

**FASHIONING  
the SELF**





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the SELF

Cover image  
By Kristen Wilson

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**RAZZLE DAZZLE**

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

While the premise of *Fashioning the Self in Slavery and Freedom* is to explore the connection between fashion and slavery, it is also an entry point for exploring larger questions of race, identity, and equity (among others). The need to study and disseminate information on the importance of fashion to enslaved peoples and their descendants inspired the creation of this publication. And since the relationship between dress and an enslaved past intersect with present-day identities of people of African descent—as the crucial work of my intellectual community in New York City and Boston has taught me—I will continue to call on my colleagues and students to use this magazine as a platform to explore both historical and current intersections of fashion and race. Beyond its curated social media posts, *Fashioning the Self* provides a forum and laboratory for scholars to explore their identities through creative expression and critical reflections on fashion.

In this issue you will find Kaisha’s heartfelt tribute to her late grandfather’s style and learn about the profound effect of his enduring legacy on three generations of her British-Jamaican family. Also inspired by familial roots is Jasmine, who recently launched an Instagram account highlighting the connection between dress and Afro-mestizo identity in her native Nicaragua. Jasmine touches upon a huge aspect of historical scholarship by exploring how her own identity is entangled with her chosen area of research. Sed is a gifted photographer who splits his time between Salvador, Bahia and New Orleans. One of the great perennial treats of being a resident of New Orleans is the tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians, the subject of his photo essay. Skylar, a former student and junior at Harvard University, is a gifted writer on the cusp of a career in television writing. It is a pleasure to include her piece on Patrick Kelly and his use of the golliwog in his sartorial idiom. Lyndon K. Gill’s piece is also animat-

ed by the life and work of Patrick Kelly, weaving Kelly’s story into an exploration into his own love of fashion. The cover piece, written by my birthday twin James Cantres, was inspired by his latest tattoo of an African cosmograph. Marina’s piece, which we may call “SZA fan fiction,” has definitely made me reconsider my belief that SZA is overrated. Fun fact: Marina and I both grew up in Baton Rouge, though we met at Harvard University where we taught in the same department. Like Marina and I, Shantrelle is also a Louisiana native. Rather than “refining” herself by losing her accent and other cultural signifiers, Shantrelle dons her Louisiana roots like a badge of honor—just like the zoot-suited young men of color that she describes in her piece titled “Razzle Dazzle.” And, of course, it would not be a *Fashioning the Self* magazine without some of my own razzle dazzle. In this issue you will find my conversation with my dear friend and artist Elizabeth Colomba and director of the Gallery Met Dodie Kazanjian at Gavin Brown enterprise. You will also see my artistic response to what I consider the summer’s most significant trend among young men of color: multicolored durags.

I hope you enjoy reading these pieces as much as I enjoyed putting together *Fashioning the Self’s* inaugural print edition. I hope there are many more to come.

Jonathan Michael Square



Photo by  
Myles Loftin





## EDITOR

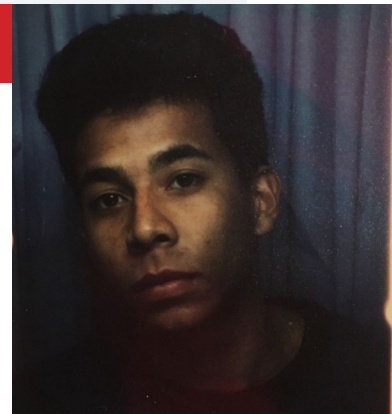
**Jonathan Michael Square** (@fashioningtheself) is a writer and historian specializing in fashion and visual culture of the African Diaspora. He has a PhD in history from New York University, a master's degree from the University of Texas at Austin, and B.A. from Cornell University. He has taught at the University of Pennsylvania, Fashion Institute of Technology, and currently at Harvard University. He has written for *Fashionista*, *Fashion Studies Journal*, *Refinery29*, *Vestoj*, *Hyperallergic*, and the *International Journal of Fashion Studies*. A proponent in the power of social media as a platform for radical pedagogy, he also runs the curated platform *Fashioning the Self in Slavery and Freedom*, which explores the intersection of fashion and slavery.

## CONTRIBUTORS



**Kaisha Esty-Campbell** (@knaominique) is a PhD candidate in African American and Women's and Gender History at Rutgers University. Her research rests at the intersection of black womanhood, sexual respectability and women's rights activism in the nineteenth

and early twentieth century. Born and raised in the UK, Kaisha lives in Brooklyn, NY, where she spends her time running, "dissertating" between coffee shops, and searching for the best Peshwari naan in the borough.



**Jasmine Chavez Helm** (@recuerdosdenicaragua) is the co-founder and co-host of *Unravel: A Fashion Podcast*. She grew up in La Puente, CA and New York City—where she currently works as an archivist. Her current research focuses on the dress and textile culture of the Afro-descendant and indigenous groups in the Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua. Jasmine chose an image of her biological father in photo booth in 1985 in lieu of her headshot, writing "in your [her father's] absence I found myself."



**Sedrick Miles** (@sedmiles) is a self-taught artist and activist. His work expresses a spiritual link between documentary, fine art, and subjective narratives. He writes, "I use image making and digital spaces to engage in transnational dialogues and critical thought about black diaspora modernism. I'm so thankful every day to be blessed to see my people reflecting so much light, magic, strength, and aesthetic. I simply believe that our humanity is quintessentially beautiful."



**Skylar-Bree Takyi** (@\_skylar-bree) is a junior at Harvard College from Newark, New Jersey concentrating in English and History & Literature with a focus in Ethnic Studies. She finds particular joy in studying women, people of color, and queer folk through the academic lens they've been historically denied. She

hopes to translate that knowledge into a career in the film and television industries, as she sees in them potential avenues for radical change and empathy.



**Lyndon K. Gill** (@ateba.kamaal) is an associate professor in the Departments of African & African Diaspora Studies and Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. He received his Ph.D. in African American Studies and Anthropology from Harvard University. His first book *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism*

in the Queer Caribbean was published by Duke University Press in June 2018. Dr. Gill is also an installation artist.

**Marina Sofia Magloire** (@m\_myglory) is an assistant professor of English at the University of Miami. Her research focuses on the Harlem Renaissance, transnational black feminism, and African-derived spiritualities. Her book manuscript follows the vexed figure of the “voodoo queen” through twentieth century black American feminism.



**James Cantres** (@tucker\_caliban) is assistant professor in the Department of Africana and Puerto Rican/Latino Studies at Hunter College.

He is currently at work on a manuscript detailing the social and political histories of community formation, race consciousness, and anti-imperialism among West Indian migrants in London in the decades following World War II.



**Shantrelle P. Lewis** (@apshantology) is a 2014 United Nations Programme for People of African Descent Fellow and 2012-13 Andy Warhol Curatorial Fellow. She is a U.S.-based curator and researcher who travels internationally researching Diasporic aesthetics, spirituality and the survival of transnational African Diasporan communities. Her traveling curatorial initiative *The Dandy Lion Project*, examines global black dandyism through photography and film.



# TO PANTY AND HEARTY WITH LOVE

## STYLE AND THE WINDRUSH GENERATION THROUGH THE LENS OF MY FAMILY

Kaisha Esty-Campbell

On December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017, I found myself committed to stillness. As friends and loved ones on both sides of the Atlantic gathered resolutions, and social media timelines became inundated with snapshots of celebrations in real-time, I sat with the blow that was the news of my grandfather's passing. I had just seen Grandad two days earlier. A traumatic, but apparently stable injury had brought me to the cool climes of green, hilly Mandeville, Jamaica to spend the winter break with him. On Christmas day, we shared long naps and watched day-time TV from his hospital bed. His gift to me came with every spoonful of soup that I fed him. His eyes creased from the pain of swallowing and the confusion of relearning the most natural function of his tongue. A croaky but determined "uhm-HUM" welcomed every successful gulp, defying the effects of his traumatic brain injury. Grandad was fighting. On the day that I prepared to return to New York City, I jokingly asked him to 'behave' for the nurses. With closed eyes, he smiled calmly and nodded in a relaxed manner as if willing—or holding a secret. His injury had triggered signs of dementia that included frightened, unknowing and sometimes violent episodes. I removed his ring, a gold signet engraved with the initials 'MC' for his first son far away in the UK. The plan was to store it safely with family in Kingston until Grandad was discharged. Although he sought recovery within the walls of a good private hospital, the rules of being street-wise in Jamaica still applied.

I suppose I say that I was *committed* to stillness because there was a disarming sense of shock. Instant grief, already assembled, no tools needed. Yet, this commitment also offered comfort, much like the way that meditation relaxes its true caller. Grandad had left on his own terms. At least, that's what my brother and I agreed. Knowing him, how else would he have departed?

My memories of my grandfather find their form in the pieces of material, clothing and accessories – both real and imagined – that told his and our family's sto-

ry. For example, Felix Campbell, my grandfather, was known among his oldest and closest friends as *Panty*. He carried this nickname (or rather the nickname followed him) all the way from his childhood in poor, rural Westmoreland, Jamaica in the 1930s. As the second youngest of ten siblings, Felix was given the simple chore of collecting the laundry from the family's washing-line. It was a job that he performed dutifully, with one exception: he would not touch any of the feminine undergarments. Grandad's 'fear' of *knickers* became a source of much humor among his elder siblings. I've



often imagined my grandfather as a young child, watching his sisters hang fresh brightly-colored linens, fabrics and garments on a makeshift washing-line, with views of the coast of Negril in the near-distance. It's a picture that I've forged from the story cheerfully told and retold by my grandfather's peers, listening as I watch him pretend to be indignant about a much-cherished story from his youth. It was a story that was repeated over decades and thousands of miles away in a much colder and harsher environment than Westmoreland. Those who had the privilege of this memory represented a tight-knit group, the old crew from Westmoreland who had fashioned new lives in London, England as part of the Windrush Generation.



settle into this new country. It was an address that I know my grandfather could not read.

My grandparents met in a boarding house in the early 1960s in Tottenham, a Caribbean enclave in North London. Due to circumstances that remain much of a mystery, my grandmother found herself stranded, yet to be employed, and facing homelessness.

Though a newcomer, my grandmother was not 'fresh of the boat' per se.

She had flown over to the UK, a detail that she held with pride. Through word-of-mouth in a rapidly growing Caribbean community, my grandmother learned that a single working man who lived in the same building was looking for a *lady* to wash and iron his clothes and cook his meals. Grandad offered her a place to stay in exchange for her gendered labor. The arrangement set



**Due to circumstances that remain much of a mystery, my grandmother found herself stranded, yet to be employed, and facing homelessness.**

in motion a 40-year relationship that produced a family home, five British-born children and many grand- and great-grandchildren. My grandmother's name is Hortense. Through the romance of his thick, unyielding country-accent, Grandad called her *Hearty*.

Nanny and Grandad could be described as your typical 'opposites-attract' kind-of-couple. His family had never left the region in which their ancestors were kept as slaves. Their light-skin and straighter hair ever-signifying the legacy

The Windrush Generation refers to the nearly half million people from the West Indies who migrated to the United Kingdom between 1948 and 1970. Landing in the very late 1950s, my grandfather never shied away from recalling the story of his arrival in London. A stroke of luck, literally, got him a ticket aboard a ship to the UK. A local lottery, a raffle of sorts, transformed his life from a poor, non-literate fisherman to an urban factory hand. He reminisced about stops at ports on the European continent where he met white workers, and fellow Caribbean passengers who drank to calm their nerves only to trigger bouts of sea-sickness. I never took the chance to ask what outfit he chose for his voyage. I imagine that he may have attempted to shake off his rude roots and selected his best suit, like many others did. I wonder if he held hopes of giving a good first impression to the hostile but desperate hosts reluctantly awaiting him in the Metropole, the center of the British Empire. My grandfather arrived in Dover with a suitcase, a ticket and a single note in his possession. His ticket included a one-way trip via British rail that would transport him across the pastoral scenes of the southeastern English countryside, destined for London Victoria station. On the note was the address of a Jamaican contact that would help him

of this history. During spats, my grandmother accused my grandfather's family of being *royalty* – a surefire provocation. This wasn't a term of endearment, but an insult that suggested incestuous practices, like the rituals of the royal family. My Nan's use of this term, as a former colonial subject who kept a portrait of Prince Charles and Princess Diana's wedding in a place of honor in her home, always fascinated me. Depending on the context, *royalty* was either 'country' and backward, or refined and civilized. My grandmother came from the East, not far from the healing natural springs of Bath Fountain, St. Thomas. She was fortunate to acquire a high school education and had lived in the city. Yet, in many ways my grandparents were very simi-

lar. Their casual, near-accommodationist attitudes to mainstream British society was emblematic of their status as first-generation Caribbean immigrants. While interviewing Grandad in 2014, I asked about his experiences with racism and in the workplace. He spoke of white colleagues who took turns sneaking up to him curious to see if black people had tails, like monkeys. In my grandmother's experience of factory-work around the 1970s, there was a near-coup when word got around of her promotion. In a predominantly Afro-Caribbean and female work-space, gossip spread that my Nan had given sexual favors to her boss in exchange for the reward. So, she declined the opportunity and continued to work on the ground with her jealous, desperate peers. The ways that the discriminatory British employment market conspired to pit black workers against each other was not part of my grandmother's analysis of this moment. For her and my Grandad, such experiences represented a call to work even harder. It was a message that they repeatedly communicated to their children, including my mother, who grew to see things a bit differently perhaps by virtue of being born and raised in the UK.

