporic art, literature, and media. When explaining her book title, *Afro-Atlantic Flight*, author Michelle Commander takes inspiration from Frederick Douglass to describe the radical nature of successful fugitivity as a flight towards a possibility of liberation. “Flights of the imagination, as physical movements, or devices of cultural production, reconstruct middle passages to reconceptualize the voyages as well as to lend a sense of revolutionary possibility to freedom. Such movement is realized via countless moves of transportation and remains important to Black Americans’ enduring desire to move freely—to assert their corporeal and psychic liberty” (2017, 7). Ringgold’s literal depiction of flight in *Woman Flying with Bouquet* emanates a sense of liberation. The flow of her gown and veil illustrates her levity and her gentle grin suggests she is trusting the wind to be her guide with least resistance and trusting fate/ancestors/nature/God in her journey to her destination. This trust in the guiding qualities of nature draws from the experiences of enslaved Africans from the Middle Passage who would resist servitude by taking the leap from the slave ship or walking back into the ocean after reaching the coast of the New World (Commander, 2017). The gown that this woman wears could potentially be a traditional wedding gown especially since she carries (or is carried by) a bouquet of flowers but, drawing from West African cosmology and spirituality, there is significant symbolism attached to the color white. The color symbolism must be noted for the sake of Yoruba ritual. To recall, the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria have a lot of rich symbolism they associate with color (Mason, 1998). White is associated with Obatala, who is believed, according to Yoruba cosmology, to be the god of the sky and the creator of human bodies (Mason, 2005; Pemberton III, 1977). Various traditions and values throughout the diaspora are based in Yoruba, West Africa and many people even practice much of the

cosmological traditions today. For example, it is common practice in the Caribbean and parts of South America for attendees of funerals to wear white symbolizing rebirth into new life. As for the blue color filling the backdrop of the painting, in an interview with Faith Ringgold she referred to the blue color she used on her quilts as “night blue,” so the woman in the quilt appears to be taking flight in her white gown at night. This recalls yet another reference to the conceptualization of Black liberation with how enslaved people would take advantage of nightfall to escape bondage. The woman depicted in Ringgold’s quilt could be on a journey of new beginnings on her own. Her flight through the night sky while wearing white associates with Obatala as the Yoruba God of the sky. Faith Ringgold presents in *Woman Flying with Bouquet* a love letter to Black women’s liberation referencing Yoruba cosmology in its symbolism, utilizing the Ghanaian Fante flag design and technique for its production, and paying homage to Brooklyn, New York as a center for Black American creativity and culture.

The fibrous material used to produce textile art can be quite various and creatively sourced. A prominent artistic medium of creativity within the Black community is hair. The versatility of the curls, coils, and locs and the historical significances of Black hair and beauty reveal that hair provides a unique canvas for unlimited creativity. Artist Sonya Clark creates textile and hair art relative to diasporic culture and the Black experience. She expresses specifically the relationships Black folks have with their hair in her *Wig Series* (1998). The *Wig Series* (Figure 6) pays homage to hairstylists as a collection of 8 units made of cotton, wool, felt, thread, and sometimes wire. The wigs resemble Black hair in that it is made with thick black threads sewn in a tan-colored linen wig cap. Each display a unique design modelling a true hair

style created and worn commonly by Black folks including a crown braided style, bantu knots³, and elongated sectioned braids and twists. These hairstyles have both practical and cultural significances salient with diasporic aesthetical concepts also observed in textile art. In a recent book about Sonya Clark's artwork titled "Tatter, Bristle, and Mend" (Clark, et. al, 2021), Clark speaks about her motivations for connecting textile- and hair-based art saying that "hair is the fiber that we grow, so I like to say that the first textile art form is actually hairdressing" (2021). As a carrier of DNA, hair is the essence of identity, according to Clark. Her selective utilization of textiles, like cotton, takes on a particular racial and economic resonance, as raw cotton was the major agricultural crop that enslaved Africans picked and plucked on American plantations fueling the nation's Industrial Revolution. In the *Wig Series*, and like many other art pieces by Clark, the hair becomes a direct referent to the people who gave their lives to cultivate the sought-after crop (2021). One of her wigs in the *Wig Series* is named *Two Trees* (2003): a two-sectioned hair style where the elongated twists on opposing sides represent two trees, as the title indicates. In describing her artistic motives, Clark refers to Yoruba proverbs pertaining to nature and ancestry (2021). Recalling the conjunction between nature and cosmology in Yoruba spirituality, trees symbolize "roots" with ancestors. Clark's *Two Trees* most notably resembles the African baobab tree with its narrow stretching branches growing from a thick trunk base. According to "Spiritual Ecology: a quiet revolution" by Leslie Elmer Sponsel (2012), the baobab is recognized as the Tree of Life since each tree can live to a thousand years or more old and is even cultivated for its medicinal qualities. Clark could be referring to the baobab Tree of Life and its functional associations to life-giving when creating the branching twisted extensions of

