

**Africa-Lite:  
Cultural appropriation and commodification of historic blackness in post-  
apartheid fabric and décor design**

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### **Declaration**

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## Abstract

Over the past few years, cultural appropriation has gained a degree of notoriety as a buzzword, after emerging into the wider public arena from academic, legal and political discourses. Internationally and in South Africa, debates arise predominantly around cases where historically asymmetric power relations are symbolically or materially re-enacted when dominant groups appropriate from economic or political minorities. This study examines the appropriation of colonial images of black individuals and bodies for commodification in twenty-first century South African décor and fabric design. A prominent trend in post-apartheid visual design, the re-purposing and commodification of archival photographs, and its circulation within local and global image economies and design markets demand further research and comprehensive theorising.

I investigate the various aesthetic and discursive devices through which images of black bodies from South Africa's pre-democratic past - including images of suffering, trauma and revolution - are assimilated for consumption and display within retail, leisure and domestic spheres. I use the notion of 'subject appropriation' to account for this form of appropriation, and to investigate the affiliation that indigenous groups claim with archival images in cases of objections to cultural appropriation, as well as where such groups deploy archival images for their own self-fashioning. In proposing a critical humanist and black existentialist approach to cultural appropriation, I suggest rethinking colonial representations as sites central to postcolonial 'communities of practice' in ongoing struggle for recognition, restitution and liberation.

## Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die toeëiening van koloniale uitbeeldings van swart individue en liggame vir kommodifisering deur kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse interieur- en tekstielontwerpers. Oor die afgelope paar jaar het toenemende publieke debat oor kulturele toeëiening aan die konsep berugtheid verleen, waar dit voorheen meestal in akademiese, geregtelike en politieke sfere bespreek is. In Suid-Afrika en internasionaal ontstaan hierdie debatte meestal waar histories ongelyke magsverhoudinge in simboliese of materiële wyse duplikeer word wanneer dominante groepe die kulturele eiendom van polities en ekonomiese minderheidsgroepe toeëien. 'n Prominente tendens in post-apartheid visuele ontwerp - die heraanwending en kommodifisering van argivale fotos - en gevolglike sirkulasie daarvan in plaaslike en globale ontwerp- en kulturele markte, verg verdere navorsing en omvattende teoretisering.

Ek ondersoek die verskeie estetiese en diskursiewe wyses waarop historiese beelde van swart mense uit Suid-Afrika se koloniale verlede – ook beelde van lyding, rewolusie en trauma – assimileer word vir verbruik en tentoonstelling in handels-, ontspannings- en huishoudelike omgewings. Ek gebruik die konsep ‘subjek toeëiening’ om hierdie tipe kulturele toeëiening te bestudeer. Die term word ook gebruik om die affiliasie te ondersoek wat inheemse groepe beweer te hê met argivale beelde, hetsy tydens debatte rondom toeëiening, of waar argivale beelde vir eie kulturele herskepping ontplooï word. Vanuit 'n kritis humanistiese en swart eksistensiële perspektief, stel ek 'n teoretiese benadering voor wat koloniale uitbeeldings heroorweeg as platforms wat sentraal staan in postkoloniale praktyksgemeenskappe en hul voortgesette stryd vir erkenning, restitusie en vryheid.

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I thank AfriPix and Bridgit Hilton-Barber for their permission to reproduce the work of Steven Hilton-Barber.

### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to two remarkable South African women: my grandmother, Anneli Loftus, and my mother, Annet Conradie, whose lives have always been that of humble, consistent and unconditional love and respect for all human beings.

Met liefde en dankbaarheid vir jul lewende voorbeeld.

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## Preface

In some way or other we are all cultural gourmands, and I am a cultural appropriator *par excellence*. Exposure to and appropriating from cultures other than my own (itself a rich mix of crossings) has enriched and challenged my perspectives and enhanced my life and world. It has led to greater curiosity and deeper understanding, new conversations and relationships, renewed scrutiny of my own diverse cultural heritage, and a greater appreciation and sharing thereof. I too consume Africa-lite: Shine Shine's *Obama* cushions adorned my office when the first black US president was voted into office, and in the Trump-era they greet me from the couch as a haunting historical note (see Chapter 6, Fig. 6.17).

The culture and cultural fragments that I have appropriated, collected, inherited or were gifted to me (my mother tongue, the cuisine, music, literature, fashions and décor that I consume) are all products of myriad appropriations. The postcolonial commodity tells its contemporary story, a palimpsest of past stories. The Josina Machel commemorative cloth adorning my wall weaves together Javanese batik, Dutch colonial trade, classical portraiture, Baroque cameos, Soviet insignia, anti-colonial struggle, African nationalism and feminism, postcolonial fashion and tourism (Fig. i). Today treasured, marketed and consumed as African tradition, this piece of authentic Africana emerged from native re-appropriations of European imports. To this I add my stories: I treasure the cloth as a gift from a loved sibling, and I continually draw fortitude from the portrait of Machel, a formidable champion of African liberation and women's rights. Its prominent display elicits conversations about Machel, the history of Mozambican independence, African fashion, Dutch wax-resist cloth, travel and family.



Fig. i. Designer unknown, *Capulana* fabric with the image of Josina Machel. 2009. Printed cotton. 200 x 100cm. (Josina Machel, 2018).

This dissertation charts my attempt at clearing a space to think through the appropriation and commodification of colonial images of Africans in post-apartheid design. The work on this project is best described as a stumbling along, and a stumbling upon unchartered territory. My stumbling/s manifest in descriptions and arguments that develop strand-like over the course of the document. While I draw on scholarship from, and signal comparison to, former colonies such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, the focus and context of my study demand that I tailor suitable frames of thinking. Unlike most scholarship on the appropriation and commodification of culture, this study focuses on archival images. Moreover, unlike in those former colonies, the formerly colonised and white-dominated populace of South Africa comprise the majority of this country's citizens, and the country is now governed by a liberation party. There is, furthermore, enormous diversity among the tens of millions previously classified as 'non-white', and, to compound the complexity, many descendants of coloniser and colonised share cultural, language and genetic heritage. However, despite formal liberation and black majority rule, most of the country's economically marginalised are people of colour. While enormous shifts in the lives, viewpoints and interpersonal relationships of people have been made since the end of apartheid, racial thinking and discrimination remain rife and continually divide people. Our historical pictures of one another persistently affect our daily interactions in adverse ways. Furthermore, they affect our perceptions of ourselves, as our pictures of others are also pictures of ourselves.

In a country where colonialism formally only ended 24 years ago, discussions about colonial representations and their postcolonial afterlives are relatively new and frequently painful. We nevertheless persist in searching for ways and spaces to talk, work, paint, tell, dance, design, theorise, sing and write about and with the fraught archives. The contemporary affiliation to colonial images is of seminal importance to South Africans, particularly where people have a deep need for the recognition of their cultural specificity and humanity.

The greatest challenge of this study has been my encounter with the messiness and conflicted nature of the chosen territory. As doctoral student I have navigated the requirements of the university, the abstractions of theory, historical narratives and academic discourse, the radical diversity and fluidity of South African subject positions, local and global markets for commodified cultural Otherness, ongoing contestations over belonging and ownership, the divisions and convergences in and among groups, and the painful daily witnessing of people drawing lines between groups, based on imagined differences that relate to skin colour. These factors have provided cross-flows in the domain of investigation and analysis I have marked out – these, and my hopes for restoration, working solutions and societal healing.

## Chapter one: introduction

### 1.1 Africa-lite: thesis and focus

This study examines the appropriation of colonial images of black individuals for commodification in twenty-first century South African interior and textile design<sup>1</sup>. I investigate the ways in which, under conditions of neoliberalism, a humanist discourse of equal and free subjects supports the power to transpose archival images of black subjects – images once associated under European white rule with a ‘primitive other’ – into new market-related contexts where their meanings are made available for appropriation.

By examining some instances of appropriation in contemporary South African design collections, and situating them within broader domestic and global contexts of cultural appropriation in design, I explore shifts in meaning and value that occur as archival images of black Africans are repurposed for commodity production<sup>2</sup>. I investigate the ways in which the translation of historical images into instances of colonial chic, retro and Afro-chic re-inscribes narratives, symbols and iconic figures of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle according to a consumer discourse. The term Africa-lite, then, designates the postcolonial domestication of historical blackness into fashionable and easily digestible fragments. Africa-lite refigures colonial blackness as a thematic resource for contemporary commodity production, exploiting its traces and senses of an historical ‘African-ness’. Depoliticising and ahistorical, Africa-lite is not burdened by the weight of historical destruction, or the proximity in the present of the severe consequences of that destruction. Transcribing the archival image into the register of the exotic, chic and the nostalgic, Africa-lite foregrounds the past in the same gesture by which it masks Imperial and historical processes and events. In re-purposing age-old European tropes and stereotypes about ‘black Africa’, Africa-lite renders black African bodies hypervisible, while obscuring African subjectivities at odds with those assumed to function in the ‘universal’ situation of the neoliberal political economy. Africa-lite is promiscuous, ambivalent and ambiguous in its bricolage of periods, places and cultures, dealing in extractions and surfaces that, as the marketplace does its work, are replaced with newer trends and looks. Although Africa-lite’s fashion styling may change, it is ironic that the one thing that rarely goes out of style, is the historical signifiers of black bodies that are repeatedly repurposed as primary indexes of a fashionable, retro Africa<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that such trends are not specific to South Africa, that appropriation and nostalgic commodification of archival representations of indigenous people also occur in the global context of postmodernity. The trend is not limited to design but extends to tourism, heritage, advertising, film and more.

<sup>2</sup> Working within an economy of knowledge production where quantification and monetisation of research outputs brings economic rewards and prestige to scholar and institution alike, I recognise that my research further commodifies the archival material I engage in this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> Just as the notion of Africa is an historical and discursive construct, so too is the notion of the West, reminds Stuart Hall (1992:177).

## 1.2 Context and problem statement

More than two decades after South Africa's first democratic elections, the dismantling of the apartheid regime and the ushering in of the 'Rainbow nation', the spectre of race has not been laid to rest (Erasmus 2008:173; Mitchell 2012:22). In the postcolony, racial categorisation and related notions of ethnicity, tribalism, nationalism and heritage, are continually renovated, whether by the now black majority state or by still white-dominated private enterprise, for access to, and control of, power and resources (Mbembe 2014; Herwitz 2012)<sup>4</sup>. In this sprawling market, images once deeply imbued with notions of race and 'tribal' stereotypes now offer "a convenient shorthand" (Dyer 2006:358) to South African entrepreneurs, so that tropes once connoting racial blackness may be re-inscribed as metonymic of a positive, resurgent African-ness. But where designers may feel that their appropriation and refashioning of historical representations of racialised and politically marginalised figures are innocent, a black existentialist perspective proposes that other subjects may experience the encounter as deeply uncomfortable, which in psychological terms, as I shall argue, suggests the return of the repressed.

With the celebration of Cape Town as World Design Capital in 2014, design was extolled as representative of 'Brand South Africa' on the international stage and earmarked as an important sector for skills development, job creation and economic growth. As the 'new' South Africa emerged into the global community, its identity and brand were to be re-conceptualised and new strategies developed to define a nation which was now claiming to be fully inclusive of its diverse peoples, cultures and histories. Competing within global image economies, where 'exotic otherness' has long been marketed as commodity, local design entrepreneurs and domestic-ware companies began to differentiate their products from "culturally 'othered' goods" (Huggan 2001:xiii) through the attractive commodification of a recognisable, albeit ambiguous, 'African-ness'<sup>5</sup>.

The shift from apartheid to democracy ushered in radical change to South African visual arts production. As the resistance discourse of the 1980's yielded to concerns with identity politics and memory, archival colonial materials began making a re-appearance in the visual and performance arts domains, in fiction, and in the heritage and tourism industries. According to Cheryl Simon (2002:101) the idea of an "archival turn", or "archival impulse", references the increasingly common appearance of historical and archival photographs and artefacts, and the appropriation of archival forms, in the art and photographic practices of the 1990s

<sup>4</sup> In this dissertation 'cultural heritage' is included under the categories cultural products and cultural property. Although 'cultural property' and 'products' have more definite commercial connotations than 'heritage', they all point to tangible and intangible goods valued by source communities as possessions with commercial potential and as important to their identity as group and individuals.

<sup>5</sup> The Other in postcolonial theory predominantly refers to a subject whose subjectivity is denied in its discursive construction as mirror and binary opposite to a white, Western subject. Produced in and through language, both Other and self are subject positions and signifiers that gain meaning through difference, and their meanings are therefore unstable (see Chapter two).

(Foster 2004:5). In post-apartheid South Africa, a return to the archival has been integral to projects directed toward decolonising national history and giving voice to those silenced and dispossessed by colonisation and apartheid. Through counter-archival scholarship, artistic projects and curatorial interventions, practitioners have sought to answer and refute white-hegemonic historical accounts by publicising subaltern histories (Merewether 2006:16). For those whose experiences had been silenced by the apartheid state's 'Christian Nationalist' histories, or whose origins had been manipulated to legitimate oppressive regimes, archives presented a vital resource for historical redress. Alongside this move to decolonise history and public awareness, images of those oppressed under colonialism and apartheid have been appropriated and commodified for cultural, economic and political gain.

Since the late 1990s, following decades of cultural isolation under apartheid and in a spirit celebratory of (and capitalising on) the new democratic dispensation, designers have 'Africanised' design to give visual expression to South African cultural diversity (Walker 2014). Within the post-apartheid South African need to forge a new design aesthetic which befits a multicultural democracy, cultural appropriation emerged as a central strategy and characteristic (Sauthoff 2004:37-38; Lange & Van Eeden 2016:71). However, cultural appropriation and the commodification of indigenous cultural resources and colonial historical archives have not received serious critical attention, according to Sauthoff (2004:41).

In the second decade of the twenty-first century cultural appropriation has become a buzzword, and debates around this issue are reaching a wider audience and elicit much broader participation than previously, where the concept circulated mainly in academic, legal or political discourses. With the internet functioning as "mega-archive" (Foster 2004), it is also the case that many more people now engage in cultural appropriation. In South Africa the growing number of objections to cultural appropriation indicates that disapproval, anger and pain emanate from experiences of continued exploitation and economic and social marginalisation. With the chimera of the 'Rainbow Nation' long since dispelled by unfulfilled promises of transformation, civic, political and student movements are lending momentum and urgency to debates about race, representation and appropriation. This urgency resonates with cultural activist concerns in other former Imperial colonies, where similar debates about race, representation and cultural appropriation are ensuing. This is clearly a critical moment in the postcolonial encounter, and the issue of cultural appropriation is a central concern to those actively involved in processes of decolonisation.

In 2014 heated debate erupted about two collections of Cape Town-based company Maid in Africa, exhibited at the 2014 Cape Town Design Indaba's curated exposition. Their *Maidonna* and *Slave to Fashion* ranges drew passionate responses from individuals who encountered the designs at the exposition or saw photographs of

it on social media (Fig. 1.1). The near silence in local scholarship about this debate, however, indicated a gap in research and critical discourse about the politics of race and representation in South African design.

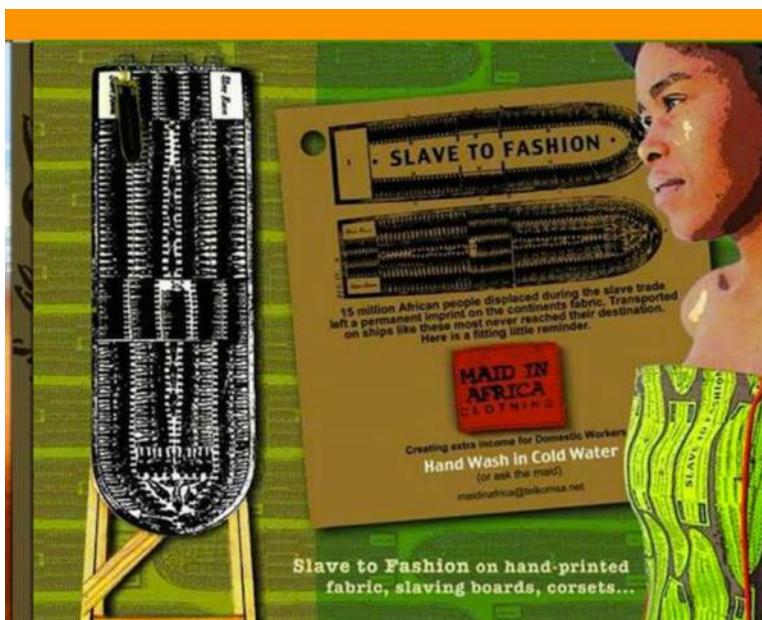


Fig. 1.1. Maid in Africa, *Slave to Fashion*, 2014. Online promotion.  
(Maid in Africa 2014).

Within the South African fine arts context, politics of race, representation and the appropriation of archival images were rigorously debated following the publication of Okwui Enwezor's (1997) article 'Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation'<sup>6</sup>. In scathing critique of white artists' use of historic images of black subjects, curator Okwui Enwezor (1997:22) wrote that the black body is appropriated "as subject and prop in both the political and cultural expressions of the 'New South Africa'".

The outcry over the *Maid in Africa* designs, and acute disconnect between designers, design establishment and diverse publics, highlights the importance of researching and theorising these issues in relation with the production and consumption of home décor<sup>7</sup>. What is lacking is a focus on the commodification of historical blackness in interior design within a shift in South Africa (for black people) "from a society of control to a

<sup>6</sup> The article drew spirited responses and resulted in the publication of a volume of scholarly responses titled *Grey areas: representation, identity and politics in contemporary South African art* (1999). Subsequently referred to as the 'Grey areas debate', it marks an important and oft revisited chapter in South African art historical criticism and has contributed to a culture of rigorous engagement with issues of race, identity and representation.

<sup>7</sup> Designer products are circulated, utilised and marketed globally and form part of people's everyday lives as objects of use or adornment. They convey meaning and are used to construct social identities (Myers 2001; Billig 1999) and it is therefore of utmost importance to study and engage critically with the production, circulation and consumption of these objects.

society of consumption”, but where the black majority continue to suffer acute privation (Mbembe 2014)<sup>8</sup>. In this study I will pursue questions similar to those central to the Grey Areas debate. My focus, however, is not on unique works of art, but on objects appearing in décor magazines and department stores, that is, on commodity products mass-produced for decorating the domestic interior.

### Cultural appropriation

Defining cultural appropriation is a deeply complicated and fraught endeavour, particularly as constructivist and other critiques have radically destabilised notions of culture and cultural identity, and, by implication, any straightforward differentiation between cultural ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Nevertheless, a critical conception of cultural appropriation is required to facilitate discussion of an empirical phenomenon and its many configurations in the public consciousness. Many scholars rely on Bruce Rao and Pratima Ziff’s (1997:1) definition of cultural appropriation as the (often unauthorised) taking of something (works of art, subject matters, intellectual property, group expression through practices of music, dress, faith and more) from cultures other than one’s own and making these ‘things’ one’s own (property).

It must be noted that public debate about cultural appropriation often loses sight of the fact that all culture is arguably the product of appropriation. A recent listing of the term in the *Cambridge Online Dictionary* rather simplistically defines cultural appropriation as “the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture” (cultural appropriation 2018). The disapproving register of this entry reflects only one perspective in the complex weft of this polemic<sup>9</sup>. A broader and less reductive understanding sees cultural appropriation as inevitable, vital and multi-directional, and suggests that it cannot be reduced or condemned as inherently exploitative and morally suspect. Appropriation is and has always been central to cultural renewal and to processes of assimilation, resistance and subversion, and has a close relationship to the self-determination of groups and individuals.

However, although appropriation is essential and inevitable to the production of culture, not all acts of appropriation are equal, and for reasons explored in this dissertation, it becomes imperative to theorise the topic from a decolonial perspective (Rogers 2006:498). Decoloniality asserts that modernity is inextricably intertwined with coloniality and that the violence of coloniality continually influences regimes of power and

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<sup>8</sup>The commodification of race and ethnicity has been more comprehensively theorised in the areas of tourism and heritage (Herwitz 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

<sup>9</sup> The classification of the practice as derogatory stems, I suspect, from popular usage, which has trickled down from late twentieth-century critique of cultural colonisation (see Chapter two).

knowledge, and conceptions of the human (Walsh & Mignolo 2018:4)<sup>10</sup>. Decolonial analysis and practices emerge from these contexts and seeks to subvert and challenge its matrices of power.

Recent debates arise predominantly around cases where historically produced asymmetric power relations are symbolically or materially re-enacted when individuals associated (through cultural or ‘racial’ markers) with dominant groups appropriate from economic or political minorities<sup>11</sup>. Globally, erstwhile colonised and enslaved peoples object to white Western appropriation, for financial gain, of expressive practices and symbols that emerged from histories and experiences of oppression, and which have since become ciphers of solidarity, belonging, resistance and intimacy. While select aspects of indigenous cultures are celebrated, appropriated and commodified by historically privileged groups, source communities still experience discrimination and social and economic exclusion because of their ‘culture’ (whether figured through racial, ethnic, tribal, religious or other categories).

### **1.3 Research questions and scope of study**

This study situates itself within a broader international context in which appropriation of indigenous styles, motifs, practices and objects (in the visual arts, as well as in the design, consumer culture, tourism and heritage industries), has become commonplace. I therefore draw on international examples and scholarship to elucidate my own discussion. As there is little scholarship on cultural appropriation in Southern Africa, and even less research which focuses on the fashionable commodification of historical images of subordinated populations, my search for a suitable framework led me to several disciplines. *Inter alia*, I draw on legal, philosophical and art historical scholarship, although issues of copyright, ethics and aesthetics are not strictly within the parameters of this study. Fabric designs, décor accessories made from fabric, and the domestic environments within which they are pictured, form the objects of analysis<sup>12</sup>. The design collections selected for analysis are *Cameo* and *Novelty* by Pretoria-based Design Team, and *Maidonna* and *Slave to Fashion* by Cape Town-based Maid in Africa. I also discuss selected designs from or by Ed Suter, Shine Shine, Evolution Design, Fabric Nation, Inyezane and Mr Price Home. All the designs were produced after 2000, and

<sup>10</sup> For Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo (2018:4), the concerns of decolonial thinking “are with the habits that modernity/coloniality implanted in all of us; with how modernity/coloniality has worked and continues to work to negate, disavow, distort and deny knowledges, subjectivities, world senses, and life visions”.

<sup>11</sup> For discussions of instances where cultural appropriation may cause harm, see Ziff and Rao (1997), Scafidi (2005), and Young (2005, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> The term fabric is often used synonymously with textile. The latter can denote a finished or unfinished product, it can be both the fibres or yarn used to produce material, or the finished material. Textiles and fabric can be produced through similar methods – weaving, spinning, crocheting. Fabric thus connotes fabrication, construction or building, as well as the basic material used in many of the home décor products under consideration here.

predominantly by white designers. The designs I discuss are exemplary of global trends to customise and commodify archival representations of formerly colonised people and their cultural heritage.