My grandmother never saw the supposed incongruence between her working-class status by British-standards and her individual values in piety, respectability, a modest demeanor and glamorous style. A black and white passport-style photo of her, possibly from the '60s,

wearing a casual sweater with hair perfectly rolled, tucked, and held together invisibly with bobby pins, reveals in some ways the persistence of her style over time. Today, she wears the same sweater, baby-blue, as seen in real life, and in such excellent condition that serves as a testament to the care she put into preserving her garments over the years. Long, crocheted skirts, laced dresses, pearls, fascinator hats that would draw envy at the Royal Ascot – these items make up my grandmother's armoire. Her collection rival pieces that could be found at your favorite vintage store in Camden Town. A great deal of pride and attention went to her own appearance, as well as that of her children and grandchildren. Once, in the 90s, she used so much starch as she ironed a pair of my then-teenage brother's jeans, that the result was a semi-permanent pleat down the middle of the legs. My brother was devastated. I rarely left my grandparent's house with utterly unkempt hair as a child. Nanny would deploy a comb, brush, Dax hair-grease and ribbons from her fabrics-box and make me over with a throwback look from the '70s. Quiet, feminine respectability in manners and a glamorous appearance seemed to indicate self-worth as much as it defied the assumptions of white British society.

Grandad seemed to experiment with style in more quotidian ways. Like many of his fun-loving West Indian peers, he loved cricket, rum, dominoes and music. He carried the essence of a simple man with a vibrant





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In over forty years of living in London, he refused to assimilate. His thick accent remained a comrade to this quiet resistance.



soul. Frequent parties were an opportunity for the old crew to get together and tell worn stories. His gold tooth glared as he released his signature crowing laughter delivered right-on-schedule after anticipated punchlines. He had a casual charm. A grey suit paired with a pale-yellow shirt, polka-dotted tie and a baby-blue belt. For as long as I can remember, he sported a hat. The trilby-style hat saw the best of its days before my time. The style of the grandfather I remember from the 1990s on, fused the old with the new, the sentimental with the practical. A button-down polo, a blazer, smart pants and a Chicago Bulls cap, without irony. When his granddaughter established a small boutique featuring Afro-centric pieces, he swapped his tacit allegiance to the Chicago Bulls for another black cap, now with the continent of Africa embroidered in the colors of red, gold and green. I wonder if Grandad even cared about basketball just as I wonder to what extent he was aware that he was fashioning the colors of the Ethiopian flag, the heartland of Rastafarianism and the African diaspora for its never-colonized history. Grandad never liked dreadlocks because, like many of his generation, he associated the style with a lack of personal grooming. But he was a proud black Jamaican man, nonetheless.

Perhaps Grandad identified with the spirit of self-government reflected in his 'Africa' cap. He was born a colonial subject on paper, but lived with a sense of refusal. The script of poor, rural life as a fisherman did not suit him. His lack of an even rudimentary education and inability to read or write did not prevent him from taking on the strange, hostile landscape of British society. In over forty years of living in London, he refused to assimilate. His thick accent remained a comrade to this quiet resistance. Yet, he raised five British children who would only look to Jamaica for temporary sojourns. The fusion of different contexts in Grandad's style by the 1990s, such as a Chicago Bulls cap matched with a suit without irony, to me, represents part of the wide mosaic that made up the Windrush Generation. The dualism of being both 'here' in the UK, as a loving father to British children, and 'there,' with his heart in Jamaica. Some left the Caribbean, never to permanently return because of the affective ties they fashioned in the UK. Others, like my grandfather, carried those ties back home with him to Jamaica, even if it was in the form of a hat.



# RECUERDOS DE NICARAGUA

Jasmine Chavez Helm

The @recuerdosdenicaragua Instagram account comes from the desire to learn about the family that I never knew and the place from which I descend—a history that is largely untold and rarely shared. My biological father is a black Nicaraguan. He denies being black and an *afrodescendiente*, which unfortunately is not uncommon in Latin America. He, however, claims to be indigenous, another taboo identity, particularly



for Nicaraguans as they largely identify as Mestizo.<sup>1</sup> He explained to me that he saw a photo of his great grandmother once and that she looked “native.” He believed she was Mayangna and qualified it with “but my father’s family would never admit that.” The generational deni-

al made me want to learn about my heritage. As a fashion historian, I wanted to know how Mayangnas and Afro-Nicaraguan descendants dressed. Clothing reveals and traces culture, values, politics, history and time, which are themes that I explore with my co-hosts Dana Goodin and Joy Davis on our podcast *Unravel: A Fashion Podcast*.

The first image I discovered of the Mayangnas was a postcard published by the German Moravian church. It depicted a group of indigenous Mayangna people





dress and tuno cloth for “clean” and “respectable” European-style clothes like cotton shirtwaists, petticoats, dresses for women and button-down shirts and pants for men.

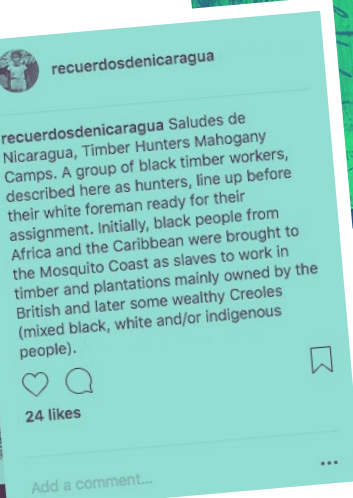
The conversion of the indigenous and Afro-descendant to Moravian Protestant Christianity and to European-style dress was documented in European and Moravian photography. Moravians frequently referred to traditionally dressed Miskitu and Mayangnas as heathens in circulated postcards entitled “Recuerdos de Nicaragua,” pamphlets, books and journals. The Creole community became the ideal converts in the eyes of the Moravians. The majority of Afro-descendants were forced to wear European-style garments as a result of being enslaved on British plantations and properties in the Coast. For example, Osnaburg muslin, a material also worn by enslaved people in the United States, was imported to the area to clothe the enslaved population. The Creole community was of multi-racial and ethnic identity that included African, English and sometimes indigenous ancestry. Many Creoles during the nineteenth-century and early twentieth centuries emphasized their English heritage, which enabled them to exercise their social mobility. In contrast, black Caribbeans that relocated to the coast to work in timber logging and fruit plantations after emancipation in Nicaragua

and “Negros.” Moravian documents reveal that many missionaries and Negros loud, lazy and less than Creoles. In many Moravian photographs, Creole and Negro identities are dressed in stylish European-style

ensembles often accessories with hats or other embellishments or shown laboring in timber or banana plantations under the direction of a white foreman.

Many of photographs and postcards produced by Moravian Missionaries and European photographers I found on eBay, Pinterest, Google Books and other auction sites. The @recuerdosdenicargua Instagram is collection of my research thus far and is meant to document and share the visual and material culture history of the Mosquito Coast with Nicaraguans and coastal residents and descendants. I started this account at time when the communities of the Mosquito coast and Nicaraguan civilians are fighting against the human rights injustices of President Daniel Ortega, since April over 200 people have been killed under his administration. I post Instastories daily relying the news from Nicaragua in hopes to help spread awareness. Each day I post a image of photograph, a person, or an object so my fellow Nicas, Afro-Nicas, Miskitus, Mayangnas, Garifunas y mas can trace the history of ourselves and that of our ancestors.

recuerdosdenicargua  
 Nicaragua Caribs of British  
 Caribs are an indigenous group  
 Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean.  
 is used to also refer to the  
 an ethnic group of African,  
 awak descent. They were  
 from the Antilles Islands  
 to Coast of Honduras and  
 the Atlantic coast of  
 Belize. The  
 and  
 he



<sup>1</sup> Mestizo/a is a Spanish-speaking person of mixed indigenous and Spanish ancestry.

<sup>2</sup> The Miskitu tribe includes members of indigenous and African descent, referred as a Sambo-Miskitu. The term Tawira-Miskitu refers to non-mixed indigenous.



# A CONVERSATION WITH ELIZABETH COLOMBA AND DODIE KAZANJIAN

Jonathan M. Square

Artist Elizabeth Colomba was tapped to direct a short film as part of the Gallery Met Shorts series. Gallery Met Shorts allow visual artists to use film, animation and video to create original works of art that are set to the music of operas performed during the Met's season. Colomba's film was shown in more than 2,000 movie theaters in 73 countries during a live simulcast of the new Met production of Massenet's *Cendrillon*.

In Colomba's version of *Cendrillon*, model Grace Bol plays Cinderella. Although this is Colomba's first foray into directing, the film fits seamlessly into her oeuvre, which critiques the absence of affirming images of black subjects in Western art, yet it also a thoughtful reflection on the beauty and grace of women of African descent. You can see the full film at <https://www.metopera.org/discover/video>.

Recently, I had the pleasure to speak with Colomba and Dodie Kazanjian (director of Gallery Met at the Metropolitan Opera and contributing editor for *Vogue*) at Gavin Brown's enterprise. They offered me behind-the-scenes details on the conception and production of the film.

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**Jonathan:** Elizabeth, your work is a critique and corrective of the absence of affirming black subjects in Western art, yet it's also a thoughtful reflection on the beauty and grace of women of African descent. What does it mean to cast Grace Bol as Cinderella?

**Elizabeth:** Casting Grace is relevant today because of the recent royal wedding [of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry]. Having a black princess is quite spectacular, and having a character who becomes a princess, as in the story of Cinderella, helps to change the perception of who can become one. Grace, with her stunning beauty and the fact that her head is shaved, provides another



way of perceiving beauty. She was not a typical princess with flowing hair. It was important to provide a different vision and redefine the standards of beauty through a woman like her.

**Jonathan:** Your work is also very based in history but with a changed perspective. For example, you subvert the Eurocentric gaze by telling historical narratives from the perspective of black women. What does it mean to approach fairytales, folktales and historical scenarios from this perspective? Also, what can be gained by engaging with history from a black female perspective?

**Elizabeth:** It's important to reverse the gaze and have every player be represented in a story. Representing black women gives you yet another perspective of what a story can be. Whatever role you're playing, you're going to be telling the story differently. For example, there is a fantastic movie by Kurosawa called *Rashomon* in which the same event is described differently by four different characters who each give a different story and perspective. So, you need everyone's perspective to learn the full story. I believe that having a black character in a fairytale usually perceived as white only can open people's minds.

**Jonathan:** And, Dodie, you are the director of the Gallery Met at the Metropolitan Opera. Can you describe the work that you do there?

**Dodie:** The gallery is an unusual place because it didn't exist until we created it. Peter Gelb, the visionary head of the Metropolitan Opera, wanted to create a connection with contemporary art. It was in 2006 when Peter arrived, and we had lunch with a mutual friend. He asked me if I could help, and I asked, "Can you give me a space in the house?" and he responded, "You read my mind!" Afterwards, we began doing shows to bring in contemporary artists. There is a history of contemporary artists being involved with the opera, for example David Hockney back in the 1980s and the sets that he created, but there had been a lag since then, and Peter wanted to recreate some of that magic. We then thought about incorporating emerging artists, but how? We decided to create a space, invite artists to the opera, get them involved and then see if it takes. Interestingly, when I began doing this, none of the artists turned me down.