³ The bantu knots hair design commonly worn by Black women globally and refers directly to continental Africa. The "Bantu people" is a generic name for more than 300 African ethnic groups that reside over a large geographic region in southern and central Africa (Bencosme, 2017).

Two Trees. Clark is in direct alignment to the salient concepts of diasporic art in that she references African aesthetics and values pertaining to ancestry, life-giving and -preserving, and beauty in her textile recreations of iconic Black hair styles.

Figure 6: Sonya Clark. 2 of 10 total units of the *Wig Series* (1997-2002). Left: *Two Trees* (2002), cloth and thread. Right: *Twenty One* (1998), cloth and thread. Collection of Madison Museum of Contemporary Art. https://sonyaclark.com/sc_text/wig-series/.



COSMOLOGIES AND CAPITALISM: WEST AFRICAN TEXTILES IN THE UNITED STATES

We recall that from before the founding of and into the birth of the United States when enslaved Africans incorporated an accumulation of skillful craft traditions to the strategies of

their survival, Black folk in the United States since then have continuously utilized African fabrics in social efforts of resistance, for the continuity of remembrance, and as visual beacons of hope. In the textile artworks of Bisa Butler, Faith Ringgold, and Sonya Clark, we are shown how the craft and associated values of African textiles are artistically maintained in retelling salient diasporic narratives of survival, legacy, and liberation. The birth of new ideologies pertaining to diasporic Blackness has occurred simultaneously with the aestheticization of Blackness. West African textiles have served as an artistic medium for expressing cultural pride, ancestral remembrance, and as symbols of hope for the future. The skills attributed to the craft production of these textiles, like the patchwork of the Fon of Benin and strip-weaving of the Ashanti and Ewe peoples in Ghana, and the symbolisms attached to these motifs are simultaneously maintained by successive generations' creativity in the visual arts. There are numerous examples on how to respectfully recall West African textiles despite problematic attempts in American commercialism to remain authentic to the tradition.

Alana Dillette, professor of hospitality and tourism management, discusses the development of a "Double Consciousness" from Black Americans who embarked on "Back to Africa" tours in her article titled *Roots Tourism* (2021). This theory of Double Consciousness is distinct from that concept developed by W.E.B. Du Bois in that it refers to the consistent warring identities that many Black folks in the United States face of being Black and being American. It involves a process of self-identity formation under the conditions of racialization (2021). The portrayals of Africa and the visual representation of Blackness in modern media, like textile fashions, are among the limited resources available for Black Americans to conceptualize their identities. Roots tourism includes those tourists who travel to a destination, specifically chosen for its connection to ancestry in west Africa where the trans-Atlantic slave trade was primarily

geographically based. This uptake in African roots tourism is grounded in the Back to Africa movement which grew out of the post-reconstruction era by Chief Alfred Sam, a pioneer pan-Africanist in the early 20th century (2021). Chief Sam's ambitious plan inspired a future 'Back to Africa' movement started by the Universal Negro Improvement Association in 1922 founded by Marcus Garvey and also founder of the Pan-Africanist movement. Especially during the 1980s, there were countless intellectuals, academics, artists, and essentially anybody who had the means who were touring Africa seeking to recall and recover lost feelings of Africanity. Within the last century, Black culture has influenced and has been influenced by media, music, entertainment, and general popular culture bringing the brilliance of Africa to the global mainstream. Fashion was a prominent department of pop culture where Black culture really thrived. From the Ghanaian strip weaving technique utilized to plot escape missions in the slave era, to the 'kente kraze' (Fila-Bakabadio, 2009, 27) of the 1960s, there have been various appropriations of African textiles. The meanings and motifs of African textiles have been altered to also have a perpetual transformative quality allowing individuals with African ancestry to materialize the facets of their identities practically. Black culture in the United States has demonstrated this cultural phenomenon in using African and Afrocentric textiles as public expressions of cultural unity, ancestral remembrance and longing, and acknowledgement of Black Americans as part of the African Diaspora.

