

**Ms Carol Tulloch**  
**Dress and the African Diaspora**  
**End of Year Report for 2007**

Key events:

**Dress and the African Diaspora: Tensions and Flows Symposium**

The contributors covered different parts of the diaspora: Kwala-Zulu Natal, Dakar, Saint Louis du Sénégal and Bamako, Republic of Niger, Antwerp, Paris, Germany, Switzerland, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Britain, United States, Jamaica, Trinidad, Bahia. They were theorists, curators, stylists, fashion designers, historians, established academics, fashion industry specialists and Ph.D candidates. The speakers demonstrated the interdisciplinary nature of the subject, the recovery of agency, and thereby pulling the subject out of the shadows within dress history emerging as a vibrant established field in its own right due to the number of speakers who contributed to the symposium.

A need more detailed histories of the forms of diasporic forms to counteract the old histories and their homogeneity.

Traditions, modernity and authenticity were all thrown up into question through out the symposium, particularly in terms of the studies on various parts of Africa.

Papers provided complex alternatives to a closed history and closed sense of African dress and textiles. The coexistence of different forms of modernities in South Africa alongside traditional dress what Anitra Nettleton called 'Afropolitanism'.

Curatorial Perspectives and the role of the museum and galleries, and the lack of representation of the African diaspora dress in archives and exhibition culture—the proactive workshop model of the *Couture Communes* project in Stuttgart, enabled critical thinking about African diaspora dress and production; the lack of objects in the V&A due to its imperial history, 'where the museum acts as a block rather than a conduit for the flow of diasporic articles'.

Auto/biographical narratives, the politics of place, played out in styling, photography, fashion installations and textile design as new directions for thinking about the different forms of contemporary expression of dress and the black self.

Theoretical Concerns included the trauma of black fashion, and the '(K)nots of Fashion' and its connection with African American basketball players today, and the notion of doubling, continual negotiation taking place that is part of the diasporic experience, 'a negotiation that is particularly marked through dress'.

The importance, the rarity and the fragility of the archive in this field of study, and the way it constructs interesting models of identity. These papers encouraged the need to think laterally across boundaries and disciplines.

The symposium was defined by the terms 'blockage, reversal, looping back, knotting, which are not about flows, as originally highlighted in the title of the symposium. A reminder that the movement of people, objects, and ideas is not always so fluid, or unimpeded. The papers demonstrated how work in this field need to be inventive in its sources and courage in its consideration of the politics of power and identity.

Future work would benefit from comparative studies, the experiences and artifacts between one diaspora and another, and how do they fit in with broader histories of migration and exchange. That the subject not be 'ring fenced' as a subset of dress studies, but be imbedded as a component of the discipline that every dress historian or cultural historian needs to think about.

### **DADN Workshop (Closed)**

To publish a book on the symposium in addition to the special edition of the journal *Fashion Theory*.

To propose panels at conferences in order to continue discussions, for example *Networks of Design 2008 Conference* of the Design History Society. To consider how to address the issue of connecting the objectives of this network with other diaspora projects, thereby broadening the core network members.

### **The Dress and the African Reading Group**

This was organised in an attempt to develop a network environment in Britain based on the international network discussions of the core network members. It was also organised to counteract the difficulty of having an international network where meetings are very difficult (and expensive) to maintain. It has thirteen members consisting of established dress historians, curators, theorists, textile and industry specialists, and Ph.D candidates, from Manchester, Brighton, Winchester and London. The aim of the reading group is to discuss, in an informal and supportive atmosphere, some of the theoretical, conceptual and analytical issues around dress associated with the African diaspora.

The main findings of the two reading group sessions have been to think of a variety of ways to study the subject in this format:

Play to the strengths and weaknesses of the group with regards to the choice of texts.

- to discuss readings around particular themes: the *Dress and the African Diaspora: Tensions and Flows Symposium* could be an inspiration; another suggestion is to unpack the notion of urbanism.
- To have an object alongside the reading in order to strengthen the interdisciplinary nature of the subject.
- The reading will not be restricted to academic texts, but can include poetry, fiction and film.
- To focus on a particular place/geographical space.
- To consider earlier periods.
- A wish to look at all aspects of dress and textiles, archives and curating. To meet in different venues e.g., spaces which connect with the readings.

- Where possible to have the author/artist/designer/curator of the text present at the discussion of their work.
- To create a bibliography of the readings for DADN website