My task is to investigate the aesthetic and discursive devices whereby images of black bodies from South Africa's pre-democratic past are assimilated for consumption and display within domestic and leisure spheres. How, I ask, are signifiers of racial blackness reproduced and manipulated to convey meaning and value for contemporary producers and consumers in trends such as 'colonial chic' and 'retro Afro-chic'? In the process, how are historically-generated racial stereotypes deployed, entrenched or challenged in the production, marketing and consumption of these commodities? Furthermore, where indigenous people are neither the producers nor owners of colonial representations, on what grounds may they claim custodianship of them? This dissertation thus engages an attempt to formulate a theoretical approach to cultural appropriation in visual design at a time when the topic is debated globally, but under-researched and under-theorised in South Africa. I investigate how the above questions might be adequately understood in the context of post-apartheid South Africa, a still divided and deeply race-conscious nation, situated economically and politically at the intersection of post-colonialism, neocolonialism, postmodernity and neoliberal capitalism (Van Eeden 2004: 20).

#### **1.4 Research methodology**

Stuart Hall (1996:263-264, italics in original) writes: "There is something *at stake* in cultural studies', while, for feminist author bell hooks (1992:3), that "[t]he field of representation remains a place of struggle is most evident when we critically examine contemporary representations of blackness and black people". With these comments in mind, the methodological eclecticism of cultural studies and of critical discourse analysis proved well-suited to my examination of the commercial articulations of historical images and the accumulation of shifting meanings within cycles of production, commodification, circulation and consumption (Lister & Wells 2004:90)<sup>13</sup>. A flexible methodology is needed to account for the many shifting ways in which consumers are affected by an image or commodity (Herbst 2005:12). Drawing on sociology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, literary theory, feminism and critical race theory, cultural studies can articulate a "range of systematic methods of analysis in order to address questions of form, production, reception and meaning while taking account of

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Nuttall (2009) gives an exposition of different streams or critical moments in post-apartheid cultural and literary criticism. In her opinion, the reality of colonialism, apartheid, racial categorisation and discrimination has over-determined studies of culture and produced two streams (Nuttall 2009:17). The first, a political and critical mode of "reiteration and return", registers shifts in social configurations while remaining focused on ongoing discrimination, struggle and exploitation (Nuttall 2009:18-19). The second is future-focused as it takes stock of social changes as firmly rooted in the historical, while transcending fixations of difference and binaries of coloniser/colonised in its theoretical and analytic frames (Nuttall 2009:19). To account for the complexities and heterogeneity of contemporary formations, scholars fashion interpretive frames located at new points of intersection and the coming together of things once deemed separate (Nuttall 2009:20).

political issues, institutions and ideological discourses" (Lister & Wells 2004:90). Critical discourse analysis, employed here to examine appropriation debates, is bound by research agenda rather than common theory. It presents a hermeneutic, rather than analytical-deductive tradition, which makes it suited to the qualitative research conducted in this study.

Both cultural studies and critical discourse analysis emphasise the relationship between language and power and are suited to a contextualised investigation of postcolonial struggles over cultural appropriation, race and representation. Stuart Hall (1996:272) describes the work of cultural studies as "intellectual practice as a politics", while critical discourse analysis aims to analyse the opaque and transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language, which is regarded as a social practice (Wodak & Meyer 2001:2-3). By taking an overtly political position, it aims to "investigate critically social inequality as expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimised etc. by language use" (Wodak & Meyer 2001:2). Critical discourse analysis further theorises and describes the social processes and operations which gave rise to the production of a text, as well as the social structures and processes within which individuals, as social historical subjects with group affiliations, create meanings in their interaction with texts (Wodak & Meyer 2001:3). This nuanced understanding of the shifting socio-historical context as productive of meaning, and the appreciation of fluidity and complexity of meanings, informs a critical, contemporary perspective. As my research is not quantitative, my method of collecting data or texts for analysis is best described as purposive sampling. Charles Teddlie and Fen Yu (2007:77,80) define purposive sampling as the selection of units based on specific purposes associated with answering a research study's questions. This study's domain of interest guided my process of data sampling, and I set out to find instances where designers appropriated historical images of Africans<sup>14</sup>. From the assembled corpus I selected units for analysis, including images and texts from printed media, such as magazines, promotional flyers and brochures, electronic images from webpages, blogs and social media platforms, and photographs I took in shops and at design expositions. Some texts were serendipitous finds while others were provided by friends and colleagues. Texts were sourced from webpages, blogs, Facebook, Pinterest, magazines, and design and décor expositions. Most images are directly or indirectly promotional and are published and consumed on platforms that target audiences who are middle-class to affluent, and with a high to very high Living Standards Measure (LSM). My critique focuses on the ideological dispositions that underpin such promotional texts (see Chapter four)<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Informal sampling commenced around 2010 when I started lecturing on postcolonial theory and visual representation. While doing a Master's degree on the contemporary commodification of colonial photography I increasingly noticed décor and fashion designs sporting archival images of Africans. More focused collecting began in 2013 as I developed my doctoral proposal and continued until early 2018.

<sup>15</sup> The South African Audience Research Foundation (SAARF) Universal Living Standards Measure (LSM) is a marketing research tool that segments the market into 10 groups, with 10 rated highest and 1 lowest. Cutting across race, it groups people according to living standards using criteria such as degree of urbanisation, ownership of cars, appliances, homes with or without swimming pools, private

These various platforms presuppose their readers' economic and social standing and their textual and pictorial codes require symbolic capital to decipher. Interior designers, design connoisseurs and celebrity consumers featured in print and television media, design blogs and advertising, play significant roles as cultural intermediaries or tastemakers, thus informing consumer decisions. With leading South African interior magazines featuring homes that are almost exclusively owned, designed and decorated by white people. While black creatives have no doubt had significant influence on post-apartheid design, interior magazines reproduce hegemonic notions of taste, style and status. At the same time, while fashion trends, marketing and promotional media powerfully affect consumers, they do not strip consumers of agency, or fix and enslave their identities (Herbst 2005:13). Consumption of décor promotions includes viewing, browsing, interpretation and dreaming, and individual consumers become bricoleurs as they selectively purchase, renovate, incorporate and customise fashions to suit their own desires and needs<sup>16</sup>.

Designers, collections, designs, magazines, blogs and adverts were selected for the important information they (and no other sources) could provide (Teddlie & Yu 2007:77)<sup>17</sup>. Further articulations of the phenomenon of cultural appropriation were accessed as theory emerged from the investigation and analysis of the existing corpus, in a process called sequential or theoretic sampling (Teddlie & Yu 2007:82). According to Gillian Rose (2007:170), "you may quite legitimately select from all possible sources those that seem particularly interesting to you. As long as you have located some intriguingly complex texts... analysis can begin". Qualitative discourse analysis depends not on the quantity, but the quality and richness of material and therefore smaller sample sizes are appropriate (Rose 2007:170). I employ critical discourse analysis to examine articles, advertisements and social media posts. Images of fabric designs and commodities, and their presentation in print and online media, are analysed from semiotic and art historical perspectives, within the broader frame of postcolonial theory.

From the sampled texts I gathered insights and opinions of those involved in design, production, distribution and consumption of the products. I also garnered opinions of and responses to design collections or décor accessories from a variety of sources, including social media. The social media debate about Maid in Africa's

security and domestic servants and degree of urbanisation. Marketers use the 'LSM' of a magazine's readership to determine whether the platform will bring their promotional material to their specific target market.

<sup>16</sup> The term broadly refers to postmodern creative production that draws from pre-existing material of diverse origin. Sociologist and media scholar, Dick Hebdige (1979) adapted the term to describe subcultural practices of taking, adapting and combining commodities and symbols from mainstream and popular culture to construct new styles and symbols. These frequently subvert the sources of the original and bricolage may become integral expressions of the bricoleur's identity.

<sup>17</sup> Where necessary I corresponded with designers to obtain details about collections. I quote only publicly available opinions of creators and consumers of the designs selected for analysis.

designs provided a rich archive of people's responses and relationships to historical images commodified for interior décor<sup>18</sup>. The responses thus offer many units within an information-rich case. The responses vary from condemnation to endorsement, and give the researcher insight into the many ways that the designs are looked at, the various factors impacting individuals' interpretations of the designs, and a glimpse into the affective forces at play in the issue. While acknowledging my authorial power in collating the archive of responses, I set out to collect as many social media responses as possible, including my own posts. These reveal my initial vehement reaction and thus my bias, as emerging from my relational position to the designs and products. In the face of this emotional involvement, I decided to let the archive of social media responses challenge and guide my theorisation and interpretation, thus opening the investigation to a myriad of interpretations and political positions. This produced a tension between the refusal of closure and delineation of the field as project, and the determination to stake out positions and argue for them. Thus, over the course of writing this dissertation I was challenged by the tension arising in staking out an informed position that scrutinises, embraces *and* is challenged by the multiple and shifting perspectives of viewers, consumers, creatives and scholars from divergent discursive communities, variously positioned and interpellated as subjects.

The meaning of visual culture is multimodal and produced in relation to the viewer, to other images and contexts of viewing, and therefore interpretations fluctuate and are infinitely diverse (Rose 2007:11). At the same time, meaning is not wholly determined by context, and images are potential sites of resistance, subversion and insubordination, generating a range of divergent affects such as pleasure, rage and shame which had not necessarily been either anticipated or intended by its creators (Rose 2007:11). In his discussion of mid-century "settler national primitivism" and the appropriation of Aboriginal art, Nicholas Thomas (1999:141) sees as inadequate any attempt to theorise modernist practices of appropriation as either "legitimate exchange and productive mutual acknowledgement, or rather the rip-off of colonised peoples by exploitative European and settler cultures". While class, culture, race and political identifications have an unavoidable impact on consumer behaviour, the complex and chaotic mixture of intentionality and meaning, interpretation and legibility, at play in the consumption of fashionable accessories defies analysis or generalisation according to broad demographic categories or binaries of black/white, settler/colonised, rich/poor *etcetera* (Vincent 2007:93; Thomas 1999:141).

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<sup>18</sup> This consists of Facebook posts by individuals who criticised and defended the designs, and posts and responses by the designers, Andrew and Micha Weir. It elicited online articles by *Africa Is a country* (2014) and *The perks of being black* (2015). Only statements made in public Facebook discussions about Maid in Africa were collected for analysis. Nowhere did I collect, reproduce or use information from Facebook users' profiles. I did not solicit or use additional information or opinions from the participants in the debate.

## 1.5 Contribution and significance of the study

Internationally, the study of domestic interiors and interior design is relatively young, and South African interior and fabric design histories are under-researched and under-theorised<sup>19</sup>. According to Sauthoff (2004:39-40), there is an absence of critical engagement with the salient postmodernist characteristics of post-apartheid design and its connections to postcolonial and neocolonial impulses. As a prominent trend in South African interior design, the re-purposing and commodification of archival photographs, and their circulation within local and global image economies and design markets, need further research and theorising. Developing an interdisciplinary theoretical approach informed by postcolonial theory will contribute to the relatively young field of interior design theory. Developing a consumer studies approach is further imperative, following Daniel Miller (2006:348) who identifies “an extraordinary blindness to consumption in two disciplines most responsible for the form of our contemporary material culture: architecture and design”.

The re-appropriation of colonial representations by descendants of colonised peoples, in acts of self-identification, historical retrieval and/or subversion, has been explored by scholars of photography, anthropology, law and cultural appropriation (see Walsh & Lopes 2012). Seldom, however, have scholars focused on the intersection of these fields, which constitutes the interdisciplinary approach I take to address the affiliations with archival images that indigenous groups make in contexts of, or in resistance to, cultural or subject appropriation. I propose a decolonial perspective to cultural appropriation, and suggest a rethinking of colonial representations as sites central to postcolonial “communities of practice” (Wrenger-Trayner & Wrenger-Trayner 2015). I develop an argument for minority custodianship of archival material influenced by black existentialism, a critique of Eurocentric conceptions of subjectivity. Black existentialism emerges from the contexts and experiences of black unfreedom and suffering, and it theorises human existence in terms of the freedom of all black people<sup>20</sup>. This argument contributes to the fields of archival and heritage studies

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<sup>19</sup> The study of contemporary domestic interiors has its roots in archaeology, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, semiotics, consumer studies, phenomenology, and historical studies of cloth, furniture, art and architecture (Cieraad 1999:2). According to Amanda Breytenbach (2015), head of University of Johannesburg’s interior design department, local output of interior design research is slowly increasing, but academic publications remain few and scattered over different disciplinary fields. Raymond König’s (2014, 2015) research stands out in developing (from South African context) disciplinary and hermeneutic frameworks for construction of meaning in/through interior design and artefacts, drawing on fields of semiotics, consumer studies and critical theory. Modern and contemporary histories of South African interior and textile design are nearly absent in the country’s scholarship of visual and material culture. This was revealed in email correspondences with several South African lecturers of art history, visual studies, interior and textile design, whom I contacted in my search for source material.

<sup>20</sup> The terms ‘minority’ and ‘majority’, ‘subordinate’ and ‘dominant’, or ‘marginal’ and ‘mainstream’ are simplistic abstractions that connote binaries consisting of homogenous, stable entities. Acknowledging the limitations of such categories, they are used to designate and distinguish between appropriating hegemonic groups and historically marginalised ‘source’ communities. The differentiation between the groups rests on historical legacies of inequality (often under colonialism) and unequal economic and social capital under conditions of neocolonialism. For further discussion see Chapters two and four.

where scholars and institutions are globally contending with demands for repatriation of heritage objects and sites by representatives of First Peoples.

### 1.6 Theoretical framework: bringing the war home

For Karl Marx, writes Hall (1973:34), the “first part of theory was ‘adequacy’ to its object”<sup>21</sup>. This is my basic objective in fashioning a theoretical framework – that it be adequate to the contexts within which colonial images are appropriated and commodified. What analytic approaches are best suited to investigate the assimilation of images of black bodies from the colonial past and apartheid past, for consumption and display as nostalgic, retro and chic within domestic and leisure spheres? How can a decolonial agenda productively disrupt and discomfort discursive reproduction of historical blackness in an industry capitalising on comfort?

An encounter in 2016 with Martha Rosler’s *Vacation Getaway*, from the series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful, 1967-72*, provided an entry-point for thinking through the conceptual subversion of domestic bliss (Fig 1.2)<sup>22</sup>. Through her juxtaposition of a stylish, modernist interior with the violence of a war zone, Rosler disrupts the boundaries and barriers between inside/outside, private/public, personal/political. Assembled from images of *Life* magazine at the peak of the United States-led war in Vietnam, she reveals the intimate relationship between idealised domestic bliss, security and affluence with foreign policy and warfare. For Laura Cottingham (1991), “[c]onsumer media avoids directly referring to [the] political and economic connection between your cosy sofa and someone else's dead body: Rosler reveals the artificiality of this severed causality”.

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<sup>21</sup> *Grundrisse* (1857) is a multi-volume manuscript that would contribute to the publications of *A critique of political reason* (1859) and *Capital* (1867). In these volumes Marx stressed that theory must be rooted in the contextual and historical (see Hall 1973).

<sup>22</sup> This work appeared in *Home Truths: Domestic interiors from South African collections*, an exhibition curated by Michael Godby, shown in 2016 and 2017 at IZIKO South African National Gallery (SANG) and Sanlam Art Gallery in Bellville.



Fig. 1.2. Martha Rosler, *Vacation Getaway* 1967-72. Black-and-white photograph. 37.5 x 54.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art collection, New York. (MoMA art and artists, 2018).

Homes are ideally places of comfort, privacy, relaxation and domains for taking flight from the stresses of work and ‘the outside world’. While not necessarily intent on disrupting this peaceful realm, I argue that the political must be central to any theories around interior design and décor consumption, particularly where figures and events that once belonged to situations of fundamental social contestation are re-signified for commercial purposes. ‘To bring the war home’ with my interrogation of commodification of race in design, I aim to shed light on appropriative practices that re-inscribe bodies as racially Other, but go largely unnoticed. This invisibility occurs in part through the seductive charm and beauty of blackness-turned-décor and – as I will show – because such domesticating re-inscriptions have been produced and consumed for centuries under the rubric of taste.

This dissertation does not attempt any definitive resolution of debates about appropriation, or provide conclusive readings of contentious appropriative acts. It hopes, rather, to contribute “just that extra edge of consciousness” about and insight into the typical power relations that underscore the social production of meaning in objects commonly deemed frivolous and common-place (Williams 1983:24). This goal resonates with Slavoj Žižek’s (2009) notion of design as Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), and shares his emphasis on “the disavowed ideological dimension...inscribed precisely in what may appear as a ‘mere design’”<sup>23</sup>. This

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<sup>23</sup> In the essay ‘Ideology and ideological state apparatuses’, Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser (1971) introduced the concept of Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to explore the pervasive ways that dominant ideology produces its subjects. He distinguishes between

approach to décor, interior and fabric design complements and draws on scholarship of material and visual culture emerging in fields of visual studies, critical race theory, consumer and cultural studies. Critical investigation of the everyday is imperative as – despite decolonisation – “the colonial legacy continually asserts itself in popular culture and re-inscribes politics of power” in the commercial domains of leisure and consumption (Van Eeden 2004:18).

### **Fabric and décor accessories as commodities and signifying objects**

As Christopher Tilley (2006:10) emphasises:

Things do not just represent meanings or reflect, or ‘ideologically’ invert, persons, social relations or processes. They play animated roles in the formation of persons, institutions or cultures [...]. We find ourselves through the medium of things.

Interior design, fabric design and its artefacts are meaning-making objects. These are circulated, utilised and marketed globally and form part of people’s everyday lives as objects of use and adornment and as vehicles of fantasy, imagination and pleasure. According to Tilley (2006:7), “[w]e ‘talk’ and ‘think’ about ourselves through things”. As signifying objects that convey meaning and are used to construct social identities, “interior design and its artefacts fashion identity through artifice and participate in the staging of individual identities” (Sanders cited in Königk, 2015:56)<sup>24</sup>. Elaborating on the relationship between interior design artefacts, the formation of identity, the reproduction of culture and habitus, Raymond Königk (2015:50) argues that "interior design [as cultural activity] offers the tangible cultural spaces that serve as vehicles for intangible cultural practices". The objects central to this study carry reproductions of historical, mostly photographic images, which inform consumers’ interpretations of and relationships to the objects. The artefacts are also of a material and sensual character, and the body’s encounters with it in domestic or commercial locations further inform the meanings attributed to it. Identity and notions of belonging are also constituted through differentiation in relation to other consumers, in a continuous process performed through distinction achieved by consumption, as shown in Chapter four. Interior design and consumption for home-making construct and reproduce the dichotomies of inside/outside, private/public, self/Other as physical and/or symbolic boundaries informed by historical contexts and hierarchies of class, gender and race.

Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). In the former, subjects are made to conform to the demands of the dominant order through force, violence, punishment or the threat thereof. RSAs centralised forms of authority and includes the government, administration, army, courts and prisons (Althusser 1971). ISAs include schools, the family, media, and religious, political and cultural organisations and interpellate people as subjects through ideology and achieve consent through the individual’s compliance (Althusser 1971).

<sup>24</sup> This cultural studies approach (especially during the 1970s and 1980s, explored the ways in which consumers expressed and constructed subjectivities through appropriation, bricolage and creative subversion of consumer culture. In this way consumer culture is deployed by the individual or subcultural group for creative expressions of individuality, rebellion or even anti-capitalist attitudes. This perspective is productive for considering the subversive potential of appropriation and bricolage, by both designers and consumers, of designs featuring archival images of Africans.

My analytical approach is predominantly semiotic in that I analyse interiors, fabric designs and artefacts as textual images. It is also anthropological in my incorporation of the cultural and historical biographies of objects and images-as-objects (Kopytoff 1986:66). I investigate the wider historical provenances of the appropriated images, as these affect the images' appeal and the responses they evoke. These provenances also inform my theoretical framework: the *Slave to Fashion* design, for example, led me to scholarship on the transatlantic slave trade, *The Brooks* abolitionist print, and to critical race theory.

### **Commodity, commodification and consumer culture**

Central to my study is the object as commodity and product which is produced, marketed, distributed, sold, owned, used, altered, discarded and re-purposed. Most critical theoretic definitions of the term commodity return to that of Karl Marx (2010) in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, who explains commodity in terms of value, use-value and exchange value. Celia Lury (2011:5) offers a contemporary, contextualised definition of commodities as "objects and services appropriated or produced for exchange on the market within an increasingly globalised capitalist division of labour, driven by the pursuit of profit".

In defining commodity fetishism, Marx (2010:47) identifies commodities as "social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible to the senses"<sup>25</sup>. Abounding with "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties", the enigmatic character of commodity fetishes convinces of the natural link between the material product and its economic and social value (Marx 2010:46). As monetary value resides in exchange, rather than in the use-value of the object, it follows that the former drives commodity production (Marx 2010:51). In contemporary economies, exchange value emerges in the signifying function of a commodity within a particular social context where it reflects and reproduces class distinction (Bourdieu 1984).

Consumption presents an opportunity for the expression of aesthetic stances, and assertion of position and rank in social hierarchies (Bourdieu 1984:57). For Mike Featherstone (2007:16), goods are doubly symbolic: symbolism is evident in the design and imagery assigned through manufacture and marketing; and in the symbolic associations utilised and renegotiated by individual consumers to emphasise difference in the lifestyles and habitus that demarcate social relationships. For Bourdieu (1984:170), habitus is both structuring structure (which organises practices and its perceptions) and structured structure. The latter results from the

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<sup>25</sup> Marx makes a direct connection between the fetishes of capitalism and those of religion: for him both conceal and distort ideology. This resonates with my study's interrogation of the simultaneous hypervisibility and obscuration of race, class and history in retro design.

internalisation of class division and denotes “the principle of division into logical classes which organises the perception of the social world” (Bourdieu 1984:170). Lifestyles, argues Bourdieu (1984:172), are the “systematic products of habitus”, which become sign systems socially qualified as tasteful or vulgar. Taste is affirmed through differentiation and negation and is never simply natural or neutral: “Being a habitus...each taste feels itself to be natural” (Bourdieu 1984:56).

Igor Kopytoff (1986:73) stresses that commodification is a “process of becoming”, that commodities have biographies or careers, and may lose and gain their commodity status as they are bought, used, stored and sold again. Commodities don’t follow clear, linear trajectories from origination to consumption, as producers cannot control the “transposition, translation, transformations and transmogrification” of their products (Lash & Lury 2007:5). Appadurai’s (1986:20,25) notion of diversion depicts cultural appropriation and commodification as the removal of objects or images from enclaved zones to ones where exchange is less confined and more profitable. Kopytoff and Appadurai’s (1986:28) approaches facilitate thinking about the shifts in meaning and value which occur as anthropological photographs and magazine covers are “diverted” through an “aesthetics of decontextualisation” from contexts of historical archives, academic publications and museums, into the zone of design and fashion.

Appadurai (1986:4,5) points out that significance and value are not inherent to the object, but that humans endow objects with these. This economic perspective finds equivalence in semiotic and art historical evaluations of meaning-making. Commodities – objects, images, ideas – never emerge arbitrarily, and its commodification is always subject to a complex intersection of temporal, cultural and social dimensions (Featherstone 2007:67; Appadurai 1986:15). To explore the production of the selected designs and décor products, my analysis is rooted in the historical and socio-economic contexts within which contemporary appropriations occur, and from which its modern and classical precursors arose<sup>26</sup>.