Throughout the 20th century, American society gradually developed a greater comfortability in the freedom of dress initially resulting from people's desires to match their appearances with their identities. However, this can become problematic when certain presentations, like in how one dresses or styles their hair, can be stigmatized as being associated with a specific ethnic or racial group. Angela Davis, the renowned activist, educator, and leader

in all African American history, states in her press article “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia”, that editing the public dissemination of a social movement to a mere image, like an Afro hairstyle, is “reducing politics of liberation to a politics of fashion” (1994, 34). When discussing how the press and public buzzed about her afro, she describes how infuriating it is for her that her afro has become interpreted as a politicized fashion statement, servicing as “generic images of Black women” grouping all Afro-wearing Black women into a single character type unwillingly represented in the media by Angela Davis (1994, 42). Black women and men everywhere wearing afros would have to face being generalized as an assumed as a revolutionary alongside Angela Davis when the afro is simply a staple hairstyle for Black folks. She states that this misguided attention to her hairstyle as opposed to her important intellectual messages demonstrates the “fragility and mutability of historical images” (1994, 37). I argue that this same phenomenon is occurring with African textiles as it has become manipulated and misconstrued within American commercialism. African motifs and aesthetics have been formulated as foreign artifacts of intrigue for western consumers, spanning from the Scramble for Africa and the historical extraction of African goods by European soldiers to the contemporary use of performative marketing tactics to appeal to the modern, progressive ‘consumer.

The commercialization of non-Western artworks often results in the generalization and minimization of peoples convincing the consumer public that these foreign peoples belong to the primitive past. This plays into the conversation of authenticity and its legitimizing powers. This in addition to nostalgia determines the consumer value of an artifact whether it be in cheap souvenir shops or in the million-dollar antiques trade. As an archaeologist, I fear the *archaeolization* of material culture which has free market potential which interestingly African

nations are showing to be keen to take advantage of. Scholars like Michelle Commander (2017) critique the potential problematic consequences of these pilgrimages to Africa by Americans in *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic*. The powerful pan-Africanist movements of the 20th century led by and for Black folks in the United States has fostered the mythologization of Africanity observed in “return” trips to Africa by a privileged few who have had the means to do so. From a critical perspective, this can be considered as the marketability of Africanity mainly for African American consumers. We are reminded that even though the African portions of Black American folks’ histories were virtually erased it becomes problematic if these incoming American tourists “are clouded by an individualist concentration on homeland returns” (Commander 2017, 15). The tropes and imaginations of Africanity reinforced by tourism are perpetuating the narrow American perspective on Africa and what it means to be African. Flights of imagination, as physical endeavors across the Atlantic or as devices of cultural production, reconstruct middle passages to reconceptualize the voyages as well as to lend a sense of revolutionary possibility to freedom dreams (2017). Ironically, with the unifying efforts of pan-Africanist trips back to Africa, this act of “reclaiming” land as one’s own is perhaps quite imperialist. African Americans might find themselves disappointed if they reach Africa expecting a welcome party and are instead received with tense attitudes of African people rightfully defending their culture and property from Americans who are notorious for invading, taking, and capitalizing off total cultures and cultural properties (2017). Recalling my fear in the archaeolization of material culture, this problem of *imagining* what it means to be African continues unchecked on American soil with the adoption of African culture observed in the exploitations of African textiles, both in daily individual dress and in the global industry.