Look at what Elizabeth just created. It's reimagining something, and by being connected to the opera, her

work is very much influenced by the old masters. It's a radical work in old masters' clothing, and I don't know anyone who's doing this on the same level. I felt that she more than anyone I know was the right person to be involved with the opera.






**Jonathan:** Dodie, you were the producer of the film. What was your role in the production and distribution of the film?

**Dodie:** Distribution is easy because it goes out to 2,000 theaters worldwide during broadcasts. These broadcasts of the opera are live streamed on Saturday afternoons. People can go to the opera in a movie theater. I thought about how we had some extra time available and that I'd love to show the artists' shorts shown during intermissions. There are two restrictions for the shorts: they can't be X-rated, and they must be two minutes or less in length.

**Jonathan:** So, how was Elizabeth a perfect match for the series and how did she differ from past artists who have participated?

**Dodie:** What drove me to Elizabeth was her professional background. Elizabeth came to this country from Paris and got a job right away. She went to Hollywood and started working in movies doing storyboards. When we started talking about her film, she explained it to me in storyboards. She told me through what she showed me, and I saw how it would work. She had it all planned right from the beginning. You could see what it was going to be, but I don't think she had ever made a film before.

**Elizabeth:** No, this was my first time directing.

31 Park armory Room(pre room)	CU on necklaces being laid down on her chest. We can see a painting in a pendant as a cameo.		
32 Park armory Room(pre room)	CU of her hand putting on perfume (old school bottle)  If time permits		Highlight of perfume spray  
33 Park armory Room(pre room)	Insert on hand putting on a ring		
34	Insert on a clock ticking Film whole sequence so the clock strikes midnight		
35 Studio	Insert on hand pressing tube paint on palette.		

**Dodie:** That was really fascinating to me because I felt that you knew the language and could translate it. Then, you told the Cinderella's story using fashion. I mean, the story is all about fashion, and you were able to bring that to light.

**Elizabeth:** Fashion is a very important aspect to my work.

**Dodie:** You're creating an image. You're not simply taking black figures and placing them into a historical painting, you're creating a historical painting that depicts both the past and the present. You're reimagining what the world might have looked like if there had been no colonialism, for example. It's very interesting and gets me excited about your work.

**Jonathan:** I feel that the heart of your work is storytelling.

**Elizabeth:** Yes, absolutely. I love to start with a story and go from there—whether it's historical or mythological. My work is always based on facts that I use as a foundation, so, yes, it's definitely about being a storyteller, whether I'm working in two dimensions or film.

**Jonathan:** How was the experience of working in a new medium? Will you continue to work in film?

**Elizabeth:** It was a different process. When I'm in my studio, I'm by myself and doing my own thing. However, I think that you can only succeed in filmmaking when it's a collaborative effort. You need to have a crew that you can trust and people you can talk to and bounce ideas off of. If you have that, you're going to get good results. We were very lucky with the costume designer and stylist. I was really lucky in my first experience directing, and hopefully, I will do more.

**Jonathan:** You don't have to share all your plans, but are there any other stories or folktales that you would like to recreate?

**Elizabeth:** There are so many stories that I'd like to tell. I'm considering doing graphic novels. I'm really interested

in the figure of Madam St. Clair, who was known as the Queen of Harlem. She was supposedly from Martinique, but there is some debate. Some say she's from Guadeloupe, but I say she's from Martinique because that's where I'm from. [laughs] From Martinique, she moved to New York City. She became a mob boss and ran a number of criminal enterprises in Harlem. I think it's a fascinating story.

**Jonathan:** Dodie, as an art critic and writer, is being the director of the Gallery Met new territory for you as well?

**Dodie:** Well, it's not so different from covering the art world for *Vogue*. At *Vogue* back in 2000, I began a series where I invited artists to do original work and then use the pages of the magazine as a gallery. In one case, we had a show for the art in the magazine at the gallery at the Park Avenue Armory. I love the idea of





stretching outside of the pages of the magazine. They all feed one another: Gallery Met feeds *Vogue* and *Vogue* feeds Gallery Met. It's a nice collaboration. By the way, Elizabeth, I was wondering if were interested in doing another movie in the future?

**Elizabeth:** I would love to do a movie, but I don't have the budget for it at the moment.

**Dodie:** Many artists have made that transition, for example Steve McQueen and Julian Schnabel. I was talking to Julian this morning in Vienna, and he's finishing up the final edits on his Van Gogh movie. I'm always fascinated by what people say about Julian now that he is a filmmaker. The art is all one, each work feeds into one big vision, just as we have seen with what Elizabeth has done here. It's just another way of sharing her voice.

I'm very interested in getting young artists involved in figuring out ways to create on a smaller scale. It's going to be interesting to see what comes from that direction. What's happening in the art world today is very different than in the past. Today, art follows a trend of *gesamtkunstwerk*.

**Jonathan:** Elizabeth, you have a hybrid identity as a black woman who was born and raised in France, but now you call New York City home. You are Martinican, French, and, dare I say it, African-American. How have your identities shaped your work?

**Elizabeth:** Well, I believe that being French comes



Fashion provides another layer for telling the story. When people get dressed in the morning, they want to express who they are.

through in my painting style. In art school in France, I was constantly exposed to French art history. However, being from the Caribbean, there is always a hint of it in my work, whether it's in my choice of fabric, a reference to fruit or even in the narrative. It's funny because you have this duality from having been raised to believe that you're French, but people there still ask, "Where are you from?" So, you're not really French, and so there's always this duality in being a French person of Caribbean descent. You see this duality in my paintings. I think that's the story of my background and how I'm also African American in a way. [laughs]

**Jonathan:** Claim it! [laughs] So, what role does fashion play in shaping the story you're telling? Have you ever dabbled in fashion design? The composition of your paintings is classical, but you replace white subjects with impeccably dressed black female historical actors.

**Elizabeth:** Fashion provides another layer for telling the story. When people get dressed in the morning, they want to express who they are. It's also a sign of your background and social status. Fashion is a character in my narrative.

**Jonathan:** Returning to Dodie's earlier point about *gesamtkunstwerk*, would you ever consider going into fashion design. I could see you creating costumes for an opera, for example.

**Elizabeth:** That would be nice. I used to design clothing. One of



my uncles is a tailor, and my mother used to make us clothing as kids. My sister and I used to wear the same outfits like twins. [laughs] I think that it would be nice to create costumes for an opera or something else.

**Dodie:** Because you are creating clothing on canvases.

**Elizabeth:** Absolutely!

**Jonathan:** You have actually incorporated *The Reading* into a real gown. Can you describe this piece?

**Elizabeth:** *The Reading* is my interpretation of a scene from the Greek myth of Eros and Psyche. It shows the moment when Psyche's two jealous sisters give her a false tarot cards reading supposedly revealing the true identity of her husband. In the original myth, the three women actually consult an oracle.

**Jonathan:** Elizabeth, what was the process for creating the film for the Met Short film series (i.e., casting, location scouting, costuming, etc.)?

**Dodie:** She didn't have much time!

**Elizabeth:** When you're doing a project like this, you have to count on a lot of favors and having people who will hopefully be interested in participating. You have to make phone call after phone call. For example, casting was the result of many phone calls, and we found Grace, who is as gracious as her name suggests. For the costumes, we were very lucky. We had the idea of working with a student, and so Lashun Costor created a gown for us. The ring I found in a flea market.

**Audience member:** Do you know the maker of the ring?

**Elizabeth:** No.

**Audience member:** It is Coreen Simpson. She is still alive and lives in Harlem. She was a photographer, and then she started doing fine art and got picked up by Avon. She partnered with Avon for a few years and created the Black Cameo Collection. She has been around forever.

**Jonathan:** Dodie, how do you see Elizabeth's painting practice in relation to the mission of Gallery Met?



“

The Met is extremely lucky to have the space, whether it's inside of its walls, in a movie theater or on the banner in front of the Metropolitan Opera.

**Dodie:** Her film is a gallery short that will live on, and I think it exemplifies exactly what we want to do. I like that it's accessible and multi-layered. You can make what you want from it, and it's very open for everyone. She has that same beautiful way of doing things in her paintings.

**Jonathan:** Dodie, what is the future of Gallery Met's connection with the visual arts?

**Dodie:** The Met is extremely lucky to have the space, whether it's inside of its walls, in a movie theater or on the banner in front of the Metropolitan Opera. It gets the voices of young artists out there in ways that may not have occurred otherwise. It brings in a new audience to the opera and to the work of the artist.

This is not necessarily an audience who is also consuming visual art. I truly believe that art has the potential to do so much more in these times. Artists see things in ways that others don't. Their minds are different, and they bring clarity.

**Jonathan:** So, what's next for you, Elizabeth?

**Elizabeth:** I will have a new painting included in the New York iteration of *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* at the Wallach Art Gallery. My painting *The Portrait* is also included in the accompanying catalog.

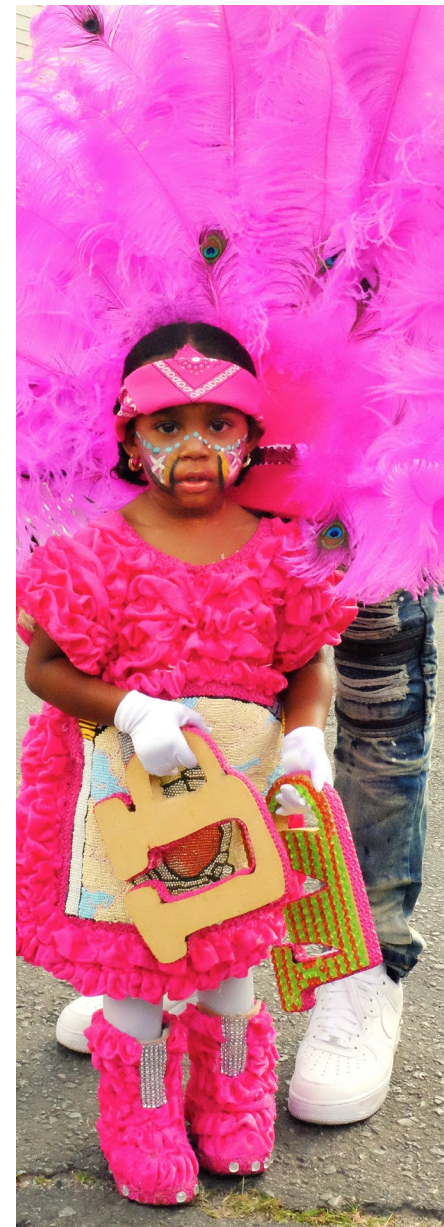
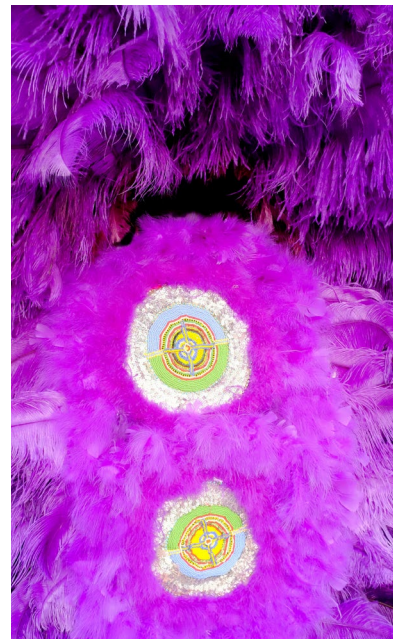


This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.



# SED MILES LENS THE COLORFUL TRADITION OF MARDI GRAS INDIANS

Sed Miles



"I believe that whatever amazing thing you hear about New Orleans, there is probably plenty of truth to it. But like most amazing things, it's best experienced. The Mardi Gras Indians seemed to have maintained every ounce of their legendary mystique and the highest level of cultural importance. But don't ask how to find the Indians. Most folks don't know and wouldn't tell if they did. Just go, be cool, follow the beats of the city and you'll find yourself in a tribe's dazzling path, with plumage and sequins exploding in the sky. My advice, the view is better up close."