According to hooks (1992:21), postmodern appropriations of black culture in tourism, fashion, music, visual art and spiritualist movements present “more upscale” versions of modern primitivism. Deborah Root (1996:70) argues that it is the presumed difference and inherent cultural authenticity of non-Western societies that motivates appropriation, with difference itself desired as commodity. In *Black Skins White Masks* Franz Fanon (2008:108) writes: “When the Whites feel they have become too mechanised, they turn to men of colour and ask them for a little human sustenance.” Where appropriation is articulated as appreciation and

<sup>26</sup> These include the appropriation of African art, styles, motifs, objects and persons in Western literature, philosophy and mythology, in anthropology and ethnography, by colonial administrators, traders, explorers and soldiers, and in the art and design of modernist primitivists (see Clifford 1988; Errington 1996; Torgovnick 1990; Archer-Shraw 2000; Mbembe 2017)

inspiration, the engagement with cultural others and their expressive forms function predominantly to revitalise, spice up, critique or shed new perspective on the outsider's art and culture. Following Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, examination of consecutive aesthetic movements and style trends in Western arts and design since the Renaissance has shown that appreciation and appropriation of foreign cultures have seldom coincided with respect for and humane treatment of those cultural producers (Said 2003:41,43; Parisiene 2007:54-55). This critique remains pertinent under conditions of postcoloniality and neoliberalism, with critics of hegemonic appropriation of minority culture noting an absence of recognition of the humanity and lived experiences of source communities (Hall 1997, Haupt 2012)<sup>27</sup>.

My critique of post-apartheid design builds on late-twentieth century scholarship, while noting shifts in more recent theories around appropriation and consumerism<sup>28</sup>. For Huggan (2001:12), "the link clearly exists between postcoloniality as a global regime of value and a cosmopolitan alterity industry". However, a model of appropriation as a form of latter-day imperialism, with clear binaries of West/rest, exploiter/exploited, cannot account for its contemporary complexity (Huggan 2001:12). More recent theories appreciate and explore the productive aspects of commodification and appropriation for consumers and producers, the potential for generating new, unexpected, modes of self-fashioning and the formation of new social relations where creative commodity production plays with and subverts hegemonic discourse, social hierarchies and categories (Huggan 2001:12)<sup>29</sup>.

Consumption may demarcate and communicate boundaries between groups, while simultaneously facilitating connecting with others (Featherstone 2007:62). Social class and social identity are defined and asserted through difference, with taste and its expression through consumption emerging as prominent vehicles for distinguishing belonging, difference and sameness (Bourdieu 1984:172). Consumption practices further offer potentially powerful vehicles for fostering and materialising nationality and Robert Foster's (1999:265-167) proposal of "commercial rather than strictly political or ideological technologies of nation making", accounts for the emergence of South Africa as new nation or "collectivity of identities" (Narunsky-Laden 2008:129). From the mid-1990s, the communications and design sectors functioned to educate South Africans about the new nation's value systems, its constitution and its transformative policies (Lange & Van Eeden 2016:69).

<sup>27</sup> Perry Hall (1997:32), writing on white appropriation and commodification of blues and jazz, notes that "while the white-dominated wider culture absorbs aesthetic innovation, it continues to avoid engaging or embracing the human reality, the very humanity, of those whose shared living experiences collectively created the context in which such innovation is nurtured, maintained, and supported. In the course of this appropriative process, these people and their experiences, their connection to the aesthetics, have in essence become 'invisible' as the forms purport to become colour-blind" (Hall 1997:32-33).

<sup>28</sup> In the 1990s theorists of appropriation and commodification such as Deborah Root (1996), Marianne Torgovnick (1990) and bell hooks (1992) theorised the contemporary processes of assimilation and consumption of material culture, intellectual property, representations and the very bodies of formerly colonised and enslaved peoples as cannibalistic.

<sup>29</sup> Also see the work of Appadurai (1996), Comaroff and Comaroff (2009).

Consumer media were mobilised by public and private enterprises to present new ways for citizens to negotiate rapid socio-political change, and to access resources and strategies for new ways of being and belonging (Narunsky-Laden 2008:128). Décor magazines can establish new understandings, and suggest imaginative, evocative ways to their readers for accommodating change and expressing themselves in ways aligned with the national ethos. In Chapter six I investigate the appropriation of anti-colonial struggle icons and mid-century black modernity in post-apartheid designs that celebrate the coming into play of a ‘new nation’.

## Race

Critical and philosophical scholarship on race, blackness and anti-black racism forms an important part of this dissertation’s theoretical framework. My use of the term race acknowledges philosophical, biological and linguistic critiques of the concept as untenable myth<sup>30</sup>. At the same time, I agree with Paul Taylor (2013:13) that “races are institutional facts, involving statistically defined relations between bodies, bloodlines and mechanisms of social stratification [...]. Races are real aspects of real systems of physical interactions and forces”. I focus on the context of South Africa as a young democracy where race is simultaneously disavowed and mobilised, and where some claim or advocate colour-blindness in the interest of non-racialism whilst notions of race and racial categories are essentialised by politicians, entrepreneurs, activists and minorities. “[W]e all live in the dusk of that dawn”, writes Kwame Appiah (1992:46), emphasising that all postcolonial subjects are differentially and generationally interpellated by racial discourse<sup>31</sup>. Race in South Africa is also “a constellation of imaginary identifications, emotions, feelings, and affects” and a mirror of the body politic’s psychosocial state (Mbembe 2004:383). As racial discourses are often affectively driven by desire, and conscious and unconscious negotiations of subjectivity, freedom and belonging, it stands to reason that these discourses also manifest in consumption practices.

William Mitchell (2012: 22) argues for retaining the term ‘race’ rather than less loaded identity markers such as ethnicity, in order to deconstruct race as master-narrative and to stress the ongoing struggle for redress. For the above-reasons the term race will not be used in scare quotes or be replaced with terms such as ‘nation’,

<sup>30</sup> Two big shifts occurred in Anglo-American critical race theory in the late twentieth and early twentieth-first century as conversations shifted from radical politics, ethics and social philosophy into the philosophy of language and metaphysics (Taylor 2013:x). Some theorists proclaimed the arrival of a post-racial moment as science has proven and deconstructionist linguistics had indicated that ‘race’ does not exist. For many the election of black presidents in South Africa and the USA heralded the end of race – if not of racism. In these perspectives the word race became redundant, which resulted in ‘colour-blind’ approaches, where proponents deem race an invalid political category. I agree with Erasmus (2008:173) that this is inappropriate for engaging how “ideas of race have shaped formal and common-sense thinking, institutionalised practices, as well as material and subjective realities in the present”. Indeed, the endurance of race as an affective force has since, regrettably, proved itself.

<sup>31</sup> In qualification of his oft-cited proclamation that “there are no races”, Appiah (1992:45) notes that what we call ‘race’ remains a social and political issue, as do the symptoms of racism.

'culture' or 'ethnicity'. To indicate my position that races are made and bodies 'raced' or 'racialised', I use the term racial blackness<sup>32</sup>. While avowing its problematic generalisations, I use the term black when referring to South Africans of colour exploited by colonialism and apartheid<sup>33</sup>.

As I show in Chapter four, race is social and political, rather than biological. Deborah Posel (2010:161) uses "the term 'race' to refer to the social construction of bodily difference, practices that have been inseparable from other fault-lines of difference and repertoires of power". Racial thinking is focused on the biological, and has historically fetishised the body, inscribing race upon it and scrutinising it for evidential traces of race. From the start, race was also about making visible what presumably lay beneath the surface of the human, cultural body and its untidy excesses (Posel 2010:144)<sup>34</sup>.

Drawing on the work of William Du Bois (1903), Fanon (2004, 2008) and Steve Biko (2013), this dissertation seeks to examine the functioning of race as a commodified visual medium, but also to demythologise by revealing how it inflects ways of knowing, and class, power and capital. Rather than stable categories, racial formations are processual and always in articulation with socio-economic and political processes (Thomas & Clarke 2008:32). Like any other set of signs, the meanings of race are produced through language and are negotiated in the difference between signifiers and the ongoing, volatile processes of differentiation. Racial discourse and its constructed categories are historically unstable because the epistemology of race has inhered in the governmentality of the social (Posel 2010:165; McClintock 1995:8)<sup>35</sup>.

My discussion of the meanings and commodification of blackness draws on work by Lewis Gordon (2000, 2012), Alessandra Raengo (2013), Achille Mbembe (2017), and Paul Taylor (2016) who situate their critiques of race and blackness in the context of the economic, aesthetic and scientific emergence of enlightenment modernity and humanism. The work of the anti-colonial revolutionary, psychiatrist and philosopher Franz Fanon is foundational to these scholars' work. In theorising the visuality of race they turn to Fanon's notion of an "epidermal-racial-schema" (Mitchell 2012:43; Taylor 2013:149). The approach follows the linguistic turn in critical race theory, where race as signifier is unstitched from the referents or the bodies it supposedly points to (Mitchell 2012:32-33). In *Black Skins White Masks*, Fanon (2008:91,92) develops this concept from the traumatic moment where his body was racially fixed when a French child, on seeing him, exclaimed "Look! A

<sup>32</sup> I borrow from Raengo (2013:168) who uses "the term 'raced body' [...] to call attention to the act of framing [the] body as the bearer of the self-evident sign of race".

<sup>33</sup> When talking about specific people grouped according to race or ethnicity, I use the terms most widely recognised and/or used by affiliates of those groupings.

<sup>34</sup> For critical scholarship on the modern social sciences of race, see Stocking (1968), Dubow (1995) and Bernasconi (2003).

<sup>35</sup> For historical examples from apartheid South Africa, see Posel (2010) and modern Europe, see McClintock (1995). Raymond Williams (1983) gives a concise overview of the changing meanings and uses of the term race.

Negro!". The self-constructed "body schema" is violently erased as the white Other hails him as 'Negro' and imposes the racial-epidermal schema (Fanon 2009:91). Fanon (2009:89) feels himself "[l]ocked in [a] suffocating reification", as "the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and his attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye".

Fanon's repeated return to this scene of racial fixing by the white gaze highlights the centrality of vision to modern regimes of knowledge, to cognition and racial thinking. Taylor (2016:44) details the making of race within modernity as a scopic regime and describes racial thinking as emerging from a modern "race-aesthetics nexus". "The height of the modern racial project is also an aesthetic project", he writes (Taylor 2016:111). Where ocularcentrism constitutes the modern, visuality ("the cultural screen that shapes perception") becomes racialised (Taylor 2016:47). This opens and closes possibilities for seeing or not seeing the black Other, which for Ralph Ellison (1965:7) is the result of a problem with the "inner eye" rather than with the body of whites (Taylor 2016:48)<sup>36</sup>.

Homi Bhabha's (1994:112) identification of skin as the "key signifier of cultural and racial difference" and as "the most visible of fetishes" is productive here for its linking of fetish to racial difference and stereotypes reproduced in commodity design. In the marketplace for cultural Otherness, racial blackness is a key signifier of primitivist tropes of wildness, nature, danger, innocence and seduction that emerged from modernist and colonial discourse. As I show in Chapters five and six, images of black bodies become metonymic of a sense of Africa, or African-ness.

Following Du Bois (1903) and Raengo (2013), I suggest that race be seen as a medium, an intervening substance and something we see through, like a frame, veil, screen or lens, rather than something we look at (see also Mitchell 2012; Taylor 2016). This approach acknowledges the real, visible differences between people, while aiming to trouble and unstitch racial representations and their associated connotations from the individuals and peoples they purportedly represent (Hall 1997:10,14). For Raengo (2013:13) the image of "blackness" functions as a "perfect sign" – a trustworthy and transparent visual cipher where "the surface bears the self-evident trace of what supposedly lies beneath it". Citing Fanon's experience of being labelled as 'Negro' by a French child, Raengo (2013:24) explains racial blackness as "deposited" on the epidermal signifier as an indexical trace of the body's genetic and biological inside<sup>37</sup>. She thus proposes a visual ontology of "face

<sup>36</sup> This inner eye, according to Taylor (2016:48), is "a socio-historical artefact, with historically specific blind spots and conditions of employment. Taylor (2016:48) argues that the preparedness of contemporary subjects to see and recognise the Other is "profoundly racialised", and "a matter of conceptual endowment and psychological habituation".

<sup>37</sup> The Peircian concepts of icon and index are important here for analysing the connotative significance of photographs repurposed by designers. The diversity of consumer responses to fabric designs indicates the instability of the sign, and post-structuralism shows that

value”, defined as the possibility, desire and belief that one may read value (as well as reference, truth and meaning) on an image’s visage and its surface (Raengo 2013:4,5). According to Raengo (2013:3) such an approach traps the body within the visual field, where it becomes both “proof and product of the visuality of race”.

Raengo’s (2013:49) suggestion that blackness provides a writing pad for inscriptions, presents a significant perspective for thinking about designers’ use of images of black bodies, and informs the ways I unpick the visual signs of blackness in the analysis of colonial chic and retro, Afro-chic. Archival photographs of Africans are frequently repurposed in colonial chic and Afro-chic décor and fabric design, and since it operates in what John Tagg (1989:99) calls the “realist mode”, photography amplifies the “corporealising of the visual”, further intimating that an image’s meaning and value is secured upon its surface (Raengo 2013:4,5). This idea is useful for examining the production, through commodification, of signifiers of blackness as a profitable surface and motif that becomes transferable, that is de-territorialised and gains endless mobility in digital and commercial spaces.

This dissertation is also concerned with ‘primitivism’ as both an unreflecting mindset and conceptual paradigm that contributes to the industrialised, capitalist and urban West’s understanding of itself in relation to its supposedly purer, uncorrupted and more authentic, yet naïve non-Western Other<sup>38</sup>. According to Gill Perry (1993:4) primitivism constitutes a discourse in the Foucauldian sense as it involves a relationship of power between the Western subject and the ‘primitive’. Perry (1993:4) writes that “those within Western society who analyse, teach, paint or reproduce a view of the ‘primitive’ would, by this activity, be dominating, restructuring and having authority over that which they define as ‘primitive’”. The discursive construction of the ‘primitive’ Other was shaped by modern racial discourse, the solidification of European nation states and their aggressive imperial and colonial programmes, the intensification of industrialisation and the burgeoning disciplines of anthropology and ethnography. In this context the ‘primitive’ and her/his cultural products were appropriated to provide for the cultural, social and political needs of appropriating subjects, as exemplified in the work and lifestyles of many avant-garde artists (Root 1996:30, Archer-Straw 2000:9-11,66). Postcolonial appropriations are similarly self-referential and frequently redeploy the older primitivist tropes of exoticism, timelessness, eroticism, violence, nobility and sublimity. According to Torgovnick (1990:9,10), different

meaning is the product of difference, unstable as the signifier endlessly defers to other signifiers, and because it is always contingent upon temporal and social contexts.

<sup>38</sup>I differentiate between primitivism as paradigm and Primitivism as a term used to describe European avant-garde art. Nineteenth and twentieth century primitivism developed and flourished through cultural appropriation, finding expression in the arts, designs and lifestyles of bohemian and later *haute bourgeoisie* Europeans. The avant-garde claimed not only African and African American visual and performance arts, but also black bodies, in its quest to rebel and antagonise the bourgeoisie and breathe new life into Western arts and society.

judgements of the primitive – whether of the political right or left, of the alternative movements of the sixties, of the anarchistic subcultures of the 1970s and 1980s, or in late twentieth-century ‘green’ movements – reveal the infinite malleability of the ‘primitive’.

The notion of authenticity is central to primitivist discourse<sup>39</sup>. It is often associated with the term ‘traditionalism’, and is used to determine the value of ‘primitive’ cultural products, or to critique modern Western society. Dean MacCannell (1976:3) argues that traditional lifestyles are imagined as rural, non-Western and unindustrialised, where humans live an uncomplicated and carefree life, supposedly closer to man’s natural state, and therefore more ‘real’ and ‘authentic’. As the authentic is constructed as antithesis of the modern, the ‘primitive’ is perceived as thoroughly steeped in evolutionary time and regarded as different “because of an originary, socially simple and natural character” (Thomas 1994:173). Colonial tropes of travel and discovery that position Africa as distant in time and space re-emerge in the products and promotions of colonial chic design, as I show in Chapter five<sup>40</sup>. These tropes are founded on an evolutionary paradigm that has both temporal and spatial dimensions, and which conflates modernity and contemporaneity with the West, designating the ‘primitive’ as contemporary ancestor ‘still’ located at humankind’s origins<sup>41</sup>. Here the ‘primitive’ offers a point of origin or home to which Westerners can return in imaginative or actual journeys – often facilitated through consumption of ‘authentically primitive’ experiences or objects – and unite with a universal family of humankind (Torgovnick 1990:186,187). “The juxtaposition of a supposedly authentic tribal society with a corrupt urban one persists today”, Root (1996:34) writes, particularly in “obviously aestheticised venues that range from movies to clothing”. For Shand (2002:52):

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<sup>39</sup> The ways that cultural authenticity functions as myth, meta-narrative or political and commercial tactic have been extensively analysed in the fields of anthropology (especially Clifford & Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988), in tourism (MacCannell 1976; Wang 1999; Bruner 2005), discourses of nationalism (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) the reception and display of African art in museums and galleries (Price 1989; Errington 1998; Clifford 2002) and in terms of appropriation and commodification in popular culture (Root 1996; Phillips & Steiner 1999).

<sup>40</sup> Central to colonial discourse was the notion that dispersal in space was analogous to sequence in time. Time became spatialised as it was conflated with social Darwinism (Fabian 1983:11-12). The evolutionary, teleological ‘family tree of man’ of modern race sciences presented white men as the incarnation of civilized, enlightened rationality at its apex. Darker-skinned races were positioned as its binary opposite, with black women shown stagnated at the roots of the tree as the prehistorical, primordial incarnation of atavism and degeneracy (see Gilman 1985).

<sup>41</sup> The obsession with origins and the notion of the ‘primitive’ as inhabiting mankind’s point of origin produced anxiety over the ‘primitive’s’ extinction, which became a recurrent theme in modern (and contemporary) travellers, artists, writers and anthropologists’ accounts of finding or being at home among the Other or in the colonies. This may also, according to Torgovnick (1990: 185-187) speak of a symptom of modern Westerners’ sense of alienation and homelessness. Deborah Root’s discussion of yearning, desire and consumption in relation to colonial power and exploitation is instructive in evaluating the “aestheticised nostalgia for a different time and place”, often the colonial context, (Root 1996:30). In her essay ‘Eating the Other’, feminist scholar bell hooks’ (1992:25) engagement with “imperialist nostalgia” as “continuum of primitivism” is productive in focusing on ‘neoprinzipalist’ trends of contemporary design.

[The] industrial liberals' enthusiasm for 'eco-tourism', 'world music', forms of shamanism, pastiches of ritualised body marking, 'third world tat', or mystical New Age experiences [shows that] the attraction for Otherness remains an important feature of Euro-American cultural values.

It is not, however, only "industrial liberals" who consume such products, but also those whose cultural expressions and heritage are appropriated. Indigenous and previously colonised peoples are also among the postcolonial bourgeoisie and 'industrial liberals'. Analysis of postcolonial consumption, appropriations and products must therefore recognise the heterogeneity of consumers and diverse relationships to colonial chic, retro and Afro-chic. Furthermore, indigenous people the world over commodify their own cultural heritage, as explored in Chapter two.

### **1.7 Outline of chapters**

This dissertation develops a theoretical and contextual framework for analysis in chapters two, three and four. Though reference is made to various décor and fabric designs in these chapters, focused analysis of selected designs only ensues in Chapters five and six. Chapter two presents a review of literature on cultural appropriation, and unsettles the notions of culture, cultural identity and heritage bandied about in contemporary debates. I develop a hermeneutic framework for theorising colonial images of black Africans as belonging to the cultural heritage of those affiliated to the people represented. Through investigation of the affective impact of "subject appropriation" (Young 2008), I explore the ways in which formerly colonised people assert agency and exercise reflexive authentication by re-appropriating colonial representations. I propose that individuals or groups may assert custodianship by claiming such representations as "accidental cultural property" (Scafidi 2012) or as 'of their own'. Re-appropriated colonial representations emerge as domains of interest that authenticate communities of practice and their members, who often share histories of racial oppression.

As debates about subject appropriation in design are currently lacking, I look to public debates and art historical criticisms around controversial artworks to inform a similar critical practice in the field of commercial design. The third chapter identifies key issues raised in debates about race, representation and subject appropriation in contemporary South African art between 1990 and 2016. The aim is to develop, from these critical debates, a theoretical framework to analyse the affective power of appropriation in design for commercial production. Post-apartheid debates around race and representation originate from a fractured nation emerging slowly and painfully from the trauma of centuries of colonial exploitation and racist segregation (Dubin 2012). Contemporary accusations of cultural appropriation and misrepresentation further point to ongoing struggles over rights to self-determination and legitimate belonging in a former white-controlled state, which, though now under black majority rule, still has deep faultlines caused by brutal colonisation and racial construction. Focusing on the affective power of repurposed images I identify key

issues of contention that emerge as different interpretive or discursive communities struggle over the signification and significance of colonial representations. This chapter also sketches the historical contexts and epistemological paradigms within which colonial images of Africans – today repurposed for fashionable commodification – were produced and used.

Consumer media and consumption practices were instrumental in the making of the apartheid nation and are intricately linked to the social production of race and racial difference under white minority rule (see Posel 2010, Mbembe 2004). In Chapter four I examine domesticity as an ideological space and concept, highlighting its historical links with “bourgeois white imperialism” (López 2005), the emergence of global capitalism through slavery and colonialism, and the concomitant commodification of black bodies as property, labour and aesthetic object. This sees the late modern manifestation of the production of racial blackness as commodity sign within capitalism, and finds new expression in post-apartheid South Africa where liberation discourse is often eclipsed by neoliberalism’s exhortation of consumer freedom. The aim is to reveal and interrogate the obscured, intimate relationship between the affluence of a minority and the exploitation of a majority. I employ Mbembe’s (2004) notion of superfluity to investigate the aesthetic manifestations of racial capitalism in hegemonic bourgeois domesticity with its colonial signifiers of taste and status<sup>42</sup>.

In Chapters five and six I examine selected décor styles and fabric designs as interrelated practices which fashion Africa and Africans as picturesque, quaint and vibrant for the consumer gaze<sup>43</sup>. The trends investigated are colonial chic and retro Afro-chic, as they are sometimes termed in design features and promotions. My examination is positioned at the intersection of some late twentieth century developments: an archival turn in visual arts and curating; appropriation and postmodern syncretism in post-apartheid design; the rise of retro in consumer culture and marketing; colonial chic in interior design.

Simon (2002:101) regards the archival turn as a late-stage manifestation of postmodernist appropriation that coincides with the prominence of retro in popular and consumer culture. Elizabeth Guffey (2006:10,11) defines retro as the “half-ironic, half-longing” stylistic evoking of the recent past in visual, popular and consumer culture. Retro is not concerned with accurate historical contextualisation, and though it may insinuate subversion through ironic and parodic citations, it is seldom politically motivated (Guffey

<sup>42</sup> Mbembe (2004:374) develops the notion of superfluity to describe not only the hypnotic, seductive even paralysing capacity of aesthetics of surfaces and quantities, but also “the dialectics of indispensability and expendability of both labour and life, people and things” under late modern capitalism, a condition only intensified under what Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2001) call millennial capitalism.