Despite the validity of these feelings of longing and unity, there are realities that can be clouded by overwhelming desires to reconnect and belong. Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* (2008) dissects what it means to be a slave by defining it as being a stranger (5). The slave is positioned as an outsider since those who were sold into slavery were outside the web of kin, nonmembers of the polity, or foreigners or lawbreakers. The perpetual longstanding effects of slavery experienced by Black people in American society Hartman describes as the afterlife of slavery (2008, 8). In Ghanaian culture and many communities throughout western Africa, family values and kinship ties are of high importance and require the upmost respect. Being a stranger is an antithesis of these values. For Black Americans, there is a unique positionality to interrogate when confronting the ugly history of slavery. This can lead to some disappointment for the positivists seeking return to Africa. Black Americans reclaiming Africa as their motherland is valid, however, it is not as simple as the fantasies of return that have developed over centuries. Hartman writes “I realized too late that the routes traveled by strangers were as close to a mother country as I would come” (2008, 9). Life in Africa has continued since the end of the slave trade and with less of a mutual longing to unite those who were enslaved. Surely there are collaborative efforts to unite diasporic kin back to Africa. However, it would be unrealistic for the descendants of enslaved Africans to expect a family welcome and easy adjustment into an African society because their descendants were essentially social outcasts or, as according to Hartman, strangers that were sold into slavery. This discourse surrounding issues of identity, cultural capital, and authenticity discussed by Michelle Commander and Saidiya Hartman continues as part of slavery’s afterlife as Black Americans continue to seek solutions to the inequities they face on colonial soil. American art has revealed to be a medium through which to express these solutions pertaining to identity-making and cultural belonging. Unfortunately, the

American consumer markets have caught onto this discourse where these issues pertaining to Blackness are dangerously utilized for the performativity of culture.

The American imaginative aestheticization of Africinity (Fila-Bakabadio, 2009) is occurring simultaneously with and centered on conceptualizations of what it means to be African. We can observe this process through the (mis)use of African textiles as it has entered the commercial realm of American capitalism. The various appropriations of West African textiles, whether in fine art or fashion, are transformative constantly undergoing continual mutation and expansion. This transformative quality of the West African textiles has been noted by the commercial sphere of western media creating a powerful impression on the cultural environment in which these West African textiles are realized. By highlighting the complex and various visual interpretations of West African textiles across various spheres of exchange, whether in a department store or in the art industry, the imitation of African aesthetics mixed with an adaptation to local aesthetics becomes the parameter of evaluation that allowed the textile to enter the sphere of the authentic (Sylvanus, 2007). The value of West African textiles aesthetically representing Africinity in United States consumption structures can reveal harmful as they can renew African stereotypes in the international market. This is a greater issue as it contributes to the identity constitution of Black Americans, Africans, and all with African descent throughout the diaspora. When treating artistic motifs as representative of all of Africa, all 30 million square kilometers of the continent and the 1.4 billion of its diverse residents are treated as a uniform monolith (WorldOMeter).

The most popularized African textile in America is kente, the strip fabric principally made in the Ashanti region of Ghana (Smith, 1975). However, it is important to highlight that America has popularized a specific type of kente notably the red, orange, black, and green type.

Black Americans have remained consistent in utilizing the fabric as it is originally intended for as rite of passage ceremonial sashes like at school graduations for Black students. American marketers have noticed this tradition. There are countless mass-produced applications of kente especially during Black History Month where it is often (mis)used as a marketing ploy. One of these companies utilizing kente fabric was Bath and Body Works, a popular American beauty and fragrance store, for a marketing theme in 2021 intended to celebrate Black History Month. This company and many others during Black History Month, Juneteenth, and even at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 have used kente and other African prints in the marketing designs. The issue is that they are presenting what they *imagine* as a universal symbol of Blackness, kente, to cater to the widest audience of Black consumers. These companies expose their own lack of effort for research by appropriating a culturally significant African textile for marketing products that are completely irrelevant to textile's original meanings. The marketing team likely assumed the products possessed enough *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu, 2004) to be passed as a company's effort to present as inclusive and deserving of Black consumer dollars. When dissecting the idea of a "culture industry", sociologist Theodore W. Adorno wrote that "The culture industry turns into public relations, the manufacturing of "good will" per se, without regard for particular firms or saleable objects. Brought to bear is a general uncritical consensus, advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement" (1975, 13). African textiles have greater value beyond the global market that runs through the tradition of the motifs, weaving practices, colors, and resources. However, African textiles, like many other foreign goods in American demand, have taken on a performative function as the case with Bath and Body Works. Even during active European imperialization of Africa, European 'knock-offs' mimicked the foreign aesthetics and