# FROM VICKSBURG TO PARIS

## HOW PATRICK KELLY'S SOUTHERN ROOTS TOOK THE CITY OF LIGHTS BY STORM

Skylar Bree-Takyi

It is difficult to decide which was the most noteworthy aspect of designer Patrick Kelly's entrance into the *Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode*, "the pantheon of 43 Paris-based designers who may show at the Louvre." In 1988, Kelly, a gay black man from Vicksburg, Mississippi, became the first American to be inducted into the notoriously exclusive French fashion association, home to the likes of Louis Vuitton, Yves Saint Laurent, and Coco Chanel. Although his race, sexual identity, and nationality had already made him an implausible candidate for this acceptance, the success of his short career was even more unlikely given the fixation of his designs on derogatory images of black Americans. Kelly's infatuation with racist memorabilia manifested itself most notably through his use of a female golliwog figure that ultimately became the face of his brand in Europe. Although Kelly's career ended abruptly following his AIDS-related death on New Year's Day in 1990, it can be said that the frenzy of excitement surrounding his work and—perhaps more importantly—his persona would have continued to grow rapidly had he lived. His unprecedented stint as a Parisian fashion darling should not be unquestioned. Understanding the exact combination of forces that resulted in his superstardom means also comprehending an industry with a history stained by prejudice, racist rules of entry, and oppressive intellectual theft.

Many of those who praised Kelly tended to describe his designs as whimsical or ridiculous: "The first thing that hits you about Kelly's art is the sheer fun of imag-

ination, as if a big kid were designing clothes, but a precocious kid who could riff on Surrealists such as Man Ray." Critics fixated on his near-obsessive use of mismatched buttons, gaudy sequins and bows, and flowers, a tactic that distinguished him from "the brassy, geometric monotony of the '80s." The tendency of the industry to understand Kelly solely through the exuberance and childlike joy of his designs, while apt, entirely ignores the racial motifs that were equally (or perhaps even more) central to his work. Robin Givhan's description of Kelly's legacy describes the importance of race to his work:

Any lasting contribution that Kelly made to fashion's vocabulary is dominated by the singular significance of his ethnicity. Kelly was African-American and that fact played prominently in his designs, in the way he presented them to the public and in the way he engaged his audience. No other well-known fashion designer has been so inextricably linked to both his race and his culture. And no other designer was so purposeful in exploiting both.

Although Givhan's description might describe a body of work that is rooted in themes of social justice or providing equal representation, her careful use of the word "exploiting" was a conspicuous choice that causes the reader to think beyond these ideal assumptions.



To say that Kelly's designs were racially charged would be a tremendous understatement. His work made an extensive use of archaic images of blackness from the antebellum South and earlier. For example, a skirt made of bananas that was inspired by an iconic costume worn by fellow Parisian expat Josephine Baker. Like the original costume, Kelly's design was a contribution to the ongoing discussion linking black people to the jungle, apes, and savagery. This was only one of a number of recurring motifs that drew from highly offensive and inflammatory depictions of blackness. Caricatures of blackness were present in all of his collections, found in both less offensive forms, such as hats designed as the watermelon wedges that black Americans are stereotyped to love, and more offensive forms, such as entire dresses covered in golliwog caricatures. Kelly's fascination with these grotesque images extended beyond fashion: "...Kelly's vast collection of black memorabilia are [sic] as important as his garments. Kelly accumulated more than 8,000 examples of advertising, dolls, knick-



knacks and household products that employed racial stereotypes, caricatures and slurs." The designer was remembered as never leaving home without his pockets full of homemade pins shaped as small black baby dolls, their lips colored bright red in the style of American minstrel shows. Thus, it is not

surprising that the highly racialized image of the golliwog became his brand's mascot.

Although it is similar in style to the American traditions of the minstrel show and the depictions of black mammies, the golliwog is a distinctly European image. First appearing in children's books by English author Florence Kate Upton in the late 1800s, the golliwog is identified by its blood-red lips, coal-black skin, and wild hair. Though the character was shown to be kind and loveable, and eventually became the protagonist of Upton's subsequent novels, he was initially introduced as "a horrid sight, the blackest gnome." Upton's books were extremely popular, and it can be argued that they were responsible for or the mass prolifer-



ation of the golliwog caricature throughout Europe and the United States. In the United States, the golliwog joined its cousin images to create the family of racial archetypes that were immortalized in the knickknacks, advertisements, and paraphernalia collected by Kelly. Although golliwogs were typically male in appearance, Kelly's own design was distinctly feminine, marked by her large yellow circular earrings. This image was placed on dresses, suits, and Patrick Kelly shopping bags in Europe.

The golliwog appeared in a slightly different form on two dresses from Kelly's Fall/Winter 1986-87 collection. The dresses were simple, crafted in red and black from wool, angora, and spandex and featured slightly pronounced shoulders. They had Kelly's characteristic silhouettes: "He draped jersey in bold colors contoured to accentuate a woman's curves, earning him the nickname the King of Cling." At first glance, the dresses seemed to be yet another example of Kelly's obsession with unwieldy buttons. However, further examination reveals a method to the madness—black buttons arranged in a semicircle formed a simple crop of hair, two white buttons with black centers created eyes, two opposing yellow buttons became earrings, and a curved row of bright red buttons constituted the golliwog's ever-smiling mouth. The dresses employed a greater level of subtlety as compared to Kelly's other designs using the golliwog. The dresses had a simplified version of the character, removing some of even the minimal detail seen in Kelly's logo. In this depiction, there was nothing to suggest the golliwog's curly hair or bright white teeth. It is apparent that these characteristics supplemented her depiction. It was not necessary to show her hair texture, that she had teeth, or even that her skin was black (one of the dresses was red). The inclusion of unblinking eyes, earrings, and a beet-red mouth demonstrated the importance of these particular features in depicting a golliwog. This is yet another homage to America's racist past and another manifestation of Kelly's infatuation with the stereotype's ability to depict the black face.

It seems unbelievable, but apparently Kelly never commented publicly on the racial figures

that featured so prominently in his collections. Those who have acknowledged Kelly's preoccupation with these images have invariably attempted to identify the reasons why he based his brand so squarely on such controversial images. One article has suggested that the use "confounded the power of hate behind such images with an overdose of love, transforming the message of such caricatures from a hate crime into a shared joke everyone could laugh at." However, this optimistic interpretation of Kelly's motives is troubling. Although Kelly made a point of including a spray-painted heart in the décor of each of his shows, to suggest that this alone renders his work as rooted in love is too simplistic. This idea about love stems from a naiveté that wholly incorporates Kelly's sanitized, publicized comments regarding his target audience: "I design for fat women, skinny women, all kinds of women... My message is, 'You're beautiful just the way you are.'" Kelly's rhetoric, while idealistic, fails to account for the fact that only remarkably thin women appeared on his runways (with a one-time exception of a typically-thin model who was eight months pregnant). In addition, a love-based interpretation of his use of racial caricatures ignores the violent and traumatic history that is inextricably tied to these images. Furthermore, it presumes a kind of wholesomeness that is simply not supported by a designer—and in fact, a businessman—cunning enough and willing to proliferate an image in Europe that he knew could not circulate in the United States.



So, why did his commercialization of a black caricature create such massive popularity in Paris but not New York City? After dropping out of college, Kelly spent an uneventful year in New York City, unable to gain traction. His subsequent move to Paris was followed by an almost immediate change in the direction of his career largely due to a chance meeting with the then-editor of *French Elle*, Nicole Crassat, that led to a six-page spread of his work. Those who initially praised Kelly's work all highlighted that same, well-known whimsy of his designs: "Patrick was charismatic, and his dresses were elegant, colorful, funny, and unpretentious." They make no note of the impor-



tance essential to the images he used. Ignorance of the significance of this kind of imagery becomes particularly apparent through an anecdote told by Bjorn Amelan, Kelly's former business and romantic partner. He recounted inadvertently developing Kelly's taste for black memorabilia by giving him an ashtray featuring a black caricature: "I was totally innocent of its loaded racist history... I only saw a funny, charming piece." Amelan has cited this as a turning point, after which Kelly began to design his logo and the first collection that informed his subsequent work. Amelan understood this as Kelly's tendency to appropriate and enhance: "rather than hiding it... There's an empowerment in an act of ownership—not physical but mental ownership." However, this interpretation of Kelly's actions gives him the benefit of the doubt in that it is equally plausible that at that moment, Kelly was fully aware of common European responses to such images. While Americans might experience intense indignation or even disgust, Europeans would see something cheeky, fun, and innovative. After all, Kelly's work was for them simply another example in a long list of acceptable golliwog imagery. Even if Kelly's aim was to take historically racist images and refashion them as celebratory emblems of being black, his customers and critics were largely unaware of any such intentions. Their fascination with his work stemmed from an association of these images with a juvenile enthusiasm, likely stemming from their own association of the golliwog image with the dolls and books of their childhoods. They saw in Kelly's feminine golliwog a confirmation of the harmless, jovial, extremely black creatures that their childhood games and stories had told them that black people were. It elicited in them a nostalgia that was so potent yet lacking in self-awareness that it singlehandedly propelled Kelly from a virtual unknown to a designer holding a position in one of the world's most renowned, exclusive fashion circles.

Kelly's carefully crafted persona and image, along with his careful attention to detail displayed by his ad campaigns and runway shows, revealed a man too masterful in the visual realm to leave such things to chance. His constant wearing of a pair of oversized overalls simultaneously functioned as both his personal variation on the "designer's singular outfit" and as a sly reference to the black South's (and likely his own) sharecropping heritage. His brand's advertisements were splattered with the color red, from the upturned brim of his own "Paris" hat to the heels adorning his models' feet. Even the campaigns that excluded the color red from the clothing designs intentionally retained the blood red color on each model's lips. The homage to the golliwog's permanently ruby

mouth suggests a strong sense of creative direction from Kelly. Believing that a man so cognizant of creating and maintaining a singular image throughout his collections over the years would not have had a full understanding of the politics that made his work so marketable to a European audience seems to be willful ignorance. Although this may seem cynical, it does not seem to be a stretch to suggest that Kelly was very aware of and intentionally manipulated the European nostalgia and affinity for golliwog imagery and other caricatures that reaffirmed black stereotypes:

The designer himself was always seen in outsize overalls -- even if the occasion was formal and before such silhouettes became the uniform of rappers and their fans [...] Kelly acknowledged most every stereotype attributed to Southern blacks. He made fried chicken for his friends, sprinkled his conversations with "honey chile" and made liberal use of aphorisms gleaned from the Good Book and at his grandmother's knee. One could argue that as an expatriate in Paris, Kelly profited from enduring and damaging stereotypes while blacks back home suffered them. He played the quaint Southern naif.

Kelly was able to collect the unsavory remnants of America's history of slavery and neatly repackage them for unconcerned, unaware European consumption, informed by their unfettered acceptance of the golliwog caricature.

Regardless of his intent, there is something that cannot be detached from Kelly's knowing use of golliwogs, watermelons, and overly stylized lips in his designs; his work allowed for an industry in which a white model sporting bright red lipstick in the minstrel tradition might wear a dress shrouded in golliwog imagery down the runway, and the next day, a wealthy white woman might appear in the streets of Paris doing the same. An honest assessment of the demographics of the individuals with sufficient time and money to follow Kelly's work and invest in his pieces makes it apparent that the majority of his clientele must have been white women. This understanding casts Kelly's designs in an entirely new light. They can no longer be read as an artful re-appropriations if it is known that these items were crafted in large part



for white consumption. The very concept that Kelly designed clothing employing racist caricatures for primarily white audiences completely nullifies any argument suggesting that these images were employed as an attempt to reclaim the humanity lost during the years of slavery and the period afterward during which they proliferated. Rather, it blurs the line between his clothing and the very memorabilia that inspired it: one is no longer able to identify a difference in their respective objectives of creation.