<sup>43</sup> Between the companies and designers discussed, there exist significant differences in the aims and intentions, the types of images selected for appropriation, and how images are combined with other motifs and eventually marketed.

2006:11,14). The detached and nostalgic evocation of a romantic past through appropriated and de-contextualised imagery in colonial chic design can be described as retro.

In Chapter five, 'Imperial nostalgia in the postcolony', I investigate the trope of discovery prevalent in the designs and in the promotional rhetoric of colonial chic. A global trend originating in the 1980s, colonial chic presents an aestheticised, vicarious nostalgia for a colonial past imagined as a white bourgeois playground. Colonial chic positions designers and consumers as traveller-explorers of colonial archives that are rich with images for discovery and commodification. In asking 'whose colonial?', I seek to disrupt the trend's mythologising abstraction of colonialism and its eclipse of the lived realities of African subjects under colonial subjugation. The analysis focuses on Design Team's *Cameo*, where photographs of indigenous women are repurposed as postcolonial chic.

With the dismantling of apartheid, the function of design as resource was reassessed, and many were optimistic about its social and economic role, particularly in differentiating South Africa as a brand in the global economy. The goal of fostering a new design culture and aesthetic for a new democratic South Africa was further driven by a nationalism construed in terms of diversity and multiracialism. The avant-garde designers who endeavoured to 'Africanise' local design did so by looking to colonial and apartheid archives, to cultural traditions from the greater continent, and to vernacular expressions from South Africa's sprawling townships. Appropriation, bricolage and cultural syncretism thus emerged as key characteristics of that which became known as the 'new design idiom' (Sauthof 2004; Lange & Van Eeden 2016).

The focus of Chapter six is on subject appropriation in retro and Afro-chic in post-apartheid fabric design. In 'A new design idiom' I give a broad overview of subject appropriation and retro in South African fabric design. I examine the avant-garde's translation of township vernacular expressions and handmade craft as symbolic of postcoloniality and their appropriation as resources for rejuvenating design. In its constructions of a cosmopolitan African modernity through repurposed images and past styles, Afro-chic often corresponds to the tenets of retro. Post-apartheid Afro-chic freely appropriate historical images and symbols associated with urban, black modernity and the liberation struggle. The section 'Retro, Afro-chic and "life behind the veil"', looks at the commodification of these visual records as retro and/or ironic, in the work of Design Team, Maid in Africa, Shine Shine, Fabric Nation, Inyezane, and Ed Suter. I evaluate the potential for the retro commodification of "life behind the veil" (Du Bois 1903) to commemorate the past and/or politicise the domestic realm. Finally, with 'Commemoration or critical invocation of black servitude and slavery', I focus on the debate generated by Maid in Africa's *Maidonna* and *Slave to Fashion* at the 2014 Design Indaba. Maid in Africa's designs can be described as Afro-chic, and while generally light-hearted, their ironic citations of

consumer and popular culture aim to provoke reflection. The designers' decision to use images of a black servant and slaves to commemorate and critique drew widespread condemnation. I consider how overlaps of cultural capital, historical experiences, the habitus of different interpretative communities and the semantic contexts of consumption informed meaning and affective responses to the designs.

## Chapter two: towards a theory of cultural appropriation

### 2.1 Introduction

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, ‘cultural appropriation’ has become a buzzword in debates on cultural matters, from the repatriation of national treasures to white celebrities sporting African American hairstyles. Defining the term is a fraught endeavour, not least as it opens in new ways older questions about cultural belonging, cultural property and the very meaning itself of culture. In this chapter I interrogate these terms within the socio-political and historical contexts from which critical objections to acts cultural appropriation emerge.

Globally, minority groups and subjects – particularly those subjugated and disempowered under conditions of slavery and colonialism – are seeking redress, reclamation and protection of the rights to their cultural heritage and property (Ziff & Rao 1997:8). Following the demise of the Soviet Union, and with intensifying globalisation and the rise of neoliberalism, the cultural turn in academic scholarship of the 1980s identified culture – rather than class – as a primary analytic framework of society, history, identity and self-identification (Garuba & Raditlhalo 2008:35,37). The negative experience of enslaved and colonised peoples, blacks and women revealed the failure and duplicity of the universalising ideology of the Enlightenment project, which in its imperial and colonial manifestations did not extend its metanarratives of humanism, liberty and equality to minorities, who were subjugated according to gender, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity and cultural practices (Garuba & Raditlhalo 2008: 36). As capitalist, liberal-democratic nation states reimagined and renovated themselves as multicultural entities in the late twentieth century, the need arose to revalue outdated notions of culture where culture had once constituted the basis of oppression (Garuba & Raditlhalo 2008:37). Formerly colonised peoples and minorities actively transformed culture into a domain of political struggle and culture and art became sites for the contestation of oppression, marginalisation and domination (Garuba & Raditlhalo 2008:37). With decolonisation, identity was “increasingly claimed as *property* by its living heirs”, who rejected the legitimacy of former colonial powers as custodians of native cultures which colonial rule had simultaneously stigmatised and supported (notably under policies of separate development), eradicated and preserved (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009:29-30, italics in original).

The increase and entry into mainstream media and public discourse of debates and discussions around issues of cultural appropriation in art, design and popular culture must be seen against this background<sup>44</sup>. In this

<sup>44</sup> Public debate and international scholarly exchange about cultural appropriation of the artistic heritage of First Nations peoples are often traced to the publication of ‘Stop stealing Native stories’ (1990) by journalist, storyteller, poet, children’s author and activist, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, member of the Chippewa of Nawash First Nation. At the 1989 Writers’ Union of Canada AGM in Kitchener,

context, Richard Rogers (2006:474) argues that questions of cultural appropriation are imbricated in the “assimilation and exploitation of marginalised and colonised cultures and in the survival of subordinated cultures and their resistance to dominant cultures”. From protestations, debates and law suits about the imitation and borrowing of hairstyles and tattoos, rhythms or folklore, to the confiscation and relocation of sculptures or human remains, those who find their cultural property appropriated have challenged those who do (or have done) the appropriating<sup>45</sup>. The decolonial sentiments of recent student and civil society movements such as Black Lives Matter (United States, from 2013) and Rhodes Must Fall (South Africa, from 2015), demanding broad institutional decolonisation and the eradication of racism, have informed and extended critiques of such mainstream and white appropriation of black and minority culture. This is facilitated and amplified by broad access to the internet and social media.

As the growing number of objections globally to acts of appropriation indicate, disapproval, anger and pain emanate from continued experiences of exploitation, economic and social marginalisation of those whose heritage, culture and images are appropriated and capitalised upon. Ironically, the appropriated styles, motifs and living heritage are often the very markers of the cultural, racial or ethnic identities for which minority groups remain marginalised and oppressed.

In this chapter, definitions of cultural appropriation are investigated while pausing at critiques of prevalent notions of culture and authenticity. I provide an overview of categories and types of cultural appropriation and propose Rogers’ (2006) transculturalist approach as suited to investigating cultural appropriation in the contexts of globalisation, neocolonialism and neoliberal capitalism. In addition, Young’s (2008) notion of subject appropriation is considered as useful for assessing the ways in which historical images of black bodies constitute the cultural heritage or property of those depicted. To develop Young’s notion of subject appropriation in relation to the appropriation of colonial images, I explore the re-appropriation of historical images by Africans as “accidental cultural property” (Scafidi 2005) and as part of an ongoing project of reflexive authentication. As debates about appropriation question distinctions between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, members and non-members, the question arises as to who may claim insider status or affiliative ownership. I propose that indicators of membership – where not rooted in essentialist categories – may arise from two

Ontario, Keeshig-Tobias spoke out on the issue of “appropriation of voice”, telling non-native writers to “stop stealing our stories” (Akiwenzie-Damm 2017). Her 1990 article, published in the Canadian *The Globe and Mail*, was revolutionary for its critique of non-native writers who borrow from native culture and of the condemnation as censorship of native protest of this practice. The article sparked debate that continued for years and was taken up by First Nations groups beyond Canada (Keeshig-Tobias 2016).

<sup>45</sup> An example is the meeting of delegates from 189 countries in Geneva in June 2017 as part of a specialised international committee within the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), a United Nations agency. The committee is negotiating around three pieces of legislation in international law that would protect indigenous cultural heritage – including dance, design motifs, traditional medicine and words – under intellectual property law (Bird 2017).

intersecting states: similar experiences of oppression, and the intimacy of groups who are also communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015; Nguyen & Strohl 2017). In both, affiliation or membership intersects with, but is not rooted in, essentialist conceptions of cultural identity, such as nationalism, ethnicity or race.

The process of authenticating the self in affiliative relation to one's heritage can be explored through Heidegger's (1927) ontology of authenticity and the notion of *Dasein*, the 'being one's own' that is intentional and relational. Given the concept's emergence from a Western Enlightenment tradition, *Dasein* finds itself challenged from a black existential philosophical perspective: here, coupled with a paradigm of freedom, *Dasein* can be utilised for analysing formerly colonised people's reclaiming of colonial images. In this sense, the Heideggerian ontology of authenticity complements Africana philosopher Lewis Gordon's (2012:104) proposal for a "philosophy of culture". This concept articulates culture as both action and resource, integral to a project of liberation where the claiming of an affiliative ownership of colonial images functions to authenticate self and/or collective. I explore the complexities of ownership claims by examining responses of University of Cape Town (UCT) student activists to Willie Bester's sculpture, *Sara Baartman* (2000).

## 2.2 Definitions of cultural appropriation

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2017) defines *appropriate* as "taking (something) for one's own use, typically without the owner's permission". The word's etymological roots speak of acts of taking and transforming into personal possession, and when things appropriated are cultural, writes Rogers (2006:474), the practice is inescapably intertwined with a politics of culture.

For Kenan Malik (2016), the "history of culture is the history of cultural appropriation – of cultures borrowing, stealing, changing, transforming"<sup>46</sup>. For Rogers (2006:474) and Malik (2016) cultural contact, whether virtual or concrete, makes appropriation unavoidable. It is not something that only happens between different groups, or when dominant groups take from minorities. Appropriation is central to cultural production and creative expression and thus to the self-determination of individuals and groups. Structuralist, postmodern and poststructuralist arguments all show that creative work inherently involves borrowing, pastiche, quotation and adaptations of previous texts (Barthes 1977, Kristeva 1980). Deliberate appropriation also emerges as a central strategy in much contemporary literature and visual art, often used to disrupt hegemonic discourses through intertextuality, parody, irony or satire. According to Trinh Minh-ha (1989:21), "writing constantly

<sup>46</sup> Malik (2016) is weary of what he calls the "self-appointed gatekeepers" whose campaigns against cultural appropriation forms part of broader policing of not only fashion styles and cuisine, but also ideas. This dissertation does not focus on arguments defending or denunciating appropriation, but does engage these where raised about the exhibitions, artworks or designs selected for analysis.

refers to writing, and no writing can ever claim to be ‘free’ of other writings”. Furthermore, appropriation is a vital tool in minorities’ intellectual and artistic struggles for freedom, in reclaiming their voices and critiquing historical as well as contemporary political and social hegemonies. Appropriation has been and remains essential as women, people of colour and sexual minorities deliberately engage with the white, male-dominated canon which silenced them as objects of its art (Sanders 2006:9,11)<sup>47</sup>. Such engagement may involve appropriation in the form of pastiche, satire and/or re-writing classic works from minority perspectives<sup>48</sup>.

Cultural appropriation in some form is thus inevitable and cannot be condemned as inherently exploitative and morally suspect. However, as Rogers (2006:498) highlights, although cultural appropriation is unavoidable, not all acts of appropriation *are equal*, and neither are all appropriators. Peter Shand (2002:52) situates one example of problematic appropriation – celebrity fashion designers’ appropriation and commodification of Maori tattoos – within a long history of violent European appropriations of indigenous cultural heritages. According to Shand (2002:52), this example must be seen against the historic backdrop of the stealing, buying, exchange and copying of commercial, sacred and personal artefacts, designs and motifs, human body parts and living peoples. The hunger for acquisition was underscored by both Enlightenment philosophy and capitalist imperatives of burgeoning empires abroad, and through powerful modernist and colonialist discourses “the world was made over to fit the intellectual, economic, and cultural requirements of first Europe, then the United States” (Shand 2002:52).

The actualities of power-imbalances and the labour exploitation of peoples once dispossessed through imperial colonial conquest, of land and of resources for cultural affirmation, greatly affect the flows of appropriated cultural property and profits in a globalised economy. This diminishes the agency and rights of groups and individuals to exercise control over the uses and commodification of their own cultural heritage and products<sup>49</sup>. Cultural appropriation “signifies not only the taking up of something and making it one’s own, but also the ability to do so”, argues Root (1996:70), and descendants of colonised and enslaved peoples often don’t have the same means as are taken for granted by members of historically colonising and now still

<sup>47</sup> Not only used by minorities, appropriation is a well-documented postmodern literary device used to unsettle and subvert dominant discourses. A primary example is JM Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986), a reworking of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) that explores the relationship of power to language, meaning and memory.

<sup>48</sup> As this creative and critical process is also appropriative, it does not produce authentic identities or works, but rather a reconfiguration of ready-mades. Minh-ha (1989:36) writes, “[t]hat which emerges from silence may be revealing, but it is revealing in the sense that language is always older than me. Never original, ‘me’ grows indefinitely on ready-mades, which are themselves explainable only through other ready-mades. Spontaneity-personality in such a context does not guarantee more authenticity than stereotypy”.

<sup>49</sup> Ziff and Rao (1997:8-9) summarise and discuss internationally reoccurring objections to cultural appropriation, which include objections on financial, legal, psychological, ethical and moral grounds.

dominant societies and groups. A diagram by Ziff and Rao (1997:6) illustrates the possible ways in which cultural appropriation can be construed and the different implications for the appropriated culture (Fig. 2.1). The diagram is simplified and abstract, but illustrates the centrality of political and economic power, and cultural capital, to the direction of acts of appropriation and to the flow of cultural and economic capital (Ziff & Rao 1997:6). The diagram raises moral, ethical and aesthetic questions that necessitate critical vigilance.

In their definitions of cultural appropriation, several authors defer to Ziff and Rao's (1997:1) definition who in turn base theirs on that of the *Resolution of the Writer's Union of Canada*. Approved in June 1992, the *Resolution* defines cultural appropriation as "the taking – from a culture that is not one's own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artefacts, history and ways of knowledge, and profiting at the expense of the people of that culture" (cited in Ziff & Rao 1997:25). Many scholars further include those forms of appropriation that occur in the absence of profit-taking, such as that done in the interest of self-actualisation, spiritual pursuits, subcultural expression or other identity projects (Ziff & Rao 1997:25)<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Torgovnick (1990), hooks (1992), Root (1996) and Errington (1998), discuss the mainstream, western appropriation of the material culture, spiritual and ceremonial practices of cultural Others – often regarded as 'primitive' - for such reflexive identity projects.

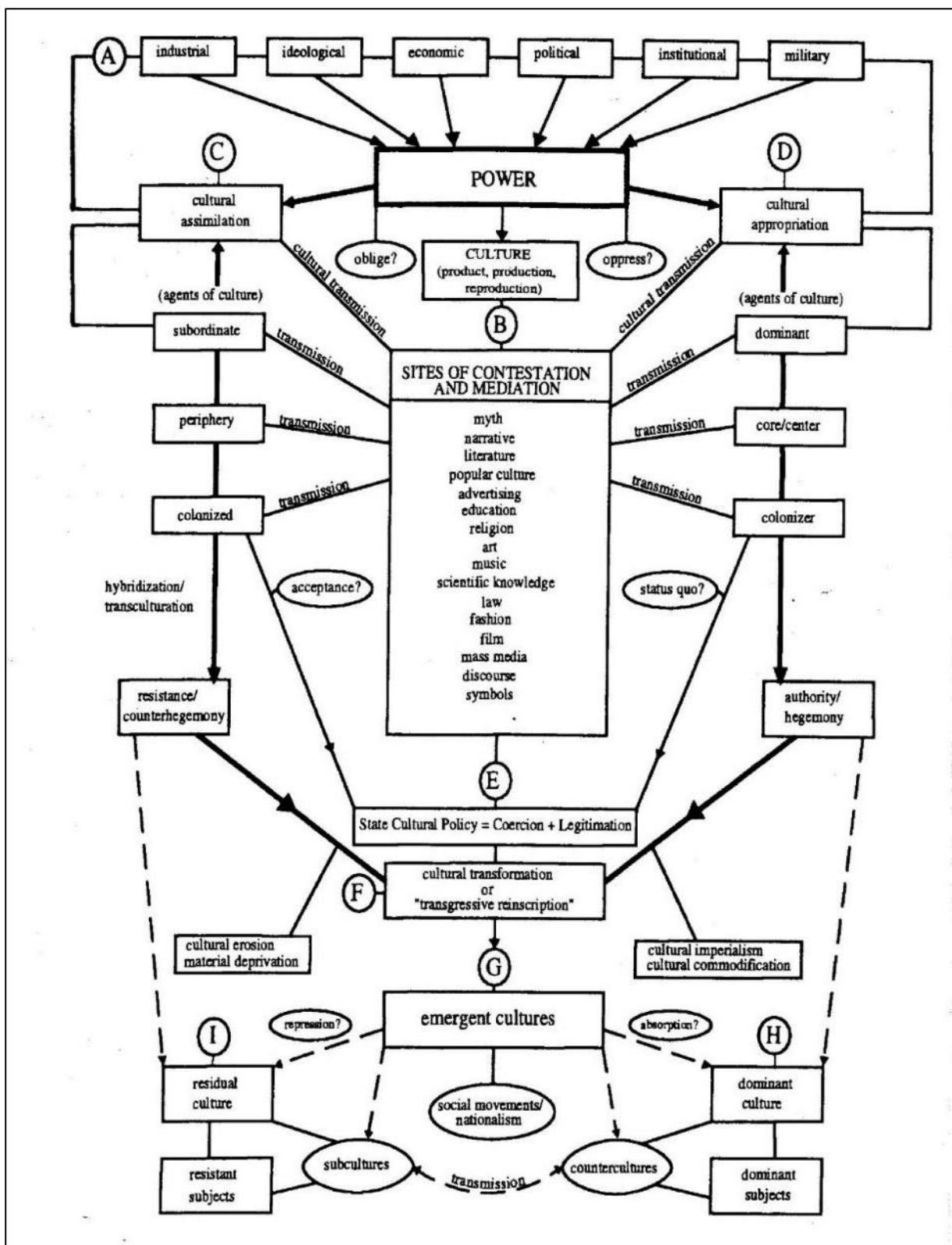


Fig. 2.1. Bruce Rao and Pratima Ziff. Structural representation of cultural transmission: appropriation or assimilation, 1997.  
(Ziff & Rao 1997:6).

Susan Scafidi (cited in Baker 2011) elaborates on Ziff and Rao's definition to include:

unauthorized use of another culture's dance, dress, music, language, folklore, cuisine, traditional medicine, religious symbols, etc. It's most likely to be harmful when the source community is a minority group that has been oppressed or exploited in other ways or when the object of appropriation is particularly sensitive, e.g. sacred objects<sup>51</sup>.

Here the impact of power imbalances on the effect of appropriation is articulated. In similar vein, Olufunmilayo Arewa (2016) suggests that borrowing becomes appropriation when contemporary cultural flows reflect, reinforce or magnify historically-derived inequalities and exploitative relationships. Root (1996:70-71) highlights that appropriation is different to borrowing or sharing, because it involves the taking, packaging and commodification of the cultural forms of a society, usually depoliticising an historical context of dispossession and reducing the living people and culture to the status of objects. In Scafidi's definition, appropriation is damaging when source communities are not acknowledged and fairly compensated, in the process depriving them of control or benefit of their own cultural products<sup>52</sup>.

### **Re-considerations of 'culture' in relation to cultural appropriation**

Numerous questions and problems emerge from the above definitions of cultural appropriation, predominantly because they rely on essentialist understandings of culture (as I shall explain shortly), and tend to overlook the complexities of appropriative actions. Some important points raised by Rao and Ziff (1997:1-3) include: the multidimensionality of the phenomenon; that it is widely practiced; it occurs through a wide range of modes; it is multi-directional; and it extends to more than goods or objects. At the heart of the phenomenon is the notion of culture: the goods appropriated are cultural and the relationships or boundaries between groups are defined along cultural lines (Ziff & Rao 1992:1-2, Young & Brunk 2012:3)<sup>53</sup>. Cultural appropriation as used generally implies cultural identity as a given, which raises questions, not least as Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist and postcolonial approaches have radically troubled the notion that 'identity' denotes something stable, unified and essential. Constructivist perspectives hold that identities (and especially collective identities) involve processes of ongoing construction, and are the products of discursive formations

<sup>51</sup> In her keynote address, titled 'Fiction and identity politics', at the Brisbane Writers Festival of 2016, author Lionel Schriven (2016) came under fire for defending the right of authors to write stories and characters from outside their own cultural groups. She took issue with Scafidi's definition of cultural appropriation and its condition of seeking permission for borrowing ephemeral cultural heritage, not only because it is unfeasible in practice, but also since cultural appropriation is necessary to writing fiction. She writes, "[t]his is a disrespectful vocation by its nature – prying, voyeuristic, kleptomaniacal, and presumptuous. And that is fiction writing at its best" (Schriven 2016).

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Hart's (1997:138) definition implies an entitled appropriator who takes something from another group "as if it were his own or as if the right of possession should not be questioned or contested".

<sup>53</sup> Recent online articles are predominantly critical of white and mainstream appropriation of indigenous, First Nations and African American styles, content and subjects, but appropriation also occurs in the 'opposite' direction and between formerly marginalised peoples. An example is the appropriation of rap music by Native Americans, or of West African dress by African Americans (Gene 2015).

within historical and institutional contexts (Hall 1996a:4). Individual and collective identities are not guaranteed by ancestry or shared history, and rather than being cohesive and enduring they are fragmentary, with any apparent unity always only provisional and always produced within a play of power and exclusion (Hall 1996a:4,5).

Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000:4-10) question the usefulness of identity as an analytic concept, whether employed in the strong (essentialist) or weak (constructivist) sense. For them, constructivist work on identity, though disavowing and qualifying it, still assumes its existence as axiomatic, presenting a contradiction between theory and method (Brubaker & Cooper 2000:27). Brubaker and Cooper (2000:4) suggest formulating concepts of analysis flexible and yet robust enough to explore categories of practice defined, following Bourdieu, as “categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors”. To avoid terms that are too strong/hard or weak/elastic to perform meaningful analytic work, they propose alternative terms, including “identification”, “self-understanding”, “self-location”, “commonality” and “groupness”, which connote process and relationality (Brubaker & Cooper 2000:14-27).