Formatted: Font: (Default) Times New Roman, 12 pt

produced an added prestige of the objects where Europeans profited from the object's foreignness. African textiles and motifs in the western world are appropriations of heritage made more familiar to the mainstream and less about understanding history (Estevan, 2016). These huge politically backed companies and organizations dangerously have authenticating or legitimizing powers. In other words, it is dangerous for these companies to be perpetrating some problematic ideologies consequential to pan-Africanism in universalizing all Black people. For the sake of social capital, the accumulation of foreign goods, historically and contemporarily, can work to reinforce Americanized tropes of Africanity. Commercialization of African print, most notably kente, by major brands is meant to evoke a post-racial national identity by promoting solidarity with Black people, but no matter how strategic the marketing scheme it lacks authenticity. Based on the problematization of authenticity drawn by anthropologist and sociologist Jean Paul Baudrillard in "The System of Objects in Selected Writings" (1981), modern commercial systems include kente cloth manufacturing and as it becomes sold to and reproduced by Asian textile manufactures in New Jersey, the African traders would still sell these cloths to their African American audience as 'authentic' (Sylvanus, 2007). Here, it is not the authenticity to tradition but a simulation or imitation of it determined and reinforced by commercial systems motivated by capital accumulation—not a duty to preserve tradition. Commercialism maintains tradition—or the marketable interpretation of it, as capital.

Despite the arguably incorrect and inaccurate appropriations of Africanity observed in capitalist marketing schemes nowadays, there is an inevitably strong cultural force within the schema of utilizing African aesthetics in modern capitalist systems. There is a recurring association that can be observed between African peoples and their culturally significant objects that is fascinating to the archaeology perspective. In a specific historical context, objects function

as agents of these specific historical contexts. Textiles decorate and these decorations are choices that ripple into the structural framework of society and even ignite social change. From “Cosmologies of Capitalism” (2000), social anthropologist Marshall Sahlins describes how the choices, decisions, and motivated arrangements made within the aesthetic capitalization of Africanity are synchronously reacting from and are reinforcing a world system led by western capitalism. That synchronous part of capitalism’s ripple effect may be to change the deciders and choosers into those who actively desire fresh, structure-breaking choices and decisions (Gewerts and Errington, 2020). In essence, Sahlins argued that capitalism has taken various cosmological forms as people, through their choices and decisions, have attempted to harness it, generally to augment themselves according to existing standards—to become more of what they already were (Gewerts and Errington, 2020). When the sampling and referencing to Africanity is done properly with respect, appreciation, and accuracy, these modern commercial systems could not only successfully reach consumers, but they can also guide them back to recalling or learning West African cosmology (Baudrillard, 1981). Audiences are revealed to how a cosmology is maintained through artwork. Each reiteration of West African art utilizing textiles enables a stable set of references of spiritual cosmology, some of which were detailed previously, which demonstrates and authentication value. Capitalism reveals that tradition is naturalistic, referential, and expressive, and the commercialism of traditions, in this case with those pertaining to West African textiles, turns the traditions into capital. Not only are the creation of west African textiles a craft tradition, but it also reignites spiritual traditions. Staring at these textile artworks, whether on a billboard ad or in a gallery showroom, allows an audience to digest their deeper meanings conjuring the same spirits, feeling the same emotions, and bringing them from the past into the present and across the Atlantic into the west.

CONCLUSIONS:

Black Americans and descendants of enslaved Africans in the western world have faced systemic injustices that deny their humanity and the reactionary social movements have driven an artistic renaissance of Black art. To reconnect with African roots, to recall history, or to worship ancestry, art illustrating such culturally significant concepts are revealed through the textile traditions that have lasted generations alongside the oral histories, cultural values, and legacies. Fashion designers like Dapper Dan reformulate traditional African textiles to create a unique aesthetic reflecting the Black American Dream of economic success and unfettered loyalty to African roots. Black American artists, like Bisa Butler, Ruth Ringgold, and Sonya Clark, utilize West African textiles to illustrate narratives of the Black experience from their cultural perspectives and positioning within the diaspora. When the artists select these West African textiles, they are, with intention or otherwise, enlivening the spiritual senses attributed to these textiles where the artistic process of craft creation is bound to the cosmology of all Creation. The indigo-dyed fabrics often worn by the *Arugba* at the Osun Osogbo festival in Yorubaland with its various blue hues are associated with femininity and a woman's power of birthing life. This idea of reformulating African aesthetics for America or western contexts more generally can be done with grace and homage to Africa. Recalling the conversation of authenticity and its legitimizing powers, the patchwork tradition maintained with the production of Fante flags and to Bisa Butler's *Southside Sunday Morning*, expresses the legitimizing values of patchwork. The marketable value is not only revealed within the textile as it weaves through the complexities of economic globalization. It also reignites the *spiritual* values that run through the artistic tradition of textiles as done with patchwork. Visual artists of African descent in all

creative subgenres, like those in gallery art or fashion, have kept these practical and spiritual traditions with textiles maintained.