If Kelly's work is seen simply as the production of more racist, caricatured memorabilia for the amusement and pleasure of white patrons, it leads one to wonder why it ever was deemed acceptable. It is likely that Kelly's racial identity and Southern heritage gave him a pass from peers and would-be critics. So, few fashion commentators of the day mentioned, even in passing, the racial overtones of his work that it appears it was never even given a second thought or considered worth mentioning. Kelly was given leeway regarding his intentions that would most likely not have been given to a similar white designer. It was assumed that Kelly's intent was to flip these caricatures on their heads, reclaim the images, and rectify the injustices committed in their name, but the lack of published commentary from Kelly regarding these images implies that this was an assumption he considered useful and not worth disputing.

Kelly's short-lived career makes our usual understanding of the word "reclamation" problematic. It forces us to consider the question: where does reclamation end and exploitation begin? Our race-based assumption that Kelly's use of caricatured images stemmed from a desire to rectify an injustice is less indicative of his motives than our own tendency to project our desires for racial justice. It stems from an optimism that I wrongly characterized earlier as naïve. The truth of the matter is that this kind of blind hope is not naïve or unknowing but rather a coping mechanism that dates back to slavery and is necessary for the continued sanity and emotional wellbeing of black people. Our unwavering faith in Kelly's good intentions is rooted in the fundamental need to protect ourselves from further harm and trauma, believing that black individuals would only have the best interest of their people at heart. However, our study of Kelly's work and his navigation of the Paris fashion world reveals that this was never the case. His complete acceptance into the fashion world no longer appears unlikely, but typical given the fashion industry's (and greater society's) rewarding of individuals and works that reaffirm and avoid challenging preconceived beliefs regarding blackness. While it may not have been intentional on Kelly's part, he is thus transformed from an outlier into yet another black artist fashioned into a tool for the maintenance of white supremacy.



# AESTHETIC LITERACY

PATRICK KELLY, DERRICK ADAMS & THE  
FASHION UNDERGROUND

Lyndon K. Gill



People always say, “How do you do it?  
How have you put up with this world for so long?”  
I say, “Through my faith and my ancestors.”

-André Leon Talley<sup>1</sup>

Like most born and bred New Yorkers, I have a complex love-hate relationship with the city, but an unabashed adoration and respect for fashion. This obsession with style cannot ignore the fashion industry’s often exceedingly racist, classist and gender disciplining tendencies. In fact, I appreciate fashion’s deep pockets of fine-stitched rebellion and intergenerational coteries of *enfants terribles* precisely because the business of fashion can be so shameless in its determination to mask ugly discrimination as sophisticated discernment—an exquisite silk purse from the muddiest sow’s ear. Like so many born in or baptized by the city, I recognize fashion as one of the few remaining democratic art forms, whose populism has not come to mean pedestrianism— even in a place where everyone pounds the pavement.

By now, in this post-*Devil Wears Prada* moment, it has become admittedly cliché though no less true to insist that everyone to some degree or another participates in fashion even if only to reject all the rules of what’s acceptable or chic in any given moment. Yes, that too is a look! So, fashion is everywhere always. Yet, there

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kate Novak’s biographical documentary *The Gospel According to André* (Novak 2018).

is something about the distillation of it in a city obsessed with it, but pretending to be too cool to care that brought something to light for me in one of the places New Yorkers are the most intimate with each other and pretending not to be— the subway. Like almost everyone raised in the city, I spent way too much time (during my fragile formative years) underground; I often joke that the living ought not to be so comfortable buried so deep, but perhaps my morbidly sarcastic sense of humor— an undeniable New York City affect— is the direct result of this surreal condition we call commuting.

As a high school student, I commuted for a little over an hour each way twice a day from my family home in Jamaica, Queens— a just barely middle-class, not-quite-suburban enclave of mostly people of color that has given the world Russell Simmons, Donald Trump (sorry), and Onika “Nicki Minaj” Maraj (born in Trinidad & Tobago, but raised in Queens)—to Manhattan’s affluent and self-righteously liberal Upper West Side, where I attended an exceedingly white and upper-class all-boys prep schools that claims to be the oldest in the nation. This was the mid-to-late 1990s; New York City was a different animal in those dark ages before ubiquitous iPhones, iPads, Apple watches and free Wi-Fi on subway platforms. Walkmans (some of you may still remember such archaic devices with affection. I may or may not still have Mary J. Blige’s 1992 album *What’s the 411?* on a cherished cassette tape) were still one of the most popular escape technologies of those times. But what I remember most vividly— admittedly with much romantic nostalgia—is a very old technology being everywhere underground in those crowded clanking passages: books.

Perhaps because I had so much reading to do myself, I was hyper aware of anything even resembling a book around me, but everyone seemed to be reading on the subway back then. In fact, it was on the subway as a teenager—being rocked for miles in flickering fluorescents through the city’s graffiti tagged vascular system—that I fell in love with words. Holding poles,

holding doors and holding steady enough to protect the precarious balance of my own little foot-shifting fiefdom, I fell in love with words...and with shoes! No matter what anyone tells you, New Yorkers always notice your shoes first. Eyes can be dangerous (too inviting, too wild, too vacant), so there is an art of looking away in New York, an elaborate choreography of avoiding eye contact in a city where people are increasingly unavoidable. And yet, looking away while moving at a pace fast enough for a fighting chance at getting anywhere before the rest of the eight and a half million requires watching one’s step. While watching one’s step, one tends to notice a lot of shoes.

### Follow Fashion: A Style Nerd Love Story

Nevertheless, shoes in motion can be hard to appreciate fully. It is when they stop that one gets to have whole love affairs of longing glances with them. One of the only places New Yorkers ever stop, the subway is after all a place to be still and yet keep moving (train delays, sick passengers, tunnel fires, police activity, track construction, E train running on the F line, express on the local track, shuttle bus replacement service and “I said stand clear the closing doors PLEASE!” aside). For a bookish black queer teenager spending way too much time reading underground and noticing shoes just off the page, the subway was a beginning. Those long rides on the train were the first place I began to connect a fascination with words with a fascination with clothes. After all, once you are taken by the shoes, your curiosity begs for the rest of the outfit. These dual worlds of fascination would soon collide once I left the very palm trees

that seduced me away to California for university and returned to the wet-eyed winters of the east coast for graduate school. In the early aughts— again immersed in a world of overwhelming required reading and facing a daily Boston subway commute— buried in a few haphazardly abandoned sections of *The New York Times* beside me on the T, I happened upon Cathy Horyn and those worlds became one.

Only the second fashion critic at paper, whose website I remember cementing as my browser homepage



No matter what anyone tells you, New Yorkers always notice your shoes first.



around that time precisely because it offered me easier access to the wide world beyond Cambridge and to that “Style” section, which for me then was Ms. Horyn.<sup>2</sup> She wrote the most relentless, encyclopedic and poetically scathing fashion reviews for the paper from 1998 until her retirement in 2014. I say without the slightest hyperbole and with a deep respect that it was “Cathy Horyn for *The New York Times*” (I can still hear her voice echoing from the later audio reviews) that sparked my intellectual curiosity in fashion as something about which one could think deeply and write both seriously *and* beautifully. I was hooked immediately on her brilliance and on that voice. Those of us who read those reviews were spoiled by the elegance of her craft, which felt almost like precise haute couture collections of word, phrase and history in their own right—before she started writing the somehow less satisfying “fast fashion” equivalent on her “On the Runway” blog (as undeniably innovative and now much copied as that has proven to be). It is thanks to Cathy Horyn mostly that I now teach a course on fashion and desire in the African Diaspora even though my central academic work is on queer artistry and HIV/AIDS activism in the Caribbean.<sup>3</sup>

While not completely foreign to fashion, I long managed to keep my obsession with it separate from my work in the academy until black diaspora style scholars like Monica L. Miller and curators of black diasporic art like Shantrelle P. Lewis gave me permission to inhabit the intersection of these worlds, to set up shop at their crossroads.<sup>4</sup> So, I was well positioned when I received the exciting invitation to present as part of the traveling *Fashion & Justice Workshop* that Kimberly M. Jenkins (The Pratt Institute and Parsons School of Design) and Jonathan Michael Square (Harvard University) curated for The Contemporary Austin, sponsored by Austin’s own radically playful IMMEDIATE Fashion School on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2018.<sup>5</sup> This opportunity to participate in what proved to be an instructive and inspiring workshop provided me with the chance to speak publicly about a designer I have been thinking about for some time and about whom,



Derrick Adams,  
Runway No. 3, 2017

apparently, New York-based multidisciplinary artist Derrick Adams has also been thinking about too.

### Patrick Kelly: The Deep South *Enfant Terrible*

I offer here only a basic sketch of the influential African American fashion designer Patrick Kelly and his work, but I encourage you to seek out more information about Kelly and demand more engagement with his work in major fashion and art institutions. I sincerely hope that the comprehensive exhibition *Patrick Kelly: Runway of Love*, which I had the honour of seeing in 2014 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMoA), was not the last public exhibition of his work.<sup>6</sup> A full decade after the 2004 exhibition *Patrick Kelly: A Retrospective* curated by the current Studio Museum in Harlem Director extraordinaire Thelma Golden as a guest curator for the Brooklyn Museum,

<sup>2</sup> After fifteen years as a fashion critic at the New York Times, Cathy Horyn is now the Critic-at-Large for New York Magazine’s fashion blog “The Cut.” See: <http://nymag.com/author/cathy%20horyn/>. In an endearing full circle turn of events, Horyn initiated a series on fashion at Stanford University in 2013, exactly a decade after I left “The Farm” and those aforementioned iconic palm trees. For the “Fashion at Stanford” series see: <https://arts.stanford.edu/office-of-the-vice-president-for-the-arts/fashion-at-stanford/>.

<sup>3</sup> See my book *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean* (Duke University Press, 2018): <https://www.dukeupress.edu/erotic-islands>.

<sup>4</sup> Monica L. Miller’s *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (2009) and Shantrelle P. Lewis’ *Dandy Lion: the Black Dandy and Street Style* (2017) are two of the most important recent texts on black style in the African diaspora and thus are anchoring texts in my “Fashion & Desire” course.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Stephanie Lang, Program Administrator at the University of Texas at Austin’s John L. Warfield Center for African & African American Studies, for her style and for graciously suggesting my name to the workshop organizers. And I really appreciate Dr. Square’s kind and patient encouragement to turn that presentation into this article.

<sup>6</sup> For more details about the *Runway of Love* exhibition see the Philadelphia Museum of Art website: <https://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/799.html> [Accessed 10/8/18].



Adams talks about his work with and through Kelly's archive as another way to approach the racist injustices of the world by turning our attention to a celebration of African American cultural creativity, resilience, and reach (Adams 2017: 8).

the PMoA exhibition was exquisite, but we cannot wait another decade to see Kelly's genius again on display. And where are the catalogues?! The PMoA exhibition oddly did not have a catalogue and the catalogue from the Brooklyn Museum show is the black unicorn of art catalogues: few have seen it and it is rumoured to be out of print if it ever existed at all. But I am getting ahead of myself. Patrick Kelly was born on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1954 in post-war Vicksburg, Mississippi, moved to Atlanta in 1972 at the age of eighteen (where he volunteered as a window dresser at the Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche boutique), then moved to New York City to attend Parsons School of Design, but was only able to complete a semester once the school revoked his scholarship due to racism.<sup>7</sup>

In 1979, following the sage advice of African American supermodel of the moment Pat Cleveland and some stories suggest taking advantage of a one-way plane ticket she anonymously gifted him, Patrick Kelly moves to Paris. In 1984, he accomplishes a fashion coupe when he convinces the Parisian retailer Victoire boutiques to carry a line of wool tube dresses he designed only to have those same dresses featured in a six-page spread in the February 1985 issue of French *Elle*. The next month in an old Paris apartment, Kelly has his first fashion show at which he reveals the clingy mini dresses adorned with colorful buttons that would become his signature. By the late 1980s, the young designer had made a name for himself through this very act of celebrating his rural

Southern roots and the ingenuity of craftspeople cum designers like his grandmother, who improvised something spectacular out of mismatched buttons, surplus ribbon and obligatory church hats. Even the steely French could not but fall under the spell of this Delta-rooted fashion outsider in his signature denim overalls and brightly colored high-top Converse. In 1988, Kelly would be the first American and certainly the first black designer to present a ready-to-wear collection at the official Paris Fashion Week shows at the Louvre, an esteemed world stage he could access only because in the same year he had been the first American ever to be inducted into the Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-Porter, the august governing body of the French ready-to-wear industry.