Shifting and diverse conceptions of culture markedly influence cultural politics and the evaluation of cultural identities and cultural property, as well as the process of cultural appropriation (Rogers 2006:500). The plurality and fluidity of identities past and present complicate the analytic function of the term culture in debates about the ethical, political and material implications of appropriated processes and acts<sup>54</sup>. I therefore examine some influential conceptions of culture which contribute to the theoretical framework proposed for examining contemporary instances of cultural appropriation. Anthropologist James Clifford (1988:10) concedes that “culture is a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without”. Inaccurate, yet indispensable, culture is a term put ‘under erasure’ (*sous rature*) in contemporary critical theory<sup>55</sup>. Not trying to replace the term with a more ‘accurate’ one, a deconstructive approach puts terms such as ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ under erasure to acknowledge their inadequacy, all the while that they remain essential for thinking through key questions (Hall, 1996a: 1-2). Brubaker and Cooper’s critique of identity as an over-burdened analytical concept

<sup>54</sup> This dissertation will not undertake extensive definitions, or an overview of changing understandings of the concept of culture. For an overview of shifts in modern conceptions of culture see Bocock (1992), and for an overview specific to the postcolonial and South African context, see Garuba and Radithalo (2008). Scholarship on culture and appropriation in the fields of anthropology, ethnography and law present definitions and debates pertinent to this study. Some examples include legal understandings of the authenticity of cultural products and the identities of its producers, or the rights of individual actors based on conceptions of authorship and creation that attribute credit or copyright to a given person or group (Rao & Ziff 1997: 3; Coombe 1997, 1998; Scafidi 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Derrida adapted Martin Heidegger’s literary device of crossing out a word while retaining the word with a line through it, thus placing it *sous rature* (under erasure). Derrida (cited in Hall 1996a:1-2)) writes, “[s]ince the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible”. Where a term is no longer “serviceable - good to think with - in ordinary and unreconstructed form” but has not been supplanted with a new or better term, it can still be used when done ‘under erasure’, or in ‘de-totalised’ form, writes Hall (1996a:1). “The line which cancels them, paradoxically permits them to go on being read” (Hall 1996a:1). The gesture disrupts the notion that meaning inheres in signifiers and draws critical attention to the wider system of signification. This enables one to deploy problematic terms vital to asking key questions, while not thinking (with) the idea in the old way (Hall 1996a:2).

can also be applied to the term culture, which is employed in both essentialist and constructivist senses. Their suggestions for alternatives that are processual and relational can contribute to the analysis of appropriative acts, and correspond with Rogers' (2006) transculturalist approach (see below).

Consideration of socio-economic context is crucial when discussing indigenous self-identification through the commodification of their ethnicity or heritage. To theorise such strategic implementation of cultural identity and heritage in postcolonial contexts, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2009:21) treat identity, culture and ethnicity not "as analytic constructs but as concrete abstractions variously deployed by human beings in their quotidian efforts to inhabit sustainable worlds".

In the contemporary postcolony, formerly antithetical notions of cultural identity would seem to converge, write Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2009:40):

In its *lived* manifestations, cultural identity appears ever more as two antithetical things at once: on one hand, as a precipitate of inalienable natural essence, of genetics and biology, and on the other hand, as a function of voluntary self-fashioning, often through serial acts of consumption. It is, therefore, *both* ascriptive and instrumental, *both* innate and constructed, *both* blood and choice (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009:40, italics in original).

Commodity consumption is noted as central to processes of modern identification and self-consciousness, and consumption of one's own commodified culture may contribute to renewed awareness of and affiliation with one's cultural heritage and identity. This awareness and affiliation may be represented and experienced as innate. Presenting numerous international examples, Comaroff and Comaroff (2009:41-42) further observe that cultural identities in the twenty-first century are experienced and renegotiated in a "simultaneity of biology and self-construction attributed retrospectively", and by "rewriting the past in the image of the present".

Drawing boundaries between self and Other, insiders and outsiders, is implicit in discussion and analysis of cultural appropriation and the transit of ideas and goods between groups (and individuals and corporations). Rao and Ziff (1997:3) point out that relation-based analyses are, however, predicated on 'strong' organising categories such as ethnicity, race, nationality, class, gender and religion. These points of identification further intersect as subjects are classified as, or identify with, several such categories, foregrounding or relegating positions as contexts, motives and desires shift. Overlapping, shifting and contradictory identification produces conflict and ambiguity in individuals, which manifest in changing consumer choices.

Hall (1996a:2) suggests reconceptualising the subject (and equally the group) according to a theory of discursive practice that accounts for relationships between subjects, discursive practices and the politics of

exclusion. Group identities are construed through difference, states Hall (1996a:4-5), within the interplay of power and exclusion.

It is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside, that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term – and thus identity – can be constructed. Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’, abjected. Every identity has its margin, an excess, something more (Hall 1996a:4-5, italics in the original).

That identities have careers that are relational, and constituted through exclusion and differentiation, is important when theorising cultural appropriation, as this emphasises the processual character of identification. The identification and branding of a group of people according to ethnic, racial, linguistic or other differences, and the marketing of objects, images, songs, stories, places and more as cultural heritage, simultaneously establishes and affirms the cultural or ethnic identity of that group. As Benedict Anderson’s (1983) work on the nation as ‘imagined community’ and Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) notion of traditions as ‘invented’ have shown, collective identities are always in a process of becoming. Narratives, symbols and performances continually construct, rather than reflect, the collective identity.

Although collective identities are historically mediated, and are fluid and heterogeneous, this does not diminish the self-identification by members as ‘insiders’ and those of other groups as ‘outsiders’ (Lindholm 2008:143). People are drawn together into collectives and identify themselves strongly as members of national, ethnic, tribal or religious groups whose distinctive features and qualities they experience as key to their sense of self, contributing to essential processes of meaning and belonging (Lindholm 2008:1,143). To deny the validity of such affiliations and groupings would constitute an act of epistemic violence that undermines the efforts of marginalised groups who seek to reclaim their rights as members of a cultural group. Ziff and Rao (1997:97,11) stress that cultural appropriation “is about political praxis”, particularly when the agency and the recognition of oppressed groups are dependent on “the construction of a strong cultural identity. That identity becomes a glue that binds a movement”<sup>56</sup>.

However, the binary approach of many critics of cultural appropriation fails to account for the heterogeneity of both subordinate and dominant groups. Popular debates often ignore the complexity of minority groups, such as existence of minority groups within dominant ones and the hierarchies of power operating within

<sup>56</sup> Clifford (1988:7,277) provides his observations of the 1977 case brought before the Boston Federal Court, where descendants of Wampanoag Indians living in Mashpee had to prove their authenticity as the Mashpee tribe so that their right to sue for lands lost in the mid-nineteenth century might be established and the matter could proceed to a land-claim trial. For Clifford (1988:9), this case and the ensuing conflict over interpretations and definitions put on trial the very concepts of ‘tribe’, ‘culture’, ‘identity’, ‘assimilation’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘politics’, and ‘community’.

minority groups. Furthermore, each social formation is necessarily crosscut by gender, class and age, blurred and fragmented by migration, mingling, and the multiple identities of its members (Lindholm 2008:143).

Acknowledging the amorphous and changing divisions between people, Ziff and Rao (1997:3) assert that “some ‘test’ of belonging seems required” to ground discussion and debate about cultural appropriation. In tautological manner, tests of belonging are often cultural, and frequently require and enact the delineation of people according to the fraught, presumably shared, categories of race, ethnicity, class, religion or nationality. Although following a binary model that abstracts and simplifies cultural organisation and belonging, Young’s (2008) notion of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ does present working terms for analysing the processes and effects of appropriation. Young’s (2008:136, italics in original) description of those who appropriate “across boundaries of cultures” is the following: “[m]embers of one culture (I will call them *outsiders*) take for their own, or for their own use, items produced by a member or members of another culture (call them *insiders*)”. Young provides no model for drawing boundaries and does not factor in notions of gender and class. I develop these necessary working concepts by thinking them through via Derrida’s notion of *différance*. Differentiation and exclusion are necessary for identities to function as points of identification and attachment (Hall 1996a:5). As the product of difference, with its meaning endlessly deferred without point of origin or ultimate essence, identity “is constructed in or through *différance* and is constantly destabilised by what it leaves out” (Hall 1996a:5). Constantly destabilised and fractured, neither group identities nor the boundaries between them are ever final or fixed. Individuals move between groups or may be ‘insiders’ to several groups at once and in the process are involved in reproducing culture through its appropriation. Who qualifies or sees themselves as insider or outsider also shifts across time and contexts, and as acts of appropriation, assimilation and consumption reshape the cultural goods of one group to constitute the heritage of another. Former ‘insiders’ may no longer feel affiliation to or desire the incarnated goods, and find themselves now outsiders to those identifying themselves through the use, production and consumption of the acquired goods or practices. As working terms, insider/outsider – avowedly under erasure – will be used in the analysis of the material and affective impact of cultural appropriation.

### Cultural property and authenticity

Underlying critical investigation into cultural appropriation lies a deeper epistemic issue of ownership or belonging. Thus, Rao and Ziff (1997:3) enquire into what theory is to be used to connect specific cultural practices or products to specific groups. In the face of the hybridity of cultural goods and practices, and the ways in which cultural identities, practices and histories overlap, split and shift, scholars ask the question: what degree of nexus is required between a cultural good and a community (Ziff & Rao 1997:3, Scafidi 2005, Lindholm 2008)?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (*Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property* 1999) defines cultural property as “movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people [...] irrespective of origin or ownership”. This definition binds cultural property to the function of heritage to a group of people, ostensibly placing greater emphasis on the role of cultural property as heritage than the origin or ownership of goods, though the latter is arguably more readily verifiable than the value and role of something as inheritance. This definition certainly allows for the claiming of cultural goods as property based on their significance as heritage, whether a group are the owners and original producers or not. It therefore opens considerations of historical images as the cultural heritage and property of descendants of those depicted, a sentiment that was underscored in a recent ‘visual repatriation’ project by the Pitt Rivers Museum. Colonial photographs held in the UK museum’s archives were “reconnected” with descendants of the people photographed in Botswana, Canada, Cameroon and Kenya (Gordon 2017)<sup>57</sup>.

UNESCO’s definition presumes an agreed-upon understanding of heritage, which in turn derives meaning from stable and essentialist conceptions of culture, identity and authenticity. Nick Shepherd (2008:126) proposes that heritage refers instead to a “tangled web of present dreams and aspirations [and] the detail of past events and bodies of memory”. In the postcolonial heritage occupies a paradoxical conceptual space: “while it exists fundamentally as a corporate entity, as a set of values and objects held in common, it is always experienced from an individual standpoint” (Shepherd 2008:117). An understanding of heritage as a space where groups or nations remake themselves to confirm or contest identities and conceptions of the self and the collective, informs conceptions of cultural property that move beyond verification of origin and ownership (Shepherd 2008:126).

In connecting goods, practices or ideas to a cultural group, some scholars invoke the concept and value of authenticity. The conditions or tests of authenticity provided by Charles Lindholm (2008) and Scafidi (2005) present conceptual and practical problems, yet are useful in that they reveal discursive constructions of subjects in relation to their cultural property, and may open further possibilities for thinking of historical images as cultural heritage. Scafidi (2005:53) argues that claims of authenticity can provide an avenue to assert “affiliative ownership”, a concept I develop below. She states that the “rhetoric of authenticity performs much

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<sup>57</sup> Chris Morton (cited in Gordon 2017), curator of the museum’s photograph and manuscript archive, sees “an inherent moral imperative for ethnographic museums to open up their collections and connect them to the communities from which they originate”. Communities from which photographs originated, or descendants of those photographed, were given digital copies of colonial photographs.

the same social function as property ownership, placing the claimant group in a position superior to all others with respect to the item in question" (Scafidi 2005:54). By proving the authenticity of a cultural product, a source community may illustrate connection between their culture and its commodified cultural products (Scafidi 2005:55-60). Scafidi (2005:55-60) writes that authenticity can be determined or established in one or more of the following three ways: 1) product authenticity, where a product resembles or embodies an archetype established as authentic; 2) source community authenticity, where a product is attributable to a member of the designated source community; 3) authenticity of a central authority, in cases where the cultural product is multifaced and diffuse, a central authoritative figure within the source community may recognise authentic products. The three conditions are without doubt crude, being predicated on ambiguous and contested terms and raising numerous conceptual and practical problems, which Scafidi acknowledges in her discussion.

Similar problems emerge from Lindholm's (2008:2) proposal for two overlapping modes for characterising cultural entities or people as authentic. The first mode is the genealogical or historical origin of the person (Lindholm 2008:2). Here the authenticity of persons or collectives, and their purity, originality and legitimacy, can be verified through genealogical or historical origins, as in checking family trees and DNA, or the history that led to the formation of the group. Lindholm's (2008:2) second mode for characterising authenticity is the content (appearance, sound, medium, execution, conditions of production or use) of both the product and of the source community (lifestyle, forms of artistic expression, knowledge systems, political formation and more). Here the authentic person, cultural group and cultural product will be what they or their product purport to be and their appearance will match their essence (Lindholm 2008:2).

In the approaches outlined by Scafidi and Lindholm, the required nexus of 'goods' and source community resides in the verifiable authenticity of source community and cultural good, the one defining and validating the other. The models they outline rely on highly contested notions of authenticity as demonstrable and stable essence, with a verifiable and pure point of origin. Both authors acknowledge and unpack these qualifications. The relevance and value of their approaches to this study lie in their reflection of understandings and criteria common to debates about cultural appropriation and the legal, commercial and popular discourse about the authenticity of cultural products. In postcolonial cultural industries, authentic indigenous goods and practices are marketed as essentially different from modern Western culture, and produced by persons presumed to be neither white nor Western. Conversely, inauthenticity "is condemned as a loss of origins and a whitening (or faking) of non-Western values", writes Minh-ha (1989:89). As discursive formations, the criteria or tests of authenticity and ownership of indigenous heritage and cultural property reproduce and reveal its foundations in modernist and primitivist discourse about the West's Other. These foundations for notions of authentic

culture and art are radically unsettled, writes Clifford (1988:14), when self and Other are understood as relational and caught up in an historically-determined dynamics of power and discourse, a point central to Rogers' argument for a transcultural approach to appropriation<sup>58</sup>.

## 2.3 Types and categories of appropriation

### Transculturalism as theoretical approach to cultural appropriation

Rogers' (2006) transculturation presents a productive avenue for conceptualising cultural appropriation, in that it derives from anti-essentialist critiques of culture and authenticity<sup>59</sup>. Transculturation is, appropriately, formulated within contexts of neocolonialism, globalisation and neoliberalism. Rogers' approach makes a significant contribution to debates on the topic, as it moves beyond viewing appropriation as happening between two groups, to seeing it as engaging multiple lines of difference (Rogers 2006:491).

Rogers (2006:497) argues that discussions on authenticity are often driven by essentialist, organic views of culture, which overlook the important role of cross-cultural appropriations and hybridity in ongoing cultural development and processes of identification and resistance. He further emphasises that these processes were not inaugurated with colonialism, globalisation or postmodernism, but have always been the conditions for cultural renewal and change, dispelling the myth of pre-colonial purity so often presented as the touchstone of authenticity or cultural essence. Focusing on recent scholarship engaging with acts by which dominant cultures appropriate from subordinate groups, Rogers identifies four types of appropriation. His fourth category – transculturalism – presents a critique of the other three<sup>60</sup>.

The first category is cultural exchange, which presumes a mutual sharing and reciprocal exchange of cultural elements between equals, often resulting in greater creativity and harmony<sup>61</sup> (Rogers 2006:499). The second, cultural domination, describes the appropriation of elements of a dominant ('sending') cultural group by a marginalised or colonised ('receiving') group, where the dominant culture holds greater political, cultural,

<sup>58</sup> Gordon (2012:102) uses the notion of double-consciousness to disrupt neat separations of white and black (worlds), suggesting that "[w]hite lives and black lives do not, however, entirely live apart but are part of a continuum of social reality called culture".

<sup>59</sup> In 'Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today', philosopher Wolfgang Welsch (2001) proposes the notion of transculturality as a more appropriate conception of culture than interculturalism or multiculturalism, or older understandings of cultures as homogeneous units. Welsch (2001:68,71) identifies transculturality on macro- and microlevels: cultures and individuals are interconnected, interdependent and increasingly hybrid as a result of globalisation, new communications technologies and economic interdependence.

<sup>60</sup> Rogers (2006:500) proposes a "qualified retention" of the first three models since they remain useful as tools for considering cultural dynamics. They further alert to the variable conditions under which appropriation occur, the differences in participating parties and their motivations, and the perspectives and evaluations they may have of processes and products.

<sup>61</sup> Theorisation of appropriation as an exchange between equals is problematic as it requires discounting the conditions and socio-political contexts of appropriation. For Rogers (2006:478) the value of this category is mostly theoretic and rhetorical.

economic and/or military power (Rogers 2006:479-480)<sup>62</sup>. Although members of the ‘receiving’ group who appropriate elements of the ‘sending’ group may have limited agency and choice in what they appropriate, they continuously and strategically negotiate this imposition<sup>63</sup>. For this reason, Rogers (2006:480) includes appropriative acts constituting cultural resistance in this category.

Under conditions of the third category, cultural exploitation, a subordinated culture is ‘mined’ as resource by a dominant culture, usually without financial compensation (Rogers 2006:486). Such acts are often judged as theft, particularly within neocolonial contexts where the traffic of goods and profits perpetuates exploitative historic relations and bolsters the dominance of the appropriating culture. For some critics, appropriative acts that indicate appreciation and admiration of the culture or goods appropriated also fall in this category<sup>64</sup>.

Unlike the other three categories, a transcultural approach does not presume the existence of distinct cultures, and highlights the hybridity of cultural forms present and past, thus rejecting claims of authenticity and essence (Rogers 2008:493). It dispels the myth of pre-colonial purity and disrupts the foundational condition of ‘authentic’ indigenous culture and its primary criterion for appraisal. For Rogers (2006:491), an understanding of cultural appropriation according to a transcultural theoretical framework

involves cultural elements created through appropriations from and by multiple cultures, such that identification of a single originating culture is problematic. Transculturation involves ongoing, circular appropriations of elements between multiple cultures, including elements that are themselves transcultural.

Involving multiple cultural forms and settings, and manifold acts of appropriation across time and space, the fusion of cultural forms – never ‘pure’ to begin with – produces hybrids that in turn impact on cultural settings (Rogers 2006:491,493)<sup>65</sup>. Culture is understood as constituted by, and not merely engaged in, cultural appropriations (Rogers 2006:492). Throughout his argument, Rogers (2006:496,499) emphasises the importance of reconceptualising culture as radically relational or dialogic, and emphasises that transculturalism is neither a neoliberal licensing of cultural imperialism nor an embrace of postmodern

<sup>62</sup> The category includes the institutional assimilation of the receiving group, as the dominant group seeks to replace the cultural institutions of subordinate groups with their own (Rogers 2006:479-480).

<sup>63</sup> Receiving groups may appropriate aspects of the dominant culture in inventive ways to affirm agency, as overt or covert resistance tactics, for purposes of insubordination, survival or psychological compensation (Rogers 2006:483, 499).

<sup>64</sup> In ‘Stop stealing native stories’, Keeshig-Tobias (2016) draws parallels between contemporary appropriation of native stories and colonial theft of land. She writes, “the Canadian cultural industry is stealing— unconsciously, perhaps, but with the same devastating results — native stories as surely as the missionaries stole our religion and the politicians stole our land and the residential schools stole our language” (Keeshig-Tobias 2016). Root (1996:70-71) considers this argument as advanced by Canadian First Nations, asking whether appropriation is simply a synonym for theft. The argument, according to Root (1996:71), is predicated on two points: first, source communities are not consulted about the appropriations, and/or consultations are not transparent or honest; second, although appropriations are motivated primarily by financial gain, source communities receive little or no compensation.

<sup>65</sup> Rogers (2006:492-493) proposes hybridity as useful for clarifying dynamics of appropriation under conditions of cultural globalisation, not merely as product of local-global interactions, but as “communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, socio-political and economic arrangements” (Kraidy cited in Rogers 2006:493).

indeterminism and relativism. Its approach is founded on a keen awareness of the complex dynamics and material implications of unequal power relations which underscore cultural appropriation and commodification under conditions of neocolonialism (Rogers 2006:493)<sup>66</sup>.

The transculturalist critique of essentialist notions of culture, identity and authenticity may alert to the complicity of such understandings in perpetuating colonial stereotypes of native cultures. This critique or denunciation may, however, constitute further epistemic violence in contexts where cultural groups value and deploy essentialist identity constructions in their resistance to oppression, and in the struggle for the recognition of rights to practice their culture and to control it as a resource (Rogers 2006:495,500; Coombe 1997:87)<sup>67</sup>. Groups who have been exploited and subjugated, and have experienced historical debasement of their ethnic, racial or class identity, have deployed those identity positions within counter-strategies of survival and resistance (Parmar & Minh-ha 1990: 72)<sup>68</sup>.

Gayatri Spivak's (1987:205) concept of strategic essentialism describes the calculated, self-conscious use of essentialist notions of group identity (be it as women, workers or Hindus) as a basis for political struggle<sup>69</sup>. It is important not to lose sight of Spivak's (1987:205) emphasis that such a move be "scrupulously visible" in its political goals, and while a group might strategically mobilise and rally around an essential identity, they remain critical thereof and seek to destroy the mechanisms that constructed the outlines of that category. Minh-ha (Parmar & Minh-ha 1990:72) similarly cautions against essentialising identity as "an end point, a point of 'authentic' arrival", as it perpetuates Otherness as defined by the 'master' and fails to radically challenge hegemonic power relations. Eventually displacing the essentialised identity, the strategy is therefore executed in "the spirit of maintain *and* cause to cease" (Spivak 1987:206).

<sup>66</sup> Rogers (2006:498) writes that although a transcultural framework recognises and critiques issues of power, it advances no clear politics of culture, unlike the other three models that are situated within ethics and politics roughly aligned with Western liberalism. He concludes that critics employing this model may retain selected elements of the other categories as suits their political commitments.

<sup>67</sup> Legal anthropologist Rosemary Coombe (1997:87) cautions against dismissals of marginalised people's assertions of identity and culture, particularly as such groups continue to experience racist and ethnocentric discrimination. "Abstract and universalising criticism of essentialism may appear to subjugated peoples as threatening, again preventing them from gaining or regaining a hearing" (Coombe 1997:87). Hall (1996a:13), on the other hand, points out that "the decentring of the subject is not the destruction of the subject". Subjective self-constitution and self-reflection, and strategies of resistance of the imposition of objectifying subject positions, remain central to critical evaluations of class, ideology and discursive and disciplinary regulation (Hall 1996a:13)

<sup>68</sup> Strategic essentialism has further emerged as a vital instrument in indigenous efforts to counter the rhetoric of ongoing settler and dominant postcolonial nationalisms, which threaten their discursive engulfment or elimination (Skinner 2014:138-139).