The American imaginations of Africanity can consequently flatten the textiles' meanings. Since West African textiles and African aesthetics have entered the commercial zone of American society, there have been and continue to be misapplications and appropriations of them. When companies sample African aesthetics, like random configurations of the red, orange, green and black of kente cloth, to market towards Black consumers, the important symbolisms associated with textiles like kente are arguably lost in mistranslation. However, amidst these misuses of African aesthetics there have been wonderful examples of expressing the aesthetic heterogeneity of the vast continent of Africa. Ruth Carter is the costumer for the 2018 film *Black Panther*, which earned her Academy Award for Best Costume Design for maintaining various African traditional aesthetics within a modern Afrofantastic storyline for the first live-action film of an African superhero and his Afrofuturist kingdom of Wakanda invisible and thus untouched from European colonialism (SCAD FASH Museum of Fashion + Film, 2020). Ruth Carter created superhero suits worthy of a Disney's expectations by selecting specific fabrics, jewelry, and even body modifications from various African cultures. The imagination of an ideal African utopia with technological advancement and artistic expression continued into Carter's work in designing the film's costumes. Witnessing these imaginations come to life on screen ignited emotions within many Black citizens, including many academic scholars, throughout the diaspora. The film inspired people in more ways than just how to be a hero as costumer Ruth Carter became an instant inspiration to those searching for a style to connect their ancestral roots of Africa to their positioning in our modern ever-changing reality.

Another contemporary artist who creates his unique style by employing traditional African aesthetics is Moroccan portrait artist, Hassan Hajjaj. He is from Morocco and occasionally lives and works in London, England. Hajjaj's international notoriety is expressed in his portraits where he intermixes western and African aesthetics to illustrate his ingenious take on a modern Moroccan style (see Figure 7). He utilizes colorful patterns resembling those of African textiles into his works. Cowry shells, beads, fabrics, and, most notably, the various vibrant colors surrounding the individuals central to the photograph are what make a Hassan Hajjaj portrait (D'Orléans, 2017). In his collection 'Kesh Angels, he pays homage to the modern Muslim women of Marrakech, Morocco by applying his style of using vibrant color pallets and geometric patterns to further accentuate the brilliance and pride of these women as they demonstrate a fresh, new contrast to the global popularity of minimalism and modernism. Like Dapper Dan in New York, Hajjaj's portraits draw on traditional motifs while also retaining a modern feel. Hajjaj proves to not just be a photographer but also a fashion stylist in how he designs the 'Kesh Angels' outfits with traditional styles and counterfeit brand-name fabrics from markets in London and Marrakesh. He respects the varied traditions of Islamic dress —hijabs, niqabs, babouches, and abayas— but combines it with Moroccan biker culture and famous Western brands, like Nike and Louis Vuitton (Wender, 2014). Hajjaj also builds the frames for these pictures from found objects like Legos with Arabic lettering, cans of Fanta, boxes of chicken stock evoking the daily life of Marrakesh in a modern age of globalization. This technique also elicits a style from arguably the most famous pop-artist of the 20th century, Andy Warhol who famously depicted the can of Campbell's Tomato Soup in various colors and dimensions (Madoff, 1997). Hassan Hajjaj is a modern pioneer of urban art depicting a modern aesthetic of an African culture without historicizing or totally westernizing it. He exemplifies

that African aesthetics are not just from objects we recall in archaeology or art history, but these are very much textile print and production traditions that are alive today.

Figure 7: Hasssan Hajjaj. *Kesh Angels* series, framed photography. “Gang of Marrakesh” (2000) (left). “Kesh Angels” (2010) (right).