A controversial and complicated American in Paris, Kelly's ironic embrace and frequent use of the iconography of racist stereotype in his designs as well as in his public relations materials no doubt influenced his reception especially among his fellow African Americans and continues to colour his legacy. His grinning golliwog logo, watermelon prints, seemingly ubiquitous little black doll brooches, use of white models in blackface for an infamous Annie Leibovitz *Vanity Fair* portrait all provide a kind of uneasy bridge to the racial minefield of the past—especially for the progeny of the formerly enslaved—that Jonathan Michael Square walks us through so meticulously in his work. By the early 1990s, Patrick Kelly had reached rarefied heights in his fame. He had opened a central Paris boutique and his compa-

<sup>7</sup> This very brief introduction to Patrick Kelly (a full length biography— a stalled proposal for which sits in his archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture though penned by none other than venerable writer Maya Angelou herself (a friend of Kelly's)— is long overdue) in the paragraph above and what follows is deeply informed by two extensive articles about Kelly's life, art and legacy: Horacio Silva's 2004 New York Times piece "Delta Force" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/22/magazine/delta-force.html>) [Accessed 10/8/18]) and Antwaun Sargent's 2017 Vice piece "Patrick Kelly Was The Jackie Robinson of High Fashion" ([https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/kz77yv/patrick-kelly-was-the-jackie-robinson-of-high-fashion](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/kz77yv/patrick-kelly-was-the-jackie-robinson-of-high-fashion)) [Accessed 10/8/18]).

<sup>8</sup> Hallie Ringle, who was previously an assistant curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem and is now the curator of contemporary art at the Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama, curated this exhibition



ny was projected to earn an impressive ten million dollars after only five years of showing collections. But on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1990, Kelly died of AIDS-related illness; he was only thirty-five years old. We have all been cheated of the phenomenal collections he would have given us for decades to come had he lived. But something of Patrick does live on.

### Derrick Adams Does Patrick Kelly

A collaboration of the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the New York Public Library's Countee Cullen branch in Harlem (whose mezzanine housed the exhibition), performance and visual artist Derrick Adams' exhibition *Patrick Kelly, The Journey* crafts a resurrection of sorts.<sup>8</sup> And here again, my fascination for the places where books and fashion share space finds an artful home: the black gay visual artist honouring the black gay fashion designer in a library named for a celebrated gay poet, novelist and playwright of the Harlem Renaissance. Who could wish for a more glorious ancestral lineage?! This family line and his abiding faith are the only things that international fashion maven André Leon Talley assures us (in the epigraph) make this world bearable. Based on his interest in Kelly for over a decade and his research in the designer's archive at the Schomburg, Adams' "Mood Boards" are a series of eleven abstract collages that remix Kelly's vintage clothing patterns and fabrics to gesture with shape and color at the bold geometry of his visual legacy (Adams 2017: 3, 7). The works are intended to highlight Kelly's genius with form (asking us to consider him a soft sculptor using textile as his medium) while also continuing Adams' own ongoing interest in deconstructing, fragmenting and manipulating forms.

Even some of Kelly's more stereotypically racist iconography gets distilled and reworked as Adams negotiates how far to push us visually without losing the integrity of Kelly's vision (Adams 2017: 8). Adams talks about his work with and through Kelly's archive as another way to approach the racist injustices of the world by turning our attention to a celebration of African American cultural creativity, resilience, and reach (Adams 2017: 8). At the same

time, he is as focused as Kelly was on the specificity of the body, in motion even in complete abstraction:

"In this series, I'm really trying to represent a sense of movement of the body or the garment. I didn't use the figure directly in the work. I used the contour of the clothing patterns, which are cut up and distributed throughout the grid with a lot of different types of compositional forms that push the shapes in and out of the space." (Adams 2017: 9)

Adams is determined to give the two dimensional a fuller flesh, a performative quality through composition. These active compositions offer the viewer a sketch of his formal and affective relationship to both Kelly's physical archive and the emotional afterlife he left behind. There is so much road left to be trod in interpreting *Patrick Kelly, The Journey*, but of principal interest here are the various ways in which the designer—by way of Derrick Adams—comes to function as a connective seam or perhaps a particularly active transfer point in a whole system of significance, shifting just below the surface.

A bridge between Jonathan Michael Squares' meticulous interrogation of fashion's racist past and Kimberly M. Jenkins' dynamic engagement with the "post-racial" racism of fashion's present moment, between the museum and the academy, between the world of fashion and the world of visual art, the Patrick Kelly of Derrick Adams' reverential reimagination is an infrastructural phenomenon as awesomely complex, as imperfectly vast in its reach, and as hidden yet vital as the New York City subway system. There are certain days in Austin, Texas—where I currently live, along with every other hipster defecting from the coasts—when I miss that subway, miss the way those steel cradles can rock a reader (the few left who are not playing games or cruising apps on their phones, pads and watches) and showcase a shoe as entire to an outfit immaculately "just thrown together" in that way that is so very New York. But more and more, I am finally starting to see an increasing sole sophistication in Austin that perhaps signals the coming of others kinds of sartorial and aesthetic cosmopolitanism. In any instance, there can be little doubt that much like Patrick Kelly's profound legacy, we all look so much better—head to toe—in the light of day.

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# NEVER TIRED OF RUNNING

James Cantres

Photos by Kristen Wilson

In the autumn of 2013, while resident in Santa Barbara, California as a doctoral fellow, I began running for sport. I ran to train, I ran to relieve stress. I ran because the weather was impeccable, or rather because there was no weather. In the nine months of my fellowship, I remember it raining on only one occasion. The temperature was mild, the wind breezy, the air often laced with the scent of offshore oil. I ran to the supermarket, to the mailbox, to the taqueria.

I began running the day after I arrived. The day was lovely and, for the first time in my life, I ran in a place I had never seen and felt sure of myself. I had been nervous about being away from home, regretful that my fiancée was in Brooklyn without me, guilty that I was the guy who left. But running down that street in a town where no one walks, made me think the decision was the right one.

Only days later, sitting in a cell in the Santa Barbara County jail, I wondered how handcuffs could feel so cold. I stood akimbo peering through the cell bars at the guards on duty who could not have been bothered to allow me a call. There were a few other men milling about, our number vacillating between ten and twenty-five through the night and morning. A few Chicanos, seemingly reunited I, greeted each other effusively as the gate clanged open and shut. I had hoped for a friend or a familiar face—to be alone at that time was unbearable.

So what did I do after I got out? How would I protect myself when my simple acquiescence could not prevent my apprehension? How was I supposed to stand or stay or feel safe in any space, let alone one alto-



gether new to me? The black professor, grad student, intellectual, what have you—I looked in the mirror each morning after and saw not only my reflection but how I look in the eyes of a cop, a neighbor, a store clerk. So I ran.

I woke each morning, pulled on running shorts, tied my sneakers, turned on my running app, and set out. Around the faculty and graduate student family housing units and onto a gravel and sand road I would jaunt—wheezing, huffing, puffing, and scared shitless





about what would happen next. And to my surprise, I unfortunately continued to endure various incursions on my body. I was set upon by of all God's creatures. A Chihuahua, or perhaps a terrier, would yip and yap from afar, dragging its walker by the leash. I thought nothing of the dog until it bit my sneaker as we crossed paths one day. I thought more of the dog when it bit my heel two days later, and thought a whole lot about the pup when my ankle was twisted in its jaw the next week. But I continued to run the same path every day.

The then-chair of UCSB's Black Studies Department mentioned he had seen me running at 8am one morning, winding between short-term housing and the beach. "Hey brother, now you know I wanted to slow down and see what was up. Maybe you were running away, but then I didn't want to bother you and all. Well it's so nice to see you out there, how was your run?" I looked at him and said, "Brotherman, I don't know if I'm running away or toward something."

I used to listen to lyrically dense bass-booming rap music on my runs. Nothing else would ever do. I

thought about my heart racing in step with a bass line or to mouth the words from a song so precisely I was always left gasping for breath. There was a long hill at the beginning of my runs that I would struggle to climb, and take precious note to complete before the end of "Bitch don't Kill My Vibe." Reaching the top of that incline and then past the pens of lambs and goats, through a small opening that led to a cliff overlooking the beach that smelled only like oil by the time Kendrick yelped, "I am a sinner, that's probably gonna sin again," let me know I was on pace for a 6:30 mile. And that mile would be merely the first of maybe five, six, or seven that morning. On most days I would set out with a mileage goal, and would not head back until I reached



that goal. So setting out for four miles turned into a guaranteed six miles when I would run out and around until I reached four and was still two miles back from where I began. I ran every morning, no matter what. On weekends, I ran multiple times a day. I would take a long route to the supermarket, and then walk groceries to my apartment. I would throw a new bottle of hot sauce in the cabinet, toss the avocados, cheese, and jalapeños in the fridge, and then run out again for an additional six or seven miles. I ran over and over

again. On Sundays, I ran ten or eleven miles to make up for those shorter Saturday runs.

When I was feeling especially self-hating, I would set out for a half-marathon. At times I felt compelled to show myself just how sad I had made myself and others. So when I decided I would stay in Santa Barbara, even after my fiancée strongly suggested that maybe it was not worth the stress, I would run and run and continue running so I would never forget how much pain I caused. How much pain I caused the people close to me, and how much that pained me. How much pain I swallowed while reenacting a perp-walk each and every evening from my office in Black Studies down El Colegio and into my shit flat in West Campus housing. I suppose I was waiting to be apprehended again, and some guilt-ridden tic in my side said that I'd better be able to run fast enough the next time.

The running kept me straight because, most days, my mind was flush with the minutiae of black radical

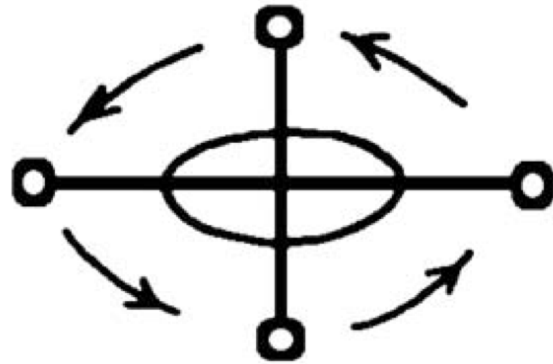
politics among West Indian and African migrants in post-World War II London, transcribing long quotations and adequately analyzing my sources, and the hunger pangs in my belly. There were other thoughts of course. I could see myself walking back to the apartment, having some white frat boy or police officer (oh and were there police in these communities let's count them: UC Santa Barbara Campus Police, Santa Barbara County Police, Santa Barbara City Police, California Highway Patrol. I'm sure I'm forgetting some folks) bashing my head in with a bat, Maglite, or baton. I would sit typing away, thousands of words in an afternoon, only to pause every so often thinking of cuffs tightening on my unusually small wrists. I looked out of my office window onto the courtyard watching black legs and feet dangling from the long branches of the trees, but I was only dreaming I think. So you would understand when I say I may have been running from something, my own demons I suppose.

I came home and finished my dissertation, got married, and ran less and certainly slower. I tend to bask in my own invented glory. A four hundred-page tome that would be read only by those who had already read it.

Back in New York, I began to dream about being back in the e belly of the proverbial grad school beast (academics can be so dramatic). I saw myself in the library looking for my name in the stacks. Slavery, emancipation, bondage, freedom, Middle Passage, disenfranchisement, forced migration, alienation. I fingered the words on the book covers and sighed—wrapping my mind around reading hundreds of texts for my upcoming exams had been daunting enough—I sank into a depression thinking on history and struggle and pain and hopelessness.

How did I forget my graduate work for so long? I dreamt of the biweekly meetings with my doctoral advisor<sup>1</sup> that were nerve-racking and filled me with self-doubt. I remembered feeling unsure that I had read or thoroughly enough or could identify and compare various important but mostly esoteric historiographical arguments. I woke up remembering one particular meeting. My advisor, who always looked at me with care and determination said, "James, if you are concerned with artistic and cultural expression, you need to think about Robert Ferris Thompson." She looked at her office shelves teeming with books and pulled one out. On

the cover was a masked man, and under his chin, sat the subtitle, "African and Afro-American Art & Philosophy." She handed me the book and said, "See if you cannot do something interesting with the ideas inside."