<sup>69</sup> Spivak originally developed this concept in the essay 'Deconstructing historiography' (1985) where she criticised the tension between the Marxist Subaltern Studies Collective's (SSC) structuralist account of subaltern insurgency. Their aim was recovering subaltern subjectivity and political consciousness using empirical methods (Morton 2007:100-101, 126). In his *Prison Notebooks* (1929 -1935) Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci uses the term *subaltern* to describe "non-hegemonic groups or classes", which directly influenced the SSC and Spivak's use of the term, the latter identifying "subalternity [as] a position without identity" (cited in Morton 2007:97). Reading the SSC's methodology "from within but against the grain", Spivak identifies a "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" [italics in original] (1987:205).

As discussed above, authenticity may play a major role in the strategic mobilising of identities for political or economic reasons. Paradoxically, the very deployment of identity as essence highlights that it is both contingent upon specific historical and institutional sites *and* a product of specific discursive formations and enunciative strategies (Hall 1996a:4). The product of difference, ‘authentic’ identities are always relational and variable, and any essence can only be “a political, cultural invention, a local tactic” (Clifford 1988:12). In Chapter five I discuss the construction, value and function of African authenticity *vis a vis* the commodification of archival images.

### **Subject appropriation**

Young (2005: 136; 2008:5-6) lists three different types of appropriative activities or acts which prove useful in discussions of this phenomena in the visual arts and popular culture. These are object appropriation, content appropriation and subject appropriation. While Young’s conception of cultural appropriation may be criticised as limited, his notion of subject appropriation presents an avenue for analysing the historical making of images of colonised or marginalised people, and subsequent use by others<sup>70</sup>. In the relative absence of critical literature dealing with this kind of appropriation, his category proves useful and is here adapted to analyse the appropriation of historic images of black subjects by contemporary designers.

The first category, object appropriation, describes the transfer of possession of a work of art from members of one culture to members of another (Young 2008:5-6). The theft of ‘the Benin bronzes’ by the British during its ‘punitive expedition’ against the Benin Kingdom in 1897 is often presented as a paradigm case of object appropriation<sup>71</sup>. The second, content appropriation, describes the borrowing, re-use or imitation of intangible cultural forms such as musical compositions and stories expressed, in the work of an artist of another culture (Young 2008:6). This category has two subsections. The first, style appropriation, describes the borrowing of parts of the whole expression of an idea or art form, such as the production of stylistic elements in common with works of another culture (Young 2008:6). An example is the white mainstream absorption of the blues and ragtime of African-American musicians (Hall 1997:32). The second sub-category, motif appropriation, is related to style appropriation, but focuses on the appropriation of basic motifs (Young 2008:6). The work of

<sup>70</sup> Young’s considerations are at times predicated on quite narrow definitions of culture and art, and his discussion of appropriation predominantly follows a binary model of cultural products moving between two groups ('insiders' and 'outsiders', subordinate and dominant). He presents a defence of appropriation as fruitful under free market capitalism.

<sup>71</sup> The Benin bronzes, as they’ve become known, are commemorative relief plaques that decorated the Oba (king’s) palace of the Benin Kingdom in what is today Nigeria. These were made by Edo people from leaded brass according to a lost-wax casting method, between the 16th and 17th centuries. Following the 1897 sacking and destruction of Benin city by a British ‘punitive expedition’, hundreds of plaques and other artworks were seized. Some were taken to Britain and consequently given to the British museum, or sold to private collectors, dealers, and other museums in the UK and abroad.

appropriating artists is influenced by the art of another culture, but instead of producing works in the same style, they use designs, patterns, images and forms found in the source material. This is seen in the copying of San rock paintings on domestic Drostdy Ware crockery at the Grahamstown Pottery in the 1950s (Gers 2011).

Young's (2005:136) third category, subject appropriation, "occurs when an outsider represents members or aspects of another culture, e.g. when an outsider makes the culture or lives of insiders the subject of a painting, story, film or other work of art". The Canada Council, the Canadian federal governments' agency for funding of the arts, recognises "the depiction of ... cultures other than one's own, either in fiction or non-fiction" as a form of appropriation (cited in Young 2008:7). This has been called "voice appropriation", particularly when outsiders represent others in the first person (Young 2008:7)<sup>72</sup>. This category has its historic and conceptual origins in debates about appropriation of native stories, styles and figures by white Canadian and American writers during the 1980s. It presents a paradigm and conception of appropriation suited to the depiction of cultures other than that of the artist using archival images. I develop the category or term subject appropriation for this analytic purpose.

Subject appropriation differs from other types of appropriation, and Young (2008:8) accepts that the term may be a misnomer, as those engaged in subject appropriation are not taking anything produced by a specific people, such as artefacts of material culture, motifs or styles. Young (2008:8) contends that subject appropriation does not prevent insiders from also representing themselves, since outsiders have no exclusive claim once they have represented others. This perspective does not hold against marginalised artists' experiences of the creative industries, where older hegemonies remain intact<sup>73</sup>. While no 'thing' is taken, Young (2008:9,101) acknowledges the moral or aesthetic problems such acts of appropriation may lead to, particularly regarding the effects of misrepresentation or distortion of others and/or their culture<sup>74</sup>. Conversely, the failure to represent those who are not of one's cultural group may in some instances also do harm (Young 2008:109). This may constitute a distortion of historical record, the denial and silencing of

<sup>72</sup> In South African debates about representation, this is frequently referred to as "speaking for the Other" (see Atkinson 1999, Enwezor 1997).

<sup>73</sup> Keesig-Thobias (2016) asks, "[w]ith native people struggling for justice with land claims and in education, what makes Canadians think they have equality in the film industry? In publishing? With agencies that make art grants? In the arts themselves?" Coombe (1997:11) writes that contemporary intellectual property laws, including the law of copyright, are premised on Enlightenment notions of the sole, Romantic author, confirming a dialectic of possessive ownership and liberal democracy that is inadequate for protecting the cultural products of indigenous peoples. Writing about the post-apartheid cultural landscape and industries, Dubin (2012:66) notes the frustration of black artists who experience that they have fewer opportunities and face greater structural challenges than their white counterparts when producing films and plays about their black histories and stories. According to Dubin (2012:67) their dismay is "as much about both structural limitations within the arts as about the imbalance in perspectives within what gets produced".

<sup>74</sup> Objections to subject appropriation often focus on outsiders' inability to draw from any other but their own experience without risking misrepresenting the represented cultures, a point contested by many commentators, writers and artists (Young 2008:9, and see Malik 2016, Shriver 2016). Although this study reviews some objections made on moral grounds, it does not offer a philosophical investigation of the moral problems presented by subject appropriation.

alternative and minority voices, or a failure to draw attention to the experiences of others, particularly the marginalised and oppressed (see Richards 1999:171).

## 2.4 Historical images of black subjects as accidental cultural property

The contemporary appropriation and commodification of historical portraits of black individuals or cultural artefacts is not specifically addressed in literature about cultural appropriation. Where does this practice, and its attendant problems and challenges, sit within debates about subject appropriation, cultural products and cultural property? Can historical photographs be considered cultural heritage products when they are not produced by those depicted, or belong to the person(s) depicted and/or their descendants? Historical photographs of colonised Africans were predominantly created by Europeans, and in most instances, were never the actual property of those depicted or their descendants. Such historical images may exist as tangible objects in private or public collections and archives, or as copies and reproductions in books or on postcards, in advertisements and in fashion and interior accessories. Many such images have also been digitised and appear in electronic form on academic and commercial websites, archives and blogs, as well as in online image catalogues such as Pinterest, where users can select and copy images for personal or commercial use.

As with many cultural products (like dress, stories, songs and dances), the public use of historical photographs or their reproductions is virtually impossible to regulate, and assertions of collective ownership cannot be legally enforced (Scafidi 2005:53). Where legal mechanisms do not recognise ownership, the concept of authenticity may be useful, argues Scafidi (2005:53). According to her it does so by creating links between cultural products and their source communities through affiliative ownership, and by “establishing the source community as definitive repository” of the products’ meanings (Scafidi 2005:53)<sup>75</sup>.

Mine is not an argument for the legislative recognition of images as cultural heritage or products *qua* property, but rather an existentialist exploration of the conditions for and meanings of affiliative ownership enacted through the re-appropriation of historic images by those who claim a relationship to the persons depicted. How are relationships of affiliation, and feelings of ownership or custody constructed and exercised? Apart from material benefits of affiliative ownership asserted through claims of authenticity, what value do such

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<sup>75</sup> The notion that source communities are “definitive repositories” for the meaning of cultural products rests on a primordialist conception of cultural groups and the presumption that cultural products have conclusive meanings, ideas disputed in this study. It is important to read Scafidi’s approach in the context of American, and particularly Native American, efforts to regulate appropriation of cultural property such as motifs, styles and tribal names, to limit misrepresentation, harmful representation and outsiders benefiting from Native American cultural heritage and property. Though contentious in theory and practice, turning to authenticity presents an avenue for indigenous persons who cannot copyright their cultural products, but may profit in competitive markets on the basis of certified authenticity (See Scafidi 2005:52-66).

affiliations hold for cultural insiders? What is the relationship between a person or group's history, their authenticated cultural heritage, and their sense of authentic being or subject-hood?

Susan Scafidi's (2005:24-30) conception of cultural products as "accidental property" and her framing of their purposeful appropriation by a source community as part of a process of reflexive authenticity, may present an avenue for discussing archival photographs as cultural products. This in turn presents a starting point for theorising the significance of archival images to the source communities, and the impact of their appropriation and commodification. Scafidi (2005:28) suggests that cultural expressions – such as the tango in Argentina – may begin in many communities out of necessity, or adversity or desire for internal self-expression. Over time the expression or practice may become an identifiable cultural product through its 'accidental' conversion into cultural property, and its ensuing commodification, standardisation and association with its producers or initiators (Scafidi 2005:28). Although the 'product' originated in a confluence of circumstances and not by plan, "the preservation of the idiom as a cultural product is quite deliberate" (Scafidi 2005:30). Scafidi's legal approach to cultural property that is claimed retrospectively resonates with scholarship that since the 1980s has reconceived cultural traditions as products of myth-making and invention, and are often responses to immediate external influences rather than the expression of essences whose formal manifestations are certified by centuries of practice. Precisely because all tradition is 'invented', argue Emile Boonzaaier and Andrew Spiegel (2009:201), cultural forms should be recognised as political and imaginative resources that are "inevitably the site of contestation by competing interest groups".

Scafidi (2005:35) acknowledges that neither social memory nor the attributes of the cultural product remain stable, but the cultural product will in turn, and over time, represent the substance, stability and authenticity of the source community. The architecture and mural adornment of the Ndebele people of Northern Province and Mpumalanga, popularised internationally by Esther Mahlangu, provide a prime example of 'accidental' cultural property that represents a cultural group<sup>76</sup>. She therefore advocates a process of reflexive authentication of cultural products, particularly that of marginalised groups:

Cultural products may originate as accidental property, but the collective awareness and intent of the source community transform them into objects and practices that instantiate the

<sup>76</sup> From the 1880s until the end of apartheid, Ndebele peoples struggled for possession of their land and recognition of their culture as they were displaced by segregationist legislation. Over this period their distinct style of mural painting emerged as an outward sign of cultural integrity, identity and open defiance. The aesthetic shows the influences of their Sotho, Pedi and Tswana neighbours, and characteristic patterns and images reference Victorian-style architecture of Southern towns and graphics from consumer culture (Frescura 2001:85). Its contemporary manifestation is firmly established as Ndebele tradition, a symbol and trademark of the people, particularly in the tourism industry. Esther Mahlangu became a renowned as Ndebele artist after her international career was launched in 1989 when she participated in the exhibition *Magiciennes de la Terre* (Magicians of the Earth) at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. In 1991 she became the first woman to receive a commission to paint one of BMW's Art Cars, and has collaborated with Fiat, Fifa, British Airways and footwear brands Melissa and Eytys, launching the Eytys x Esther Mahlangu sneakers at the 2015 Paris Fashion week.

authenticity of the community and are themselves authentic only if they maintain a legitimate link to the community (Scafidi 2005:54).

Scafidi (2005:53) seeks to link cultural products to their source communities in the form of affiliative ownership that is purposefully claimed. Unable to prevent outsider appropriation, claims by the producers and originators of the ‘genuine’ or ‘real’ version of a product can be leveraged (see Shand 2002)<sup>77</sup>. This process and its implementation are potentially conflicted, as Shand (2002) illustrates, with regards the standardisation and commodification of the koru motif by the Maori, its source community<sup>78</sup>. This is not to suggest that source communities treat historical representations in the same manner as design motifs or craft practices. Rather, that a relationship between authenticity and the affiliative ownership of a cultural product or practice, claimed with awareness and intent, may assist in understanding the affective power of subject appropriation. Here authenticity is related to the source community, not in the narrow sense of genealogy or content, but rather in a more self-referential and subjective sense of the term.

I propose that historical images of Africans – irrespective of the identity or intentions of the producer or the conditions and purposes of the original production – can be retroactively claimed as accidental cultural property when individuals or groups enter in relationship of affiliative ownership to such images. Although Scafidi’s phrase accidental ‘cultural property’ is used, the term ‘property’ with its legal, individualist and capitalist associations are incongruous to my argument, which does not present a motivation for recognition and protection of historical images as property. I therefore tentatively supplant the term with the phrase ‘of their own’: cultural groups affiliated with the represented might claim as ‘of their own’ images which were not produced by them and are usually not in their possession. Whether by direct ancestry or due to a shared historical legacy, through a contemporary subject or community’s identification with the people represented, such images can become ‘of their own’. Connoting belonging, inclusion and affiliation, and not ownership as

<sup>77</sup> This is complicated when ‘insiders’, like Mahlangu or knitwear designer, Laduma Ngxokolo with his internationally celebrated MaXhosa knitwear label, commodify their own cultural heritage. There are no guarantees the ‘insiders’ who commodify their cultural heritage will do so in ways that necessarily have the approval of other ‘insiders’. Sanders (2002:47) cites the example of Amsterdam-based artist Te Rangitu Netana who in 2002 gave British celebrity Robbie Williams a tattoo resembling the Tā Moko facial tattoo, to the dissatisfaction of some Maori.

<sup>78</sup> From 2002 a bureaucratic mechanism for Maori Artists and manufacturers was established to minimise economic exclusion due to historic disadvantages and competition from more powerful companies in the international market (Shand 2002:77). As such, the Maori now have recourse to apply a label of cultural authenticity to their works. The objective of the Toi Iho or “Maori Made Mark” is “to assist consumers in identifying authentic cultural products, and thereby improve the economic benefits flowing to Indigenous people from the commercial use of their cultures” (Shand 2002:78). The development parallels measures protecting First Nations interests in Australia, Canada and the USA. Shand (2002:78-79) notes various complications presented by the labelling system, particularly in proving indigeneity and proof of ethnic belonging as, “to be eligible to utilise the mark, purveyors of goods will need to be able to prove their ethnic identity as Maori”. It therefore assumes a united, likeminded and non-biased Maori authority, and objective measures of determining ethnic identity. Shand (2002:71) also notes that “just as a tourist public can endorse orthodoxies of style, so can a general Maori public”, which has consequences for Maori artist applications to legislation, and can lead to a regime that endorses artistic stasis.

understood legally, this approach to forging contemporary connections with historic images may allow alternative perspectives on the expressions of ownership or guardianship of images of colonised people (see Walsh & Lopes 2012). Where there is no recourse to legal intervention, source communities may find this a point of departure in addressing who has authority to give permission to copy historical images, or what is the permissible or preferred treatment of such depictions – issues explored in Chapter three.

### **Who may claim affiliative ownership?**

Colonial representations and indigenous art forms feature prominently in both settler and aboriginal claims to indigeneity and authenticity (Skinner 2014:137)<sup>79</sup>. This frequently results in struggles over the right to represent and to reclaim historical images, narratives and figures as their own. Although descendants of colonised and coloniser living in postcolonial nations are equal as legal citizens and share intertwined histories, cultural heritage and even genealogy, conflict about custodianship and representation often ignites deep-seated tensions derived from the colonial and repressive past. Delineating boundaries between cultural ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to ascertain who might claim affiliative ownership presents challenges as these boundaries are fundamentally based in contentious, historically burdened categories. I tentatively propose that indicators of membership may arise from two intersecting states: similar experiences of oppression, and the intimacy of groups who are also communities of practice<sup>80</sup>.

The first is the sharing of experiences or histories of oppression. Contemporary victims of racist discrimination and exploitation may identify with, or feel themselves as belonging to, global and trans-historical communities of those oppressed by colonialism or apartheid. As I demonstrate below, people of colour who have suffered abuse and displacement in racist societies may identify with Sara Baartman’s story and appropriate her history and image as ‘of their own’.

The second is developed from Etienne and Beverley Wenger-Trayner’s (2015) account of communities of practice, which Thi Nguyen and Matt Strohl (2017) use in theorising restrictions on style appropriation. Communities of practice are constituted by people with a concern for something they do, and who regularly interact to engage in processes of collective learning in a “shared domain of human endeavour”, write the

<sup>79</sup> To differentiate itself from the colonial metropole and assert indigeneity, settler nationalism appropriates select aspects of aboriginal culture, such as styles and motifs, linguistic and musical elements, indigenous knowledge, and more (Skinner 2014:137)

<sup>80</sup> My proposal is predicated on the ‘intimacy account’ of philosophers Thi Nguyen and Matt Strohl (2017, [s.a]). They argue that the shared cultural practices of large groups be afforded the same protection given to the intimate practices of romantic partners or families. In both instances, sanctioned participation in shared practices produces a sense of intimacy, belonging and identity. This intimacy, argue Nguyen and Strohl ([s.a]:14), can ground the prerogative of appropriation claims, or requests that outsiders refrain from appropriating aspects of a group’s culture. In some cases, failure to respect this prerogative can constitute “a problematic *breach of intimacy*” ([s.a]:14, italics in the original). .

Wenger-Trayners (2015:1). The concept encompasses shared practices that impart knowledge, and the development and sharing of a repertoire of resources, such as stories, tools, experiences, and ways of solving problems (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015:2)<sup>81</sup>. Importantly, "a community of practice are practitioners" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015:2). Such communities can include those emerging from historical experience of oppression, where the oppressed and/or their descendants constitute a community of practitioners. Shared practices such as dress, ceremonies or games, produce a sense of cohesion and shared identity, and may function as ways of coping with marginalisation, in communities that are large or small, formalised or informal, localised or diasporic. I contend that written and oral histories, and historical figures and their representations may constitute domains of shared interest and practices in so far as their telling, reproduction and honouring are performed by community of practice members. More than an appreciation for a historical portrait, it is the ongoing commemorating of the depicted persons, and care about their legacy and the ties that bind them to the living that constitute membership and authenticate the communities that affiliate with them.

Membership is further marked by proficiency as well as a sanction to participate in the practices that uphold these legacies, even where 'members' also belong to other communities of practice. For Nguyen and Strohl (2017:16), "individuals who do not have a history of coping with marginalisation in the relevant ways could legitimately be excluded". They illustrate this argument by referring to the variable acceptability of ethnic or racial slurs, depending on the 'insider' or 'outsider' status of the user (Nguyen & Strohl 2017:11). It is widely known that outsiders may not use derogatory epithets, while within a group this form of address is sanctioned and may show solidarity, indicate irony, affection or insider-status. It might function as value-free descriptor or denote mild derogation<sup>82</sup>. In acts of resistance and reclaiming power, minorities have re-appropriated derogatory epithets. In similar vein, groups may strategically re-claim images that stereotype or degrade them, using these to subvert the discourses and hegemonic institutions that reproduce these<sup>83</sup>.

Furthermore, non-members admiring or inspired by the practices of such communities, to the extent that they identify as members, may be legitimately denied insider status when they do not share experiences of coping with marginalisation. An example is the denunciation in 2015 of Africana scholar and black rights activist Rachel

<sup>81</sup> Communities of practice are cultivated through the parallel development or combination of three elements: 1) a shared domain of interest, which defines a community's identity while membership implies commitment to the domain, and specific competencies shared among members; 2) a community constituted as individuals who pursue their care about a domain through engagement in joint activities; 3) shared practice, (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015:2)

<sup>82</sup>In such cases, "even [the] derogatory use [of a racial slur] is entirely different from the derogatory use in the hands of a racist" because the latter is not a member of the community of practice, argue Nguyen and Strohl (2018:11). Insiders may extend conditional use to intimate outsiders such as spouses, with the uses thereof always contingent upon context.

<sup>83</sup>An example is Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Couple in the cage* (1992), which I discuss in Chapter two. See also Andrea Walsh and Dominic Lopes' (2009) for a discussion of Native American artists who re-appropriate racist colonial imagery.

Dolezal, when her European American parents publicly announced that she was a white woman passing as black (Nguyen & Strohl 2017:16). Though there is no formal, unified African-American community, Dolezal was rejected as insider by those whose claims to membership include their ancestry, blackness, and shared histories and ongoing experience of anti-black racism.

## 2.5 Authenticity, affiliative ownership and *Dasein*

Scafidi (2005:54) turns to Heidegger's and Kierkegaard's conceptions of authenticity to explore the ways in which authenticity is manifested in and through the search for personal identity and meaning. According to Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon (2016), the most common understanding of authenticity originated predominantly from Heidegger's *Being and Time*, published in 1927. The term *Eigentlichkeit*, translated as *authenticity*, is a neologism derived from *eigentlich*, meaning really, actually, truly or originally. Built on the stem *eigen*, meaning 'own' or 'proper,' more literal translations of *Eigentlichkeit* might be 'ownedness', 'being owned', or even 'being one's own'. For Varga and Guignon (2016), this translation implies the notion of 'owning up to' and of taking responsibility for what one is and does. Rather than a passive essence, for Heidegger authenticity requires action and consciousness by the person claiming it.

Kierkegaard's notion of authentic being finds expression in the intentional and committed relation to something outside oneself which imparts meaning, and constitutes the self over time (Varga & Guignon 2016)<sup>84</sup>. This emphasis on relationality in the process of the self's move to authenticity is echoed in Heidegger's understanding of authentic human existence, or *Dasein*, translated as 'there-being' (Varga & Guignon 2016). Rather than referring to an object among others, or a person or biological being, *Dasein* designates the distinctive mode of being that humans realise over the course of their lives (Wheeler 2016). Furthermore, as a "relation of being" (*Seinsverhältnis*), *Dasein* denotes a relation between two aspects: on the one hand, what and where one is at a given moment and one's "being-in-a-situation", and on the other, one's actions and undertakings over the course of a life's unfolding (Varga & Guignon 2016). This does not suggest that Heidegger's is a biological model of a seed or essence maturing towards authentic actualisation. "*Dasein* is not an isolated subject in relation to an object *but is that relation itself*" (Golomb 1995:119).

Discussing Heidegger's ontology of authenticity in relation with historical heritage, Golomb (1995:114) argues that "[a]n authentic Being must appropriate its tradition in an authentic 'coming-back' which secures its

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<sup>84</sup> "For Kierkegaard, as a religious thinker, this ultimate commitment was his defining relation to God. The idea is that passionate care about something outside ourselves gives diachronic coherence in our lives and provides the basis for the narrative unity of the self" (Davenport cited in Varga & Guignon 2016).

authentic looking-forward". This happens through the active and resolute reinterpretation, appropriation and owning of one's past and one's heritage, an integral part to *Dasein*'s authenticity. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (cited in Golomb 1995:115) writes, "*Dasein* inherits its past not only by 'accident' but also with authentic 'resolve'; it 'choose[s] it' freely". It is thus through composing one's own autobiography in relation to one's heritage and as a process of resolute actions that the self can approach wholeness and authenticity (Varga & Guignon 2016).