GLOSSARY:

- Arugba: the leading figure of the Osun Osogbo Festival who is a virgin maiden who leads a procession of devotees to offer sacrifices to the river and to help the people communicate with the deity Oshun,.
- Asafo: a military organization by dividing themselves into companies of the Fante from Ghana.
- Baobab: a tree native to mainland Africa, Asia, and Australia, and is also significantly associated with the Ashanti people of western Africa.
- Eka obi nko anka m'awu: "Somebody wishes my death.
- Gele: head ties, Yoruba.

- Iborun: a type of shawl, Yoruba.
- Kijipa: made among the Yoruba of raw handspun cotton giving a natural beige or white color, which religiously performs as a preventative measure for miscarriages or cure for infertility.
- Obatala: one of the several designated Creator gods in Yoruba spirituality represented by the color white.
- Oja: a piece of cloth used by Yoruba mothers to strap their babies to their back.
- Orishas: the spiritual figures of Yoruba.
- Oshun: Yoruba riverain goddess is represented by blues and gold, and the god of purity and the sky.
- Osuka: a cloth rolled into a bun and placed on the head for loads to be set on; Yoruba.
- Owu nhye da: a name for a specific textile design by the Yoruba translates to "Death has no fixed date".
- Sanyan: regarded among the Yoruba as the king of cloths made from the cocoons of the silkworm and holds a natural beige color.
- Shango or Xangô: the Yoruba god representing defense, strength, and trickery, and is associated with the color red recognized in Santeria, Candomble, and voodoo throughout the African diaspora.

REFERENCES:

Adorno, Theodor W., and Anson G. Rabinbach. "Culture industry reconsidered." *New German Critique* 6 (1975): 12-19.

Aleshinloye, Kayode D., Kyle M. Woosnam, Manuel A. Ribeiro, And Jingxian Jiang. "Authenticity And Cultural Sustainability At The Osun Osogbo Festival, Nigeria." In *Conference proceedings of Beyond the Waves: The 4th International Conference on Events (ICE2017)*, p. 29. 2017.

Asakitikpi, Aretha Oluwakemi. "Functions of hand woven textiles among Yoruba women in Southwestern Nigeria." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16, no. 1. pp. 101-115 (2007).

Baudrillard, Jean. "The System of Objects in Selected Writings." (1981).

Bencosme, Yamilex. "Beauty is pain: Black women's identity and their struggle with embracing their natural hair." *Perspectives* Vol. 9, Article 1 (2017): pp. 1-13.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Science of science and reflexivity*. Polity, 2004.
- Capone, Stefania. "The "Orisha Religion" between Syncretism and Re-Africanization."
In *Cultures of the Lusophone Black Atlantic*, pp. 219-232. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007.
- Commander, Michelle D. *Afro-Atlantic flight: Speculative returns and the Black fantastic*. Duke University Press, 2017.
- Corley, Cheryl. "Black Lives Are Celebrated in Bisa Butler's Extraordinary, Technicolor Quilts."
NPR. NPR, August 15, 2021.
- Costin, Cathy Lynne. "Introduction: Craft and social identity." *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association* 8, no. 1 (1998): 3-16.
- Davis, Angela Y. "Afro images: Politics, fashion, and nostalgia." *Critical inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 37-45.
- Fila-Bakabadio, Sarah. "The Fabric of African Identity." *Civilisations* 58, no. 1 (2009): 39-54.
- Gillow, John. "African textiles." (2003).
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. Macmillan, 2008.
- Hassan, Salah. "The modernist experience in African art: Visual expressions of the self and cross-cultural aesthetics." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2, no. 1 (1995): 30-74.
- Houghton, Edwin Stats. "Dapper Dan Talks His Gucci Partnership, Dressing Harlem's Notorious Gangsters, and Getting Busted by Sonia Sotomayor (Exclusive)." *GQ*, March 5, 2018. <https://www.gq.com/story/dapper-dan-gucci-harlem-atelier-exclusive-interview>.
- Jones, Joni L. "Performance ethnography: The role of embodiment in cultural authenticity." *Theatre Topics* 12, no. 1 (2002): 1-15.
- Jones, Joni L. "Yoruba Diasporic Performance: The Case for a Spiritually-and Aesthetically-Based Diaspora." " Yoruba Diasporic Performance: The Case For a Spiritually-and Aesthetically-Based Diaspora" In *Orisa: YORUBA GODS and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora*, edited by Toyin Falola & Ann Genova, 321-331. Africa World Press Inc., 2005.
- Madoff, Steven Henry, ed. *Pop art: A critical history*. Univ of California Press, 1997.
- Mason, John. "Yoruba beadwork in the Americas: Orisa and bead color." *African Arts* 31, no. 1 (1998): 28-94.