I finally went and picked up a copy. I poured through the pages of *Flash of the Spirit* and sat comfortable in an expanded notion of some sense of myself that I never articulated. Tendwa Nza Kongo--the Kongo Cosmogram--on page 109 called me. There I saw a representation of life and death, the spiritual and material, and, at that moment, saw myself with kinder eyes. An image without beginning nor end, holding the living and dead, the corporeal and spiritual, in equilibrium. Each component informing the other in perpetuity. I could get lost in the image and I did.<sup>2</sup>

Had I been sleeping that whole time?

When I decided to etch the cosmogram into my flesh, I thought about its variant forms. Different scholars and artists debate over the precise configurations of the symbol, and that was enough for me to decide on my own interpretation. I looked through book after book, went to galleries, and hunted online for photographs to steer me in some way. Then, when it became clear to me that escaped enslaved Africans in the United States searched for Kongo cosmograms carved in the floors of ally churches along the Underground Railroad, my identities began smashing up against one another, in a wholly unprecedented and unforgettable way. I could indeed be a maroon, live in the United States, and have the salt of the Middle Passage in my blood. And I could speak that however I liked. I thought about running away from something. I considered running toward something. I realized that neither undoes the reality of the place left behind nor the new destination.

<sup>1</sup> I am eternally grateful to Michele Mitchell who challenged me intellectually and managed to also be a compassionate advocate for me during graduate school. It is not "black girl magic" because she worked.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Ferris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 109.



I would have to find the right artist for this tattoo. They could not be white! I just could not wrap my mind around any alternative but a black woman artist, and when those plans fell through—I found Pablo. We communicated almost exclusively via text message and never shared much about one another. I did not know him beyond the few images of his work on Instagram, and he did not know me from Adam. That the lack of verbal articulation of similarity and affinity (he was obviously Afro-Latino), made my speaking that reality immaterial. I felt somehow that we both knew.



“Dude, we keep thinking about how you’re a professor!” I nodded and shook hands with both of them, then headed home.

On the G train back to Fort Greene, I thought about the dope-ass ink on my arm and looked up from the *New Yorker* I was reading to see two police staring at me. One looked quizzically at the magazine, and the other fixated on my shoes. They were untied—purposefully nonetheless—when I run I run and when I am not running, I swag it out in no particular rush. It dawned that my new country marks had always been there, in my juvenile nappy hair, my teenage angst-afro, my professorial locs, my black skin, my crow’s feet, my veiny forearms and hands. I dreamily conceived of the making of my own identity but indeed it had been with me, so long as I was alive.

There’s a biography of Richard Pryor called *If I Stop, I’ll Die*. Pryor screamed that at police and pedestrian bystanders as he raced down a sidewalk in Los Angeles, his awkward black smallness aflame because of a mishap freebasing cocaine in his house. But he was not the only black body running to escape death. Jordan Peele made black asses stand up and run around theaters to escape the sunken place in *Get Out*. I ran for the bus and got a summons from the NYPD because I purchased the wrong kind of Metrocard. Walking is running. Nodding off on the subway is running.

Donald Glover offered to the world “This is America” in spring 2018 and if you were not woke before well by golly. One thing about “This is America” that stood out most to me was Glover’s attempt at escape at the conclusion. He is chased by all manner of people—shirtless and wild-eyed—a knowing display from Glover that if he cannot run away successfully then his fate is sealed.

When I run, my black toes and blackened toenails merely help me retreat, help me pounce, send me away and bring me back home.

After forty-five minutes of that needle buzzing, I turned my forearm over and back a few times, looking down at my country marks<sup>3</sup> and then understood where I belonged. It was a clan of my own making, and I was deeply invested in its survival. I will always keep running.

Pablo then began explaining aftercare.

“So, keep the wrap over it. Only antibacterial soap, no sunlight. Don’t lift anything too heavy. As far as work, what do you do?”

“Oh, I’m a professor.”

He looked back down at the tattoo and then at the South Asian dude working at the shop’s front desk and then at me.

“Oh ok cool, then nothing to worry about, I guess.” I then ran to a neighboring pharmacy to withdraw cash to tip Pablo. I came back into the shop, and started to hand him his cash when he stopped me and said, “You left your book, I think?”

He gestured toward a library copy of *The Famished Road*. I was still only halfway through.

“Ah yes, that’s mine, thanks. I wanted to leave it so ya’ll would know I was coming back. I told you I’m good for the tip.”

He laughed along with the other guy and bleated.

<sup>3</sup> A tremendous debt here is owed to Michael A. Gomez, one of my graduate school mentors, whose *Exchanging Our Country Marks* disabuses the sometimes willfully ignorant of the notion that diaspora and Africa need to be irreconcilable disparate. The histories are intertwined; the genealogies inherited and passed on. Articulations of cultural affinity remain undeniable.

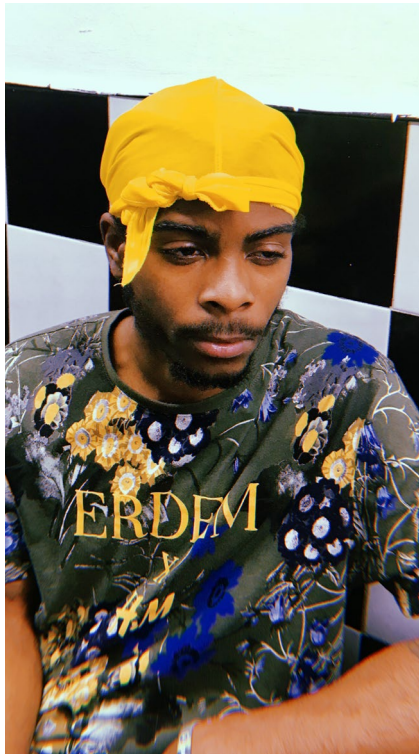
# BROOKLYN YOUTHS LET THEIR FREAK FLAGS FLY FOR THE CULTURE

Jonathan M. Square

The tradition of black people covering their heads reaches back farther/further than slavery—in fact, its roots can be traced to the African continent. I have worn a durag my entire life: to protect my hair at night, create a wave pattern, and lock in moisture while sleeping. Through the years I have witnessed the ebb and flow of wearing durags in public and recently registered a resurgence of this trend among young men of color in New York City. This iteration of the trend is not just with the black or white durags of the past, but in a panoply of colors. Yet again young men of color are on the forefront of subversive non-normative gender display. The durags are elevated beyond their functional purpose and displayed as powerful symbols of self-care and individuality. Inspired by the late Bill Cunningham, I played the part of Diasporic flaneur and roving photographer this summer by snapping street style images of these young beknighted cavaliers in all their multi-colored glory.









# SOLANA

## GOES TO THE BALL:

### AN ODE TO SZA AT THE MET GALA

Marina Sofia Magloire



It was cotton candy everywhere. Scratchy and pink, yielding under her fingers. She couldn't see for all that pink as her acolytes lowered it over her head. For a moment she thought it was suffocating her and she lashed out, panicked. But by then she was safe; it was part of her. The people responsible for her transformation clapped and gasped, touched her hair, whistled "ooh girl."

How was it possible that something so pink could be a part of her? Not even the insides of her lips (the upper ones or the nether ones, she thought, and the upper ones blossomed into a smile) were that dreamed of shade. She had asked for a pink that would be the pride of her four-year-old self, a self before anyone said "but you can't be Sleeping Beauty, Sleeping Beauty's not..." A pink to beat into submission, a pink to which you could say "you're mine, you better pretend to like it." Glenda the Good Witch pink. Virginal pink. Virginal, ha ha. It had been a minute. It had been an eon. Had it ever really been? She had a virgin's optimism somewhere back there, wrapped in pink tissue, just in case someone asked to see it someday. No one ever asked.

Solana took a moment to consider how she had come to be here in a penthouse suite in virginal





stares and phones in laps. But Solana, she knew exactly why Othello had done that to Desdemona. She knew that when people called you a black ram, even when you pretended not to care, somewhere in you was doubt that you could ever be loved. She saw this as clearly as she saw her own fingers drumming the blank notebook where she was supposed to be taking notes yet never did. Having no booty having no body, she said nothing.

It began as ornament. Wearing false lashes to the grocery store, or lipstick in a slightly unusual shade—kale green, bruise purple. But she noticed it left a door open, women nodding their approval, asking where she bought this or that. Men doing double takes, watching her open-mouthed as she crossed the street. Her body an edifice she began adding to in crazy architectural feats growing

pink, surrounded by acolytes armed with curling irons and lip pencils and glitter, all saying, *all hail girl*. But the girl she had been not so long ago shook inside her. Having no booty having no body, boys' eyes had seemed to slide past her like she was an empty lot between mansions. And let's not even get started on those few white boys who ever bothered to look. Solemnly they bestowed their gaze, like they were swearing an oath in a courtroom. *I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth: black women are just as beautiful as anyone else.* Or else it was as though they were on a dare, touching her with one finger and running, giggling maniacally, to report back to their friends.

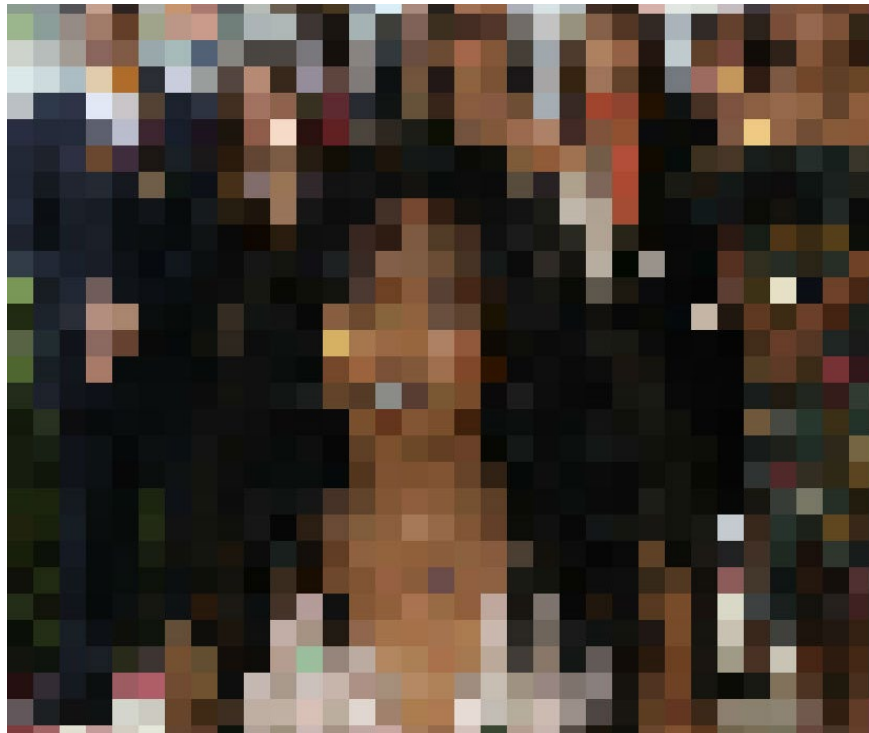
In those days she knew every answer in English class. Frustrated, the teacher would cast around a net of inquiries, beseeching blank



**I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth: black women are just as beautiful as anyone else.**



Photography: Greta Tuckute



higher and higher. The bundles of hair she bought at the beauty supply multiplied, grew thicker and verdant. Her shorts crept up her thighs, leaving trails of goosebumps. She sprouted feathers and furs, and everywhere she went she caught the light and sent it spinning back out into the ether. By the time she met the defining heartbreak of her twenty-somethings, the fuckboy to end all fuckboys, she had walked toward him through a curtain of weed and gunpowder smoke at a friends' Fourth of July party and he had shook his head and said, "Wow. You're a goddess." And she had felt suddenly giddy, like she had gotten away with something.

He said he had a girl. He made clear he had a girl. Why didn't you call me? *I got a girl.* Why did you kiss me like that last night, like I was a stranger? *You know I got a girl.* Why can't this last forever? *I told you I got a girl, and anyway, you are not the type anyone can hold onto forever.* "You're not stupid," he had told her, and she held her hand to her cheek as though he had slapped her. "You know what this is." Solana the alleged goddess pictured the girl at home. The girl had been to college, you could see her diploma on the wall behind her. The girl had majored in something practical, like business or engineering. The girl didn't smoke, and the girl had never bothered her head with anything so eccentric as the answers in English class. The girl worked hard.

The girl had her own. The girl went on vacation to Jamaica with her sorority sisters, and the girl used the hashtag #blackexcellence unironically. The girl slept well at night. For the first time Solana was not sure she wanted to be a goddess. Wasn't goddess just another way of saying she wasn't human enough to be loved?

"I love all of you" she turned now, and said to her acolytes, "but I need a minute." They filed out one by one, pausing to genuflect or to fix her crown. When they were all gone, she turned to face the mirror, a huge gilded affair that stretched from floor to ceiling. She pressed her hands to the glass and willed it to give way, to be a portal into another world she was nothing more than a girl who happened to be wearing a pink dress and who would later be donning sweatpants and venturing out into the streets for falafel at 3am and spilling tahini down her chest because she was too busy talking shit on the phone to her best friend on the West Coast about the Gala—who had looked like a lampshade, who had allowed their whiteness to stand in for an actually creative costume, who she found arrogant but secretly cute. And to her surprise, her hands sank through the glass. Solana stood for a moment, submerged up to her wrists in the mirror. "I guess that's what you call black girl magic," she said, and then walked through the mirror without a backward glance.



# RAZZLE DAZZLE

Shantrelle P. Lewis

I.  
AMBUSH  
“Kromanti.”

The first time I heard this word was in the Spring of 2014. An Andy Warhol Curatorial Fellow, I journeyed to Pikin Slee, a maroon village established over two centuries ago, in the heart of the Suriname rainforest, in search of Africa in the Dutch Caribbean. What I found was Ghana, as if in a suspended state, yet in the midst of modernity. Black women were walking around bare breast with lapas wrapped around their waists, baskets balanced atop their heads and cell-phones in their hands. What I also learned was that the Yaw Kromanti—a group of Winti, deities in Surinamese cosmology—a derivative of Akan traditional religion from Ghana, are alive and well. Prior to leaving Paramaribo, on a trek that would entail driving two hours through the dense South American country by car and then making our way one and half hours up river in a narrow wooden boat run by a simple motor, I'd already found deep Diasporic bridges between Ghana's Ashanti people and Suriname's maroon and Creole populations. That is our (duty), those of us who do Diaspora work, to constantly connect dots between the Continent and the west, linking past and present, here and there through space and time.

“I'm reading about ambush,” Kleaver's text told me. I asked him to elaborate. “This book I'm reading attrib-

utes the maroons in Jamaica to creating camouflage, though they called it ‘ambush.’” Kleaver, my friend and accountability partner, a Black Dominican and queer writer, is as interested in Diaspora work as I am.

“Can you take a picture of that passage?” I asked him. He sent several.

“The Spaniards searched in vain for the runaways. However, the Koromanteens completely escaped detection for they were quite adept at blending with the forestation by employing that African disguise the ‘ambush’ (the maroons misunderstood the literal British usage of the word and instead used it to indicate the actual dress of greenery they wore to camouflage themselves in battle).”<sup>1</sup>

Queen Nanny, the Akan priestess who valiantly led Jamaican maroons in a war against the British was not only well-skilled in the art of combat, but also ambush. Concealment. Camouflage. Guerrilla warfare tactics that would not be adopted en masse by Europeans for another hundred years. Maroons in Jamaica were not the only ones to employ these tactics. So did the maroons of Suriname who have successfully fought against the Dutch since the 17th Century.

Kromanti or Koromanteen refers to the groups of Africans who were captured, enslaved, and brought through the Dutch Fort Cromantine on slaves ships in

the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to the New World. The term referred specifically to a group of Fante speaking people, including the Ashanti who were known to be some of the fiercest warriors in all of West Africa.

The fought valiantly, bravely; they fought hard.

Was it a coincidence that maroons of Suriname were also skilled in ambush and guerrilla warfare? That they too were once enslaved Africans, largely from the Ghanaian Gold Coast, who instead of facing an uncertain future in the bondage of one of the most brutalizing institutions of slavery in the New World, opted to runaway to forge an existence for themselves in the thick rainforest? And that when their freedom was challenged by plantation-owning Europeans seeking to regain their property, they engaged in guerrilla warfare and ambush tactics? Ghana, Jamaica, Suriname. Kromanti. It's not surprising that two of the largest groups of Akan descendants established maroon settlements that have survived both slavery and colonization in the West.

Whether or not the art of modern camouflage itself, as well as concealment and guerrilla warfare, can be attributed to enslaved Africans who waged war against Europeans in the Caribbean and South America can be debated. What we do know for certain, however, is that it was indeed a tactic mastered by Black rebels, fighting to regain their freedom in a foreign, hostile land, far away from home...Africa.

## II. RAZZLE DAZZLE

“It is far better to employ intelligence and concealment, so as to induce him to present a target. A man who is well concealed can bide his time, watch for the enemy to expose himself and hold his fire until his target is sufficiently close to make sure of it. In this way the Home Guard may be able to destroy the invader without even allowing him the chance to hit back. By good concealment it will greatly augment its value as a fighting force. Camouflage is no mystery



and no joke. It is a matter of life and death-of victory or defeat.” – Roland Penrose, Home Guard Manual of Camouflage<sup>2</sup>

Razzle Dazzle Camouflage was a highly innovative military strategy employed during the height of World Wars I and II that entailed deploying battle ships that had been painted in contrasting black and white





geometric forms by surrealist and cubist artists. The theory was that instead of relying on concealment, these ships would confuse the enemy targets who would be unable to determine the ships' size, speed, and the direction in which they were heading. They therefore weren't hidden...

*They stood out.*

Like the African-American and Chicano zoot suiters. At the same time that they were seeking refuge within insular spaces, zoot suiters were still hyper-visible in

an oppressive white society and thus, their enemies. Perhaps that has always been the point. The exaggerated, ostentatiousness of zoot suits were created and worn, not necessarily to bring attention to the Black body per se, but to the idea of Blackness in contrast to that which was established and maintained within the white imagination.

They intentionally aspire to confound the beholder.

Like Black and Brown zoot suiters have historically confounded dominant white society. For more than seven years now I have been engaged in the sartorial discourse trenches, but never have I considered the zoot suit in the same way that I have about other forms of Black dandyism and suiting up. If I did, I did so only in juxtaposition to what quintessential dandyism is not.

Zoot suiting, was/is something else.

However...

Despite my inability or reluctance to locate it firmly within the historical framework of dandyism, what I cannot dispute or deny is its placement within the lineage of tricksterism.

African trickster culture, motifs, and influences throughout the African diaspora have afforded New World Africans some sense of safety and protection. A trickster plays on the optics of those who would come in contact with him. So does the zoot suiter.

Why?

Perhaps to elevate their social/economic/educational status. Perhaps to dismantle that pre-existing one.

### III. SEEN

During the Read My World Literary Festival, an annual international celebration of words and letters that I happened to curate with fellow New Orleanian Maurice Ruffin this Fall, I remember poet Rickey Laurentiis stating his discomfort with academic and activist commentary about Black bodies. It was as if humanity, people, folk, were inconsequential, non-existent in the stead of the body itself. It was a very peculiar thing to say, particularly from someone who also spends so much time discussing the body, his/her/their own, and the body's relationship to other bodies, particularly in spaces of intimacy. Yet, something made sense. For

the Black body is only a partial of the whole that is the person that occupies it. So when it comes to race politics, lived experiences, circumstances and situations, it is actually Black people, not bodies, after all, and how the world reacts to them, that is up for discussion.

Throughout the history of Black Americans in the U.S. there have been numerous examples of Black people either appropriating western aesthetics to create something new or grasping memories of African ones, only to create new meaning of them in the New World in efforts to be SEEN.

Zoot Suiters. The Panthers. Hip Hoppers. Dandy Lions. Afro-Punkers. Through the ostentatious aspect of their dress, the manner in which they greet the world, and its gaze, they scream “LOOK AT ME.”

On several occasions, millennials have raised the question of respectability as it relates to dandyism. And here’s where I think they’ve gotten things wrong, at least from a contemporary, post-post-racial, hyper racist, consideration. Contemporary dandyism, stylin’ and dressing up speaks more to an open rebellion against damaging stereotypes that are connected to one’s lifespan in many ways. Perhaps the dandyism, of our great grandparents, the New Negroes of DuBois’ generation, did dress up for entrée into dominant white society. Today’s generation, however, are seeking to do something altogether different.

To demand the gaze, to see oneself, to use self-fashioning as an instrument of opposition is anything but assimilation. Anything but respectable. It’s actually an audacious and deliberate act of defiance. Particularly if we acknowledge the thoughtfulness and intentionality behind how and why people dress up – not only for their own pleasure, but to confuse, confound, ambush their oppressor.

I ponder this often when I’m made aware of how loud my voice is amongst a sea of monotone, nasal, high-pitched voices. Even amongst other Black dialects. The way in which my tonal intonations and cross-pollinated blend of African, Caribbean, French, Creole, U.S. Southern makes distinct sounds as a New Orleans accent with a hint of well-traveled adventures stands out. Just like that of the seemingly obnoxious and loud, unbothered, carefree voices of Black kids who interrupt the mundane commutes on urban transit

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To demand the gaze, to see oneself, to use self-fashioning as an instrument of opposition is anything but assimilation.

systems. The reluctance to code switch and/or speak in hush tones, begs for others to take notice. It’s a way of showing up. Of being heard and seen.

Just like dressing up.

A body can be made invisible, a human being can’t. The more Black people assert our humanity – “Black lives matter” – the more we can challenge, reform, overthrow the white supremacist dogma and institutionalized systems that would deny it.

The Black Fantastical...there is such a thing.

I think dressing up can push us towards a new reality. One in which by our very presence in spaces, outside of the secure familiarity of our own, can assert a level of hyper-visibility that if done correctly can serve several purposes. Namely, the encouragement of other marginalized people to feel bold, brave, audacious enough to speak their truth. Bold enough to be their truth.

Dressing up, whether as a femme in a male presenting body, as a Black dandy in the streets of global urban hoods, or as a metallic and African print wearing Afro-futurist, the power of oppositional self-fashioning cultivates space for freedom to be had, celebrated and embrace within a liberatory space of Black joy. And if used intentionally, perhaps, could also provide a new modified urban guerrilla strategy to fight this ongoing war for Black liberation.

This piece was originally written for artist Troy Michie’s A Ponemos Chancla show at Recess.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publication of this magazine would not have been possible without the financial contributions of the following supporters

---

Sandra Andino  
Melvin Backman  
Scott Barton  
Ericka Basile  
Keren Ben-Horin  
Sarah Byrd  
Dario Calmese  
Shelby Carpenter  
Lesly Deschler Canossi  
Heather Cooper  
Kira Craft  
Michael Flöer  
Craig & Emily Hanks  
Royline Fontenelle  
Nina Frazier Hansen  
Ayana Jackson  
Dominique Jean-Louis  
Boyda Johnstone  
Khemani Gibson  
Reighan Gillam  
Francesca Granata  
Karen Graubart  
Colleen Hill  
Alice Hines  
Alexandria Hoffman  
Trina Leah Hogg  
Ebony Jones  
Laurie Lambert  
Monique Long  
Shalewa Mackall  
Tyesha Maddox  
Eduardo Malcolm  
Amita Manghnani

Meera Manghnani  
Shivani Manghnani  
Troy Michie  
Edingston Middleton  
David Murdock  
Alison Okuda  
Stephanie Page  
Shannon Price  
Einav Rabinovitch-Fox  
Viki Rasmussen  
Agnes Rocamora  
Alexis Romano  
Ellen Sampson  
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Carol Simmons  
Laura Snelgrove  
Tina Sparkles  
Sheena Sood  
Jake Stevens  
Judy Strathearn  
Kaitlin Tasker  
Thomas Thurston  
Daan van Dartel  
Meredith Walters  
Elizabeth Way  
Sandra Wayne  
Alex Wynn  
Natalie Zacek  
George Zavala  
Sara Ziff

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