The "awareness and intent" with which affiliative ownership is claimed resonates with the resolve and resolute action demanded by *Dasein* (Scafidi 2005:54). As part of processes of self-definition or authentication, individuals or communities may reclaim historical images or contemporary reproductions as part of *Dasein*, 'owned-ness' or 'being one's own'. Through the purposeful claiming of affiliative ownership by cultural insiders, the appropriated historical images become 'of their own'. Such re-evaluations are, according to Jonathan Friedman (cited in Lindholm 2008: 133), "not just a question of semiotics, of sign substitution, of the intellectual game of truth-value and museological authenticity. It is rather a question of existential authenticity of the subject's engagement in a self-defining project". As signifier and trace of the people pictured, the photograph or photographic reproduction thus comes to play an integral part in the construction and performance of the subjectivity of a source community and its members.

### **Black existentialism and a philosophy of culture**

Heidegger's conception of authenticity has been influential in shaping modern Western discourses of authenticity that contributed to the discursive construction of colonialised peoples, their subjectivity, the value and worth of their culture and cultural products. As shown above, the world over, such subjects have been interpellated by, or have strategically adopted, its premises. But how appropriate are the tenets of this discourse for theorising the potential for reflexive authentication as black people claim affiliation and ownership of colonial images? According to Gordon (1997:3-4), in both its ontological and epistemological premises a modern Western conception of 'the human' not only fails to account for the situation and lived-experience of black people's being in the world, it denies black people's subjectivity and legitimates the conditions of their suffering.

Firstly, the Western existentialist tradition, with its roots in Enlightenment modernity, presumes a liberated, universal subject (read bourgeois European male) whose authoritative and active subjectivity is defined in relation to his Other: the passive, silent object of his knowledge, who does not qualify for the benefits of liberty and dignity assured by the humanist project. Related to its celebration of individualism as a vital characteristic of the actualised modern subject, is the inability of this universalist approach to account for the specific

situations of societies where the collective or a sense of groupness is paramount to a person's sense of self and significance in the world<sup>85</sup>. Secondly, epistemologically modern Western philosophy is predicated on reason and the same method that sanctioned the autonomy of the Enlightenment subject, justified slavery and colonialism and withheld one of its central values – liberty – from most of the earth's peoples.

Black existentialism differ from Western existentialist approaches as its existential and ontological questions demand recognition of the lived realities of black people whose heritage is that of racial oppression, enslavement and colonialism (Gordon 1997:3; Bassey 2007:915). Liberation is paramount to black existentialism, which is supported by three key motifs: 1) a philosophical anthropology concerned with what it means to be human within the context of racial oppression; 2) a philosophy of freedom that asks what it means to be free when one's being has been deemed property, is denied or disregarded; 3) a meta-critique of reason that questions the reasoning behind the philosophies of being and of freedom (Gordon 2012:97)<sup>86</sup>. The third motif both challenges the epistemological conditions of modern philosophy and at the same time wrestles with the critical use of reason within a philosophical and critical practice dedicated to the freedom and recognition of all black people (Gordon 2012:98). Whereas modern Western existentialism is predicated on an individual's uniqueness and obligations to self, black existentialism is dedicated to the liberation of all black people, recognising the "struggle of *all Black* people against nonbeing predicated on Black people's common experience in slavery and colonialism (Bassey 2007: 917-918,920, italics in original). Here the consciousness of the oppressed individual is inextricably linked to the collective (Bassey 2007:919).

In an argument based on Fanon's questioning of a Western phenomenological approach and Du Bois' notion of double-consciousness, Gordon (2012:104) proposes a "philosophy of culture" that can "articulate human freedom through a discussion of culture as the human attempt at being at home in existence"<sup>87</sup>. For Gordon (2012:102-104) the multi-dimensional aspect of culture challenges the presumed universality of hegemonic white representations of black non-being. Further outlined as "symbol-governed reality created by human beings", culture offers resources and meanings by which the world can be made 'liveable', presenting opportunity and space for "the project of making people and their ideas at home in the world as a fundamental

<sup>85</sup> Brubaker and Cooper (2000:27) draw a distinction between using categorical codes to identify or classify people (like language or ethnicity) and relational connectedness or subjective "groupness". The former suggests objective commonality and is often enforced by governmental or bureaucratic machinery and/or deployed by identitarian entrepreneurs. To them the "groupness" suggests Max Weber's notion of '*Zusamensgefühl*' (a feeling of belonging together) and is always emergent as people's affiliation with a group contributes to their self-understanding as, for example, Zulu, Muslim or transgender (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:27-28).

<sup>86</sup> For each of the three motifs Gordon (2012:97-98) provides correlative questions: "a. What does it mean to be human, or what are these standards by which we understand our humanity? b. What does it mean to be free and liberated? c. How do we justify our reasoning behind a and b?" For him the anthropological question emerges from the historic realities that challenged the humanity of black people, of being enslaved and colonised.

<sup>87</sup> For Gordon (2012:101), Fanon offers a qualified phenomenological movement which places phenomenology itself under suspicion in order to arrive at "conclusions freed from the yoking or the colonising force of certain forms of rationality". Gordon (2012:99,101) elaborates on Du Bois's notion of double-consciousness and suggests a "potentiated or critically reflective double-consciousness" which prompts questions about the social forces involved in the construction of black inferiority.

demand of freedom" (Gordon 2012:102,103). Rather than an essence rooted in racial blackness or a category of analysis, culture becomes both action and resource<sup>88</sup>.

Claimed as 'of their own', colonial representations have the potential to become part of a cultural resource from which contemporary black people can re-fashion new meanings for and of themselves, their relationship to their heritage and their being-in-the-world. When coupled with or functioning within a paradigm of political freedom – rather than the liberty for self-authentication in relation to/at the cost of the Other who does not share that same privilege – *Dasein* has relevance, particularly in its emphasis on resolute action and relationality. New relationships with and ownership of re-appropriated colonial representations have played an important role in decolonial projects the world over, not least in challenging hegemonic and stereotypical depictions and perceptions of colonised peoples.

hooks (1990:5, 1992:19-20) urges black people to pursue radical critique of and active engagement with the control of their own representations, reminding that "social identity is a process of identifying and constructing oneself as a social being through mediation of images". Her exhortation comes with caution against the embrace of essentialism and cultural or ethnic nationalisms that override the heterogeneity and different subject positions of marginalised groups (hooks 1992:19). As a strategic deployment of culture, cultural authenticity and its signifiers may be empowering but present a double-edged sword. Minh-Ha (1989: 89) articulates this predicament faced by native peoples:

[you] are thus led to stand in need of defending that very ethnic part of yourself that for years has made you and your ancestors the objects of execration. Today, planned authenticity is rife; as a product of hegemony and a remarkable counterpart of universal standardisation, it constitutes an efficacious means of silencing the cry of racial oppression. [...] Every path I/i take is edged with thorns. On the one hand, i play into the Saviour's hands by concentrating on authenticity, for my attention is numbed by it and diverted from other important issues; on the other hand, i do feel the necessity to return to my so-called roots, since they are the fount of my strength, the guiding arrow to which i constantly refer before heading for a new direction.

Minh-ha's words encapsulate the enervating position of those drawing strength and agency from authenticity rooted in ethnic, racial or gender identities so circumscribed by and in the language of the former master that it appears completely subsumed<sup>89</sup>. Nevertheless, the heritage, history and cultural roots of the marginalised

<sup>88</sup> Bassey's (2007:925) pragmatist approach to black existential philosophy or Africana Critical Theory (he uses the terms interchangeably) would correspond with this conception of culture as proactive and resource. For him the "practical fruits" and the solutions to "problems affecting human beings in their existence as human beings" offered by black existential philosophy is "its whole essence".

<sup>89</sup> Minh-ha (1989:89) outlines two positions that may mitigate this predicament. "The difficulties [double-edged sword] appear perhaps less insurmountable only as I/I succeed in making a distinction between difference reduced to identity-authenticity and difference understood also as critical difference from myself" (Minh-ha 1989:89-90).

provide vital (re)sources of strength and the resolute reclamation and appropriation of historic images have and can become another such resource. Visual cultural heritage therefore plays a vital role in the psychological fortitude of a people, particularly where it is claimed from and as a project of freedom (Gordon 2012:102).

Ongoing debate about Willie Bester's sculpture of Sara Baartman reveals the potential and complexities of re-appropriating colonial representations of Africans as 'accidental cultural property' in endeavours of reflexive authentication and political self-assertion. The events unfolding around the work reveal how claims of affiliative ownership intersect with the personal experiences and political goals of respective parties.

#### ***Sara Baartman (2000) by Willie Bester***

Beginning in March 2015 a body of students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) began demanding the decolonising of education and directed protest at the institutional racism of their own and other tertiary education institutions. Their actions resulted in the eventual removal of a centrally-placed statue of Cecil John Rhodes – decried as a prime symbol of colonialism – from the university's main campus. The issue of representation of blackness featured prominently in the campaigns of Rhodes Must Fall, as the protest movement soon became known. Artworks displayed on UCT's campus were scrutinised for their role in perpetuating white hegemony and black humiliation suffered under colonialism and apartheid. Willie Bester's sculpture of Sara Baartman, displayed prominently in the Chancellor Oppenheimer Library on UCT's Main Campus, was one such work that sparked debate (Fig. 2.1). Bester is a South African artist known for his mixed-media works, often made from found objects and scrap metal. Growing up under apartheid and classified as 'coloured', Bester's experience of the violence and brutalising effects of apartheid, racism and poverty on black subjects motivated his use of art as a tool for exposing and critiquing apartheid and its legacy.



Fig. 2.2. Willie Bester, *Sara Baartman*, before and after it was covered by students in 2015, 2000. Welded iron. University of Cape Town art collection, Cape Town. (Pertsovsky 2017).

Over two meters tall, Bester's sculpture of Sara Baartman is made from welded scrap metal and machine parts. Baartman, from the cattle-herding Gonaqua group of Khoikhoi in the Eastern Cape, was taken to Europe and exhibited in London and Paris salons, fairs and freak shows, between 1810 and 1815 (*Sara (Saartjie) Baartman*, 2013). Sardonically named 'The Hottentot Venus', she was displayed nearly naked, often in a cage and alongside animals, as a titillating oddity and proof of her people's lower evolutionary status. After her death in 1816 the naturalist George Cuvier claimed her body for scientific study. He preserved her brain and genitals and made a body cast that was publicly displayed at the *Musée de l'Homme* (Museum of Man) until 1974. By the 1990s, Baartman and her tragic story had become a potent symbol of the humiliation and dispossession suffered by indigenous South Africans at the hands of colonisers (Martin 1996:9; Coombes 2003:240-241).

The sculpture was inspired by a poem by Diana Ferrus, *A tribute to Sara Bartmann* (1998), and according to Rosemarie Buikema (2009:10-11) both the poem and Bester's sculpture were inspired by political efforts to

have Baartman's remains repatriated and to give her a Khoisan burial<sup>90</sup>. Bester's sculpture was further motivated by his goal to raise consciousness about the dispossession and dehumanising effects of colonialism in South Africa (Buikema 2009:11). Speaking of his intentions, Bester says that he identified with Baartman's ordeal and how, after apartheid, politically-motivated artists struggled to find a new direction (Torres, 2016).

At a glance, the form of the sculpture follows that of nineteenth-century renditions of Baartman's physique, with its focus on her torso, breasts and pronounced buttocks (the steatopygia that so fascinated Europeans). Buikema (2009:14) suggests that the violent manipulation of Baartman and her image to serve the purposes of Europeans is communicated through Bester's technique of welding together disparate bits of scrap metal into a monstrous form. For Buikema (2009:14) the materiality of Bester's representation powerfully foregrounds the work's "functioning *as* representation" (italics in original), therefore disrupting the long history of using Baartman's body as a spectacular sign for racial inferiority and sexual degeneracy.

Part of UCT's art collection, Bester's was one of over 70 works covered up or removed following a decision taken by the University's Works of Art Committee and the Artworks Task Team (ATT), an advisory body established in September 2015. In a report of February 2017, the ATT stated that works were removed for political reasons, as "part of the transformation agenda", or for safety reasons (Geffen, 2016; Pertsovsky, 2017)<sup>91</sup>. Elaborating on its transformation imperative, an ATT statement reads:

Student members of the Task Team made strong representation to the Team concerning what they understood to be a widespread apprehension, on the part of students objecting to the artworks, that the works' cumulative effect in terms of the representation of black people was negative, even abject (Artworks Task Team, 2016).

Bester's representation of Baartman was listed by a Student Representative Council member, Ramabina Mahapa (2014), as among those from UCT's collection "which do not portray black people in a good light". In a *Cape Argus* article titled, "Little at UCT saying 'Black child be proud'", Mahapa (2014) writes that two broad

<sup>90</sup> Former president Nelson Mandela requested the return of Baartman's remains after the ANC's victory in the 1994 elections, and it took the French government eight years to draw up the bill that facilitated the return of Baartman's remains, but would protect the French state and its institutions from claims by other countries for return of appropriated or stolen cultural property (*Sara (Saartjie) Baartman*, 2013). Baartman's remains were brought back to South Africa on 6 March 2002 and buried at Hankey in the Eastern Cape Province.

<sup>91</sup> The Artworks Task Team (ATT) was formed in September 2015 to advise the university's Works of Art Committee on policy for statues, plaques and artworks. This came after student protests, vandalism and removal of the statue of Rhodes in 2015. These ATT's reasons were seconded by a statement by UCT Vice-Chancellor Max Price and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Sandra Klopper, titled 'Removal of UCT artworks is about curation, not censorship , says Price' (Price & Klopper 2016). The Vice-Chancellor's statement explained that the "decision to cover and take down some works is motivated by two concerns: the first is to signal that we have started a process of debate and discussion about how works of art should be displayed on campus, and that we will respond to this debate with seriousness and urgency. The second is in recognition of our custodial obligation to protect our art collection, especially those works of art that have become controversial (whether for good reason or not), noting that in the absence of an art gallery, almost all of UCT's art is displayed in public spaces" (Price & Klopper 2016). The burning of 23 artworks during the 'Shackville' student protest action on February 2016 increased concern about the safety of the art collection (Pertsovsky, 2017).

themes in the university's collection – black poverty and the naked black body – "reinforce the inferiority complex of the black student while reaffirming the superiority complex of the white student".

The measures taken by UCT and the ATT have been criticised as censorship and to many it seems contradictory that works protesting colonialism, apartheid and racism such as that of Bester, Breyten Breytenbach, Diane Victor, Vusi Khumalo, Lucky Sibiya and Sue Williamson are among those identified as discomfiting by a younger generation of anticolonial activists. Here I focus only on Bester's use of Baartman's story and image, as this can be described as a process of taking affiliative ownership. Although he is not a direct descendant of Baartman his witnessing of the effects of colonialism and his experience of apartheid contributed to his sense of association with her, such that he felt moved to draw upon her story and the image of her naked form.

It would seem, however, that Bester's expression of affiliation was not interpreted as such by students who objected to the work, claiming that its portrayal of black abjection contributed to their feeling inferior in the hegemonically white institution. This conflict over the work's meaning reveals that meaning is located neither in the work of art, nor in its artist or her/his intentions, as each viewer's reading of the work differs according to her/his own subjective position, the physical context of the work and the socio-political context of its interpretation. It may also be that the young activists have identified in their own ways with Baartman's legacy and the symbolic value of her image, re-appropriating these 'of their own' as part of their struggle against marginalisation within the university.

In 2015 a group of students performed a ceremonial covering of the sculpture, an action described by Amohelang Mohajane (2017) as one of "redressing her past and restoring her dignity". The performers – in white loin cloths, with bodies painted black and in chains – walked silently from the student-occupied administration building (renamed Azania House) across campus to Bester's sculpture where they draped and covered it (Fig. 2.3). One of the performers reflected that, "we see no difference in the racist, sexist methods used by the French and British in the freak show attraction, than her presentation in the UCT Oppenheimer Library[sic]" (cited in Mohajane 2017). Protesting the pervasive system of violent objectification and sexualisation of black bodies, the students' "teaching/learning experiment" (Mohajane 2017) also questioned how heritage, histories and its symbols are presented within postcolonial educational platforms.



Fig. 2.3. UCT Rhodes Must Fall. *Saartjie Baartman//Man walking in chains*, 2015. Performance. (Mohajane 2017).

During the performance the silent students expressed a sense of the pain, anger, self-hatred, shame, trauma and grief Baartman must have experienced. Using their own young bodies within the setting of the busy university library, they tied historic black suffering to that of a generation born in a democratic country but still suffering from past injustices<sup>92</sup>. Published on the ‘UCT: Rhodes Must Fall’ Facebook page, the performance elicited comments both appreciative of and denouncing the performance. It also stimulated debate about the significance and value of Bester’s sculpture. Many black students expressed their solidarity with the performance artists, shared their own pain and their grief about both the historic and contemporary suffering and humiliation of black people. Some students questioned the objections of others to Bester’s sculpture, expressing feelings of pride and ownership of their history and the struggles of ancestors such as Baartman, with one commentator referring to Baartman as “the true African queen” (Durrant cited in *Saartjie Baartman performance art today in UCT library* 2015). Other students were, however, critical of the performers’ decision

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<sup>92</sup> Their silent performance combined mime and dance to portray a narrative of violent suffering and bondage under conditions of slavery, colonialism and apartheid.

to paint their bodies black. Kellen Hoxworth (2017:287) identifies two chief objections: that the performers overlook and exclude other 'black' South Africans (coloured, Khoisan, Khoekhoe) and mask Baartman's coloured and Khoekhoe identity by claiming her as 'black'. In this sense the visual expression of their protest and their claim to affiliative ownership constitutes another act of epistemic violence. It further risks foregoing the "complexities of entangled racial identities", pointing to a simplistic conflation of slavery and colonialism (Hoxworth 2017:287). Hoxworth (2017:288) further argues that the blackened skin evoked 'blackface', signalling "the potential for the RMF protest to (re)spectacularise black pain".

With this event and ensuing discussion, the performers and commenters expressed a relationship to Baartman and revealed how her image had become metonymic of black suffering. Bester's sculpture of Baartman – although now covered and its future on the university campus uncertain – and its presence on campus at the time of protest action, presented a forum for student expressions of an embodied historic trauma and the struggle for liberation from continued racial discrimination. While their actions were not uncontentious, as young South Africans the performers stepped into a conversation and encounter with their history, claiming the figure of Baartman as 'of their own'. As black subjects struggling for freedom they hereby confronted the present and their position in the institution and broader society.

## 2.6. Conclusion

In this section, I have reviewed definitions and types of cultural appropriation and sought to problematise terms foundational to the concept as it is used in both academic literature and popular debate. Chief among these are the terms 'culture' and 'authenticity', and I proposed using Rogers' model of transculturalism as theoretical framework. This approach problematises essentialist assumptions of culture and authenticity to allow for an approach better suited to the complexity of the phenomenon in the contexts of postmodernism, neocolonialism and globalised capitalism.

Young's category of subject appropriation was adapted to facilitate discussions of ephemeral cultural property not produced or owned by its source community, and it is useful to consider the ways in which historical images of the black body become or constitute the cultural heritage of those depicted, or their descendants. I considered this category in relation to Scafidi's suggestion that minorities and formerly colonised peoples may reclaim agency and achieve reflexive authentication through claiming affiliative ownership to their cultural heritage and cultural products.

Representations of colonised peoples offer important cultural resources to descendants who wish to assert their being at home in worlds to which their full citizenship was historically denied. As subjects authenticated by the cultural heritage they claim as ‘of their own’, they assert that neither their ephemeral cultural property, nor its progenitors and inheritors, are homeless and without roots. Subject appropriation effects very real pain, trauma and anger. The debates and events unfolding around the respective artworks reveal the possibilities - and challenges - presented by claiming affiliative ownership of colonial images. In the next chapter I identify key issues emerging from debates about subject appropriation in contemporary South African art.

## Chapter three: critical debates on race and subject appropriation in South African contemporary art (1990 – 2016)

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter is an exposition of debates about race and representation in South African art between 1990 and 2016, with a focus on objections made to subject appropriation as occurring in the work of white artists who use archival material depicting black bodies or black historical experience<sup>93</sup>. The debates mark important chapters in South African art historical criticism and their themes have been repeatedly revisited in arts criticism, in scholarship and in university classrooms, contributing to rigorous engagement on issues of representation, race and identity – an encounter missing in the critical study of commercial design.

My aim is not to provide a chronological exposition of key debates or ‘culture wars’ in post-apartheid South Africa. Instead, I examine some debates in the fine art domain in order to provide the elements for a framework by which to approach subject appropriation in the field of commercial design, which is the focus of Chapter five. This chapter gives art historical and socio-political background to the development of post-apartheid South African design which, like the fine arts, is marked by a turn to colonial and apartheid archives. It gives insight into the major shifts in notions of identity as tied to colonial legacies and their manifestation in artistic representations of black bodies since the early 1990s. Historical images and narratives like those repurposed by the artists featured here, have become inspiration and source material for post-apartheid designers. I therefore discuss appropriated archival material and its colonial origins to give a deeper understanding of the affective power of repurposed images on black descendants and those who claim affiliation with the represented. My analysis highlights how differences in cultural capital and historical experience affect interpretations of repurposed archival material by different discursive communities. These differences emerge as central factors in debates about Maid in Africa’s designs, a focus in Chapter six.

At the centre of the debates in question are Steven Hilton Barber’s photographic series *The noble savage and the noble savages* (1990); *Miscast: negotiating the presence of the Khoi and San history and material culture* (1996), an exhibition curated by Pippa Skotnes<sup>94</sup>; the Grey areas debate, which focused on the work of some

<sup>93</sup> As this dissertation focuses on subject appropriation that occur through the use of archival depictions of black people, I do not focus on other major post-apartheid debates about works such as, but not exclusively: Kaolin Thompson’s *Useful objects* (1996); Brett Murray’s *Spear of the nation* (2012); the exhibition *Viscera*, by Mark Hipper (1998); the *Innovative women* exhibition (2009), featuring work by Zanele Muholi, denounced as pornographic by then minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana; various cartoons by Zapiro (Jonathan Shapiro); various works by artists Anton Kannemeyer, Conrad Botes and more recently, paintings of ANC politicians and struggle icons by Ayanda Mabulu.

<sup>94</sup> A volume of essays and illustrations, *Miscast: negotiating the presence of the Bushmen*, edited by Pippa Skotnes, accompanied the exhibition.

white artists from 1997; and Brett Bailey's installation and performance work *Exhibit B*, performed internationally between 2010 and 2016. To produce their exhibitions or artworks, the artists and curators in question drew upon, represented or reconfigured episodes from black colonial history, or used as their material historical visual representations of black bodies under conditions of colonialism and slavery, whether photographs, drawings, illustrations, advertisements or scientific documentation, including body casts<sup>95</sup>. These works are analysed as examples of subject appropriation as already discussed. The artists discussed are all white, middle-class South Africans who gained their economic, social and cultural capital under apartheid. With apartheid's dismantling these artists were led to renegotiate their identities and work out new positions within and *vis à vis* the 'Rainbow Nation', as it was named after 1994.

In the discussion below, I identify and extract key issues emerging repeatedly from the debates, focussing on the differences highlighted between artistic intention, viewer interpretation and affect<sup>96</sup>. The key issues are the following: perpetuating an objectifying colonial ethnographic gaze while trying to challenge and unsettle it; using archival images of black people or black history to address and/or appeal to white audiences; presuming the 'ideal' viewer to be a penitent, and/or liberal white subject with similar cultural capital as that of the artist (or art critic); the right to represent cultures other than your own and the related risks of silencing by 'speaking for' cultural Others; disagreement over the relationship between an image (signifier) and the person depicted (referent). For Richards (1999:358), conflict about these issues points to "deeper, more obstinate questions" of cultural production, such as "who ultimately holds the rights to cultural material, its appropriation, representation and dissemination?"

It also points to questions at the heart of what Steven Dubin (after James Hunter) calls "culture wars"<sup>97</sup>. As Dubin (2012:7) illustrates with copious examples, such conflicts erupt in and around particular symbolic sites of representation and collective meaning, such as museums, works of art, monuments, heritage sites, public rituals and ceremonies. These skirmishes reveal fundamental fault lines in the national body, and expose deep-seated anxieties and frustrations around the questions of who belongs to a particular community, who may represent a community and its heritage, and what medium or behaviours are permissible vehicles for such

<sup>95</sup> All the artists, apart from Steven Hilton-Barber who took photographs of contemporary black initiates, used historical material. His series is discussed here as it sparked public debate about the representation of black South Africans by a white artist, and the resemblance of his photographs to colonial-era anthropological documentation of Africans.

<sup>96</sup> These were identified by doing a literature review and discourse analysis of scholarly publications, art reviews, artists' and exhibition websites, blogs, petitions and online videos dealing with the four bodies of work, exhibitions or debates.

<sup>97</sup> Dubin's (2012:3-14) reworking of James Hunter's (1991) phrase 'culture wars' for a post-apartheid South African context is relevant to debates around cultural and subject appropriation. Writing in the context of Post-Cold War America, Hunter defined culture wars as "public conflict based on incompatible world views regarding moral authority", or what he differentiated as '*the impulse toward orthodoxy*' from '*the impulse toward progressivism*' (cited in Dubin 2012:3). For the South African situation Dubin (2012:14) finds most useful Hunter's elaboration of culture wars as conflict between a world view, on the one hand, that seeks to maintain normative ideals, traditional ways and social institutions and on the other, an attitude that embraces transformation and progressive ideals.

representation (Dubin 2012:7). As I point out below, these conflicts around representation often emerged from the difference between the values and cultural capital of the white artists and curators, on the one hand, and those of the black people they represented, on the other. These conflicts arose from the fraught post-apartheid context where a white minority retain their economic and social capital (alongside a small black elite), in contrast to a massive body of black and coloured poor. Dubin (2012:3) notes that increased contestation over representation of marginalised people attests to shifts in the political landscape and to an expanding agency whereby historically marginalised people begin to challenge the once-secure white monopoly in public discourse over representations of all kinds.

A major point of contention in these debates, writes Colin Richards (1999b:185), is the “old, uneasy and contingent relationship between ‘lived experience’, or ‘object worlds’ and our ‘signs’ or ‘representations’ made in the image of these”. Disparate conceptions of the relationship between the image and the represented object, or between signifier and signified, emerge as highly contested, and contribute significantly to conflicting perspectives in the debates. For some there is a direct link between the image of a person’s face or body as a representation in an artwork or exhibition, and the actual person(s) photographed, drawn or painted. For others, an image of a person in an artwork remains a signifier without referent and is but a visual manifestation of an idea or imagination, a position defended by those artists and critics who posit an ‘ideal’ viewer capable of reading contemporary art in this abstract manner. As argued in the preceding chapter, the connection between an historical image and the people or person represented has significant value for those who claim affiliative ownership of the image. Here the relationship is iconic and symbolic – in some instances metonymic – closely linked to the person depicted and/or his or her memory, to ancestors and descendants’ sense of self and authentic being. Through reviewing these debates about subject appropriation, I return to the question of the value of historical images. What does criticism of white appropriation of archival images of colonised Africans reveal about the value of these images to contemporary black and marginalised people? What does the affective power – revealed in objections to subject appropriation – indicate about relationships to such images and how can this inform contemporary approaches to subject and cultural appropriation in décor and fabric design?

What emerges from the review is that opponents of subject appropriation affirm what philosopher and cultural theorist Judith Butler (2004) calls the grievability or grief-worthiness of the lives represented in archival

images<sup>98</sup>. Considering the absence of public mourning and obituaries for Iraqi or Palestinian deaths in post 9/11 American media, Butler (2004: xiv-xv) writes:

Some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?

I posit that the resolute stance regarding affiliation and ownership of archival images in debates about appropriation calls for recognition, by those who turn such images into works of art or design, of the grievability attached to the lives of those represented, the long-deceased, by people who affiliate with them, and who may themselves have much to grieve about in a world still dominated by social and economic hierarchies introduced under colonisation.

### **3.2 Context and description of artworks and debates**

The socio-political and art historical contexts in which these debates occurred shifted dramatically between 1990 and 2016. Dubin (2012: 3-4) emphasises the importance of changes in the South African recent context for its culture wars. These include socio-political changes following the dismantling of apartheid, the adoption of an inclusive liberal democracy and a new positive repositioning within the global capitalist economy. These changes caused both hope and anxiety in people from different backgrounds, who had to renegotiate their position in relation to the new nation state and international trends on the one hand, and shift values that had previously served their personal and group identities on the other (Dubin 2012: 14-15). With its ethnic and racial diversity, the new nation was re-invented according to a narrative of liberation and the oxymoronic motto ‘unity in diversity’, yet group and community differences shaped by colonisation, and further consolidated and aggravated by merciless apartheid ‘racial engineering’, continue to motivate conflict between groups, and within the party system of the neoliberal state.

The slow and painful change from apartheid to democracy was similarly one of the most significant factors impacting on South African visual arts production and discourse in the last four decades. The new era was marked by a shift away from resistance art under conditions of struggle against apartheid, censorship and cultural isolation. Artistic production by the political left during apartheid was predominantly directed at exposing the violence and human rights abuses of the state (Atkinson 1999:15)<sup>99</sup>. Facing a common enemy,

<sup>98</sup> Writing in the context of heightened patriotism and violent United States retaliation against Arab countries after the attack on New York’s Twin Towers in 2001, Butler offers recognition of interdependence and relational vulnerability as alternatives to military action.

<sup>99</sup> As described by photographer David Goldblatt, from the 1970s artists, writers and photographers used to “wield their instruments like guns” against apartheid (cited in Oliphant 1992:8).

radical artists and photographers adopted an oppositional approach to galvanise support against the state, their work producing a clear binary of guilty white aggressors and innocent black victims (Oliphant 1992:8). This approach had a direct impact on the way in which human bodies, particularly black bodies, were commonly depicted, with the revolutionary, militant body, and the broken, tortured body serving the political purposes of resistance and conscientising. For Richards (1999a:348) this counter-culture of resistance demonstrates that the apartheid gaze might have been totalitarian, but not total, allowing artists who so chose to dedicate themselves to producing conditions and spaces for greater creative and imaginative freedom.

Shifts in political agendas and coalitions during the 1990s stimulated shifts in approaches to cultural production, which contributed to the public debates about the complexities and pitfalls of representing communities other than one's own (Atkinson 1999:15)<sup>100</sup>. The artistic expression of the early days of inclusive democracy was marked by an inward turn and the investigation of identity politics, personal histories and experience, symptomatic of the search for new national and individual identities<sup>101</sup>. The body – as site of identity, memory and experience – featured in new ways in artistic representation as artists found new spaces in the post-struggle environment for working through their experiences of apartheid and they investigated notions of gender, class and personal identity. This shift was further facilitated by the new constitution's protection of freedom from discrimination and freedom of expression (Bedford 1999:71). At the same time, artists had to wrestle with the consequences of the apartheid gaze, which, according to Richards (1999a:348), "colludes with other oppressive visions in Western ocularcentrism, revealing [that the] naked eye of Western scopophilia, has blind spots, producing its own field of discriminations". This gaze fixed identity as natural, God-given and "a static ethno-nationalist category" which was totalitarian in its attempts at containing the radical heterogeneity and hybridity of South African peoples, their histories and cultural expressions (Richards 1999a:348).

The country's re-entry into the international cultural sphere and its art industries further stimulated a greater critical openness about the politics of representing self and cultural others, with artists' work and careers benefitting from exposure to new international trends and markets. At the end of the millennium,

<sup>100</sup> Writing in 1992 Oliphant (1992:8), notes the limited critical attention that questions of representation had received in a country where visual culture was pervasively deployed "in the service of an objectionable ideology".

<sup>101</sup> The artworks, exhibitions and related debates discussed below are by no means the only or most important ones that brought issues of visual representation into critical perspective. In the article, 'The quest for adequate representation', Andries Oliphant (1992:9) writes that public debate was invigorated by Kim Gray's 1987 series of photos of black prostitutes and Gideon Mendel's 1989 series *Beloofde land/Promised Land* – colour photographs of Groot Trek commemorative festivities. A work that caused significant debate in the media and political circles is the sculpture *Useful Objects* (1996) by Kaolin Thompson, winner of the annual Martienssen Prize at the University of Witwatersrand. The sculpture, which shows female genitals, shaped like an ashtray, complete with stubbed-out cigarette, sparked debate when a review intimated that it represented black body parts. These debates brought issues of representation to the fore, yet writing in the 1990s, both Oliphant (1992) and Atkinson (1996) note the absence of critical discourse about the politics of representational aesthetics in South Africa.

postmodernism developed belatedly in South Africa and ushered in a new, reflexive focus on identity and the body (Bedford 1999:71). Another influence was the ethnographic turn in contemporary art, an international development of the 1990s. In a seminal article of 1995, 'The artist as ethnographer', Hal Foster identified a vogue for producing artworks, events and exhibitions that adopted anthropological and ethnographic research in the theorising of cultural difference and the politics of representing cultural others (Rutten et al 2003: 359)<sup>102</sup>. Several exhibitions and artworks discussed in this chapter exemplify this approach.

The blurring of previous political boundaries, and black South Africans' entry into all spheres of society, also resulted in much-needed challenges to the authority of white artists, curators, critics and art historians, the sole directors of South African institutions and arts discourse until then (Atkinson 1999:15). These challenges and subsequent (and ongoing) restructuring of public cultural institutions, gave rise to much anxiety among white cultural brokers about professional and personal status. The struggle over agency and access within the cultural and artistic sphere and industries continues after 1994, although with shifting terms under a black majority government and conditions of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism.

Before discussing the key issues and themes of the four debates, I describe each exhibition or debate in chronological order and position the works, artists or curators within their various contexts.

#### ***The noble savage and the noble savages. 1990. Steven Hilton-Barber, Market Theatre gallery, Johannesburg***

In 1990 the documentary photographer Steven Hilton-Barber, then known for his pictures of black resistance to white oppression, arranged to attend and photograph aspects of a North Sotho initiation or 'bush' school, which took place on a remote part of his family's farm in Tzaneen, Limpopo Province<sup>103</sup>. The resultant series, *The noble savage and the noble savages: photography of an African initiation* (hereafter *Initiation* series), consists of black-and-white photographs of a group of over 200 minors, shown in the mostly naked or semi-naked state demanded by their situation (Fig. 3.1). The series elicited a public outcry that still resonates in debates and informs awareness about the complexities of representing cultural others, including questions of ethics and the authority of the photographer (Atkinson 1999:15). Responses to the photographs included

<sup>102</sup> According to Foster (1995: 306), artists would share the ethnographer's concern for the politics of representation as they engage cultural others. He is, however, concerned and sceptical about the pseudo-ethnographic role the artist assumes as it can "promote a presumption of ethnographic authority as much as a questioning of it, an evasion of institutional critique as often as its elaboration" (Foster 1995:306).

<sup>103</sup> Hilton-Barber (1962-2002) was a freelance photographer and journalist. In 1986 he joined Afrapix, a photographic collective founded in 1982 by photographers and activists who opposed apartheid through documenting anti-apartheid resistance, as well as the deprivations of black life under racist rule. In 1987 Hilton-Barber worked for Reuters in the Eastern Cape and in 1990 founded Soundlight Photographic Agency with Paul Weinberg (Hilton-Barber *Sahistory Online* 2017).

accusations that they were racist, voyeuristic, pornographic and perpetuating of denigrating colonial stereotypes of Africans.

The exhibition of photographs was organised by *Staffrider*, an anti-apartheid literary and photographic journal that sponsored a photographic competition for which Hilton-Barber entered his series. As winner, he got to show his work at the Market Theatre gallery in Johannesburg (Dubin 2012:162)<sup>104</sup>. Coinciding with the exhibition's opening on 25 November 1990 the widely circulated *Sunday Star Magazine* published an article about the exhibition titled 'Rites of Passage' (Richards 1999a:355). The article contained a description of the evolution of Hilton-Barber's project and was accompanied by a selection of captioned photographs from the series. The article included a description of Hilton-Barber's negotiation of permission to photograph the initiates, granted by the lodge master or principal of the initiation school, Patrick Letsealo (Dubin 2012: 162). The photographer could attend and photograph the initiation ceremony on condition that he was circumcised, and he attended a week of the six-week programme and the graduation.

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<sup>104</sup> The *Initiation* series was exhibited in Germany and France (1991) and in Spain (2001).

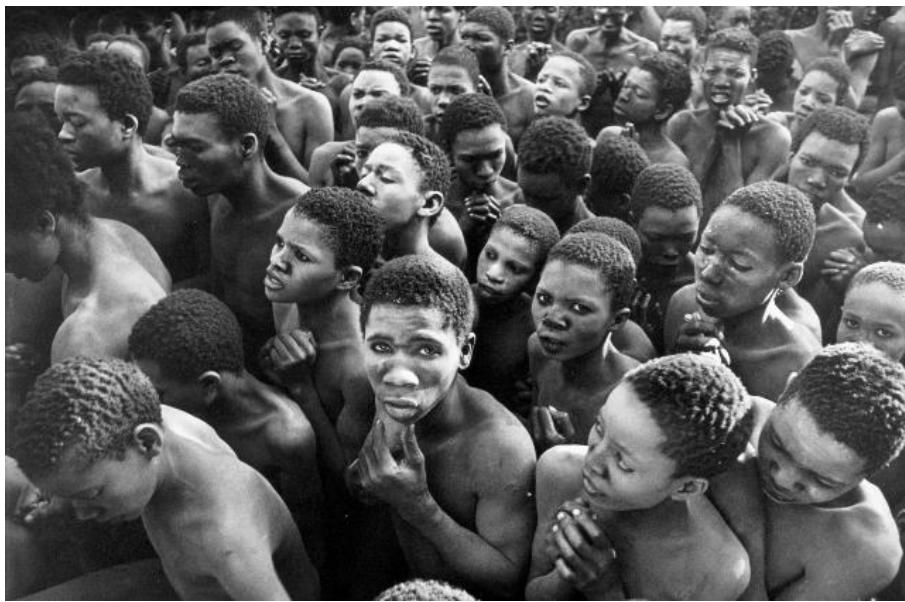


Fig. 3.1. Steven Hilton-Barber, *A crowd of naked boys at initiation school*. 1990. Black-and-white photograph, 45.6 x 30cm. AfriPix Images, Nelspruit.  
(Photograph courtesy of Afripix).

According to Dubin (2012:162) the photographs became the “focus of a tumultuous month” of activities, responses and debates<sup>105</sup>. A petition calling for the removal of the photographs, drawn up by 47 black employees of the Market complex, was headed by the following: “We ... hereby state our objection to the exhibition of photographs of the initiation ceremony of African males. We see it as an invasion of a sacred African tradition, which has for centuries been private” (cited in Richards 1999a:355). For the employees, represented by spokesperson Vusi Ngidi, Hilton-Barber’s partial attendance of the school, his circumcision and the consent given by the principal was insufficient, and they argued that he needed to consult with broader community structures, like the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa. At a public panel discussion at the Market Theatre, Hilton-Barber spoke of his artistic rationale, apologising for any offence he unintentionally caused, and raised concern over the aggressive nature of some of the commentary, which for him smacked of racism and chauvinism (Dubin 2012:162).

Atkinson (1999:15) and Dubin (2012:164) suggest that the criticism levelled at Hilton-Barber’s series was greatly influenced by the political and cultural context of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a tense period of regime change marked by public discourse taking a more vociferously critical turn. For Richards (1999:355) the metropolitan setting and press circulation of an exhibition of intimate traditional ritual was misplaced and

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<sup>105</sup> The display was closed prematurely after twenty photographs were stolen from the gallery on 14 December and three days later the captions to the pictures were vandalised (see Richards 1999).

badly timed, done at a time when ‘tribalism’ was being remobilised by apartheid spin-doctoring to forestall black unity, resulting in conflict, violence and death. Apartheid state-aligned media coverage at the time of so-called ‘black on black conflict’ would further have influenced public opinion about the traditions, culture and values of different black cultural groups. As Ngidi (cited in Richards 1999a:355) stated, “we are in a political crisis of transition, the pictures encourage tribalism...”. He further suggested that the “social-minded artist” should not document images of black traditions as these would be interpreted as ‘tribal’, in other words in line with the white racist anthropological designations which underpinned apartheid ideology (Ngidi cited in Richards 1999a:355).

For Atkinson (1999:15), the series lacked an obvious critical and engaged political agenda, which contributed to its labelling as “intrusive (white) voyeurism that sentimentalised and aestheticised racial ‘otherness’ for commercial consumption”. Below I elaborate on this charge, and accusations that, despite Hilton-Barber’s intentions, his work perpetuates a colonial ethnographic gaze that objectifies African subjects as exotic, docile and caught in an a-historic, tribal past.

*Miscast: negotiating the presence of Khoi and San history and material culture*, South African National Gallery (SANG). 1996. Curated by Pippa Skotnes.

#### Challenges and context of the exhibition

*Miscast* has become known as one of the most controversial post-apartheid exhibitions, eliciting critical reviews and scholarly articles locally and abroad. Sydney Littlefield Kasfir (1997:6) writes that *Miscast* has become a platform for expressing opposing perspectives on the representation of other cultures. According to Pippa Skotnes (1996:18) *Miscast* “is not, strictly speaking, about ‘Bushmen’ [but rather] a critical and visual exploration of the term ‘Bushman’ and the various relationships that gave rise to it”<sup>106</sup>. She chose to represent these relationships through the historical images and objects that bear witness to the severe imbalance in power between Europeans and indigenes, colonists and resistance fighters, researchers and their subjects<sup>107</sup>. The historical content of the installation included colonial government documents, newspaper articles, archival photos (including anthropological photographs of Bushmen, some shown naked or semi-naked), instruments of documenting and measuring human physiognomy, and moulds made of San people’s bodies

<sup>106</sup> The term ‘Bushmen’ as designation for San hunter-gatherers is considered derogatory by some, particularly as the Dutch-derived term (from *Boschjesmens*) has served to connote banditry. Though historically fraught, Bushman (*Boesman* in Afrikaans) is nevertheless used by some in self-identification. Contemporary historians and anthropologists use the (plural) term Khoekhoe when referring to pastoralists (also called Khoi) and San for hunter-gatherers. ‘Khoisan’ was historically used to encompass the two, a term rejected by some descendants and scholars, while some activists and traditional leaders have reclaimed it. Depending on the context, the names of individual groups may be preferred to collective designations. Some of South Africa’s Coloured/ ‘coloured’ citizens identify with the historical legacy of these indigenous groups.

<sup>107</sup> The relationship between Europeans and Africans is described by Skotnes (1996:18) as “fluid and changing, governed by different needs and criteria, to which both parties contributed and by which each party was irrecoverably altered”.

for producing painted plaster casts. Archival texts, images and objects were brought together and juxtaposed to produce dialogue, doing so to interrogate modes of representation and knowledge production<sup>108</sup>.

Skotnes' first aim was to interrogate the production of knowledge about the Bushmen, doing so through an ambitious artistic installation that highlighted the various apparatuses of nineteenth-century knowledge production, showing how this knowledge was fundamentally intertwined with colonial power, and provided justification for gross human rights violations (Coombes 2003:230-231). The exhibition sought to alert viewers to the power of the visual, and raise awareness about the act of viewing and viewers' own complicity in the discursive production of the 'Bushmen' (Coombes 2003:231). The curator's second stated aim was to investigate and reveal how "Natives" and "Strangers" encountered each other and some of the consequences of those encounters as playing out within the South African colony (Skotnes 1996:15,18).

Feedback on the exhibition was mixed and only some of the visitors' book inscriptions were congratulatory, expressing gratitude and approval at Skotnes "setting the record straight" (Littlefield Kasfir 1997:4). Although the exhibition received much praise for its innovative investigation of Bushmen history, Skotnes' choice of imagery and her choices of display ironically resulted in her being accused of the very things she wished to expose and critique: the stereotyping and exploitation of the San (Davison 2001:5)<sup>109</sup>. For many the exhibition was a painful and violent encounter with their own history, particularly for descendants of the Bushmen or San (Littlefield Kasfir 1997:4).

The timing of this exhibition was significant, as the prevailing socio-political context and political-cultural climate very likely contributed to the affective force of the show. It was presented two years after the first democratic elections, although this was a time of optimism not all parties were satisfied with the compromises negotiated between the outgoing National Party (NP) and the African National Congress (ANC). It was a time of reflection on a traumatic history of violence, humiliation and dispossession under apartheid; for example, the Truth and Reconciliation hearings commenced the same year *Miscast* opened<sup>110</sup>. The 1990s also saw the political mobilising by indigenous inhabitants of their San, Griqua, Khoi or Khoisan heritage. Their efforts focused particularly on gaining recognition of their status as First Nations people of South Africa, the return of

<sup>108</sup> In the essay 'The politics of Bushmen representation', Skotnes (2002) gives detailed description of the exhibition's content and its installation, curatorial decisions and rationale, the spatial division and its symbolism.

<sup>109</sup> In mounting the exhibition in an art museum, the domains of fine arts and ethnography were fused. This was done to question traditional distinctions between indigenous and settler culture, and to pose alternatives to the display of indigenous culture in the natural history museum.

<sup>110</sup> On 15 April 1996 the first Truth and Reconciliation hearings started where victims of violence under the apartheid dispensation could under court-like proceedings give testimony, and perpetrators were given opportunity to testify and request clemency and amnesty (Coombes 2003:236).

their lands forcefully taken and compensation for losses suffered under colonialism and apartheid. Representatives of these groups also called for government support and intervention to have the plaster cast and skeletal remains of Baartman repatriated<sup>111</sup>. By the 1990s Baartman had become a potent symbol of the humiliation and dispossession suffered by indigenous South Africans at the hands of colonisers (Martin 1996:9; Coombes 2003:240-241). Their plight coincided with international mobilising by