- Mercer, Kobena. *Travel & See: black diaspora art practices since the 1980s*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Pemberton III, John. "A cluster of sacred symbols: Orisha worship among the Igbomina Yoruba of Ila-Orangun." *History of religions* 17, no. 1 (1977): 1-28.
- "Ruth E. Carter: Afrofuturism in Costume Design." SCAD FASH Museum of Fashion + Film, July 22, 2021. <https://www.scadfash.org/exhibitions/ruth-e-carter-afrofuturism-costume-design>.
- Sahlins, Marshall. "CHAPTER THIRTEEN Cosmologies of Capitalism: The Trans-Pacific Sector of" The World System"." *Culture/Power/History* (2021): 412-456.
- Sonya Clark, Nell Irvin Painter, Nikky Finney, Bridget R. Cooks, Salamishah Tillet, Tiya Miles, Susan Fisher Sterling, Kathryn A. Wat, Hannah Shambroom, and Elizabeth Lynch, Sonya Clark: Tatter, Bristle, and Mend [Exhibition catalog], Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2021
- Sponsel, Leslie Elmer. *Spiritual ecology: a quiet revolution*. ABC-CLIO, 2012.
- Wender, Jessie. "Kesh Angels." *The New Yorker*. *The New Yorker*, January 24, 2014. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/kesh-angels>.
- Williams, Jay. "Dapper Dan on hip-hop and fashion, Harlem history and constant reinvention". Produced by Devan Schwartz, Mano Sundaesan, and Leena Sanzgiri. Our intern is Danielle Soto. *The Limits*. National Public Radio. July, 5, 2022.
- d'Orléans, Paul. "Kesh Angels." *The Vintagent*, August 26, 2017. <https://thevintagent.com/2017/08/13/kesh-angels/#:~:text=London%20artist%20Hassan%20Hajjaj,traditional%20Arabic%20clothing%20and%20settings>.
- Paquette, D. (2020, June 9). Kente cloth is beloved in Ghana. why did democrats wear it? *The Washington Post*. Retrieved March 19, 2022, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/democrats-kente-cloth-ghana/2020/06/08/dc33bcc4-a9b5-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d_story.html
- Sadler, D., & Goldszal, C. (2021, October 8). *Dapper Dan: "this link with Africa is at the heart of who I am"*. *Globe Echo*. Retrieved July 8, 2022, from <https://globeecho.com/news/africa/dapper-dan-this-link-with-africa-is-at-the-heart-of-who-i-am/>
- Ringgold, Faith. Accessed May 7, 2022. <https://www.faihringgold.com/>.
- "Africa Population (Live)." *Worldometer*. Accessed July 19, 2022. https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population/#google_vignette.

“Wig Series.” Sonya Clark. Accessed July 19, 2022. https://sonyaclark.com/sc_text/wig-series/.

LIST OF FIGURES:

Figure 2: Dapper Dan in his Harlem haberdashery on 125th Street. Image by Gabriela Celeste. Stats Houghton, 2018. GQ Magazine. 5

Figure 2: Artist unknown. *Owu nhye da* (top). *Nnwdtoa*, "snail's bottom" (bottom). Circa 1970. 8

Figure 3: BBC (circa 2018) of the Arugba of the Osun Osogbo festival, a traditional celebration that is thought to be 600 years old is held in Nigeria’s southwestern [Yorubaland] Osun state. Image Retrieved From: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49367967> 14

Figure 4: Bisa Butler. *Southside Sunday Morning* (2018) 16

Figure 5: Faith Ringgold. *Woman Flying with Bouquet* (1988) 19

Figure 6: Sonya Clark. 2 units of the *Wig Series* (1998). 23

Figure 7: (left) “Gang of Marrakesh” (2000). Kesh Angels series, framed photography. (right) “Kesh Angels” (2010). Kesh Angels series, framed photography.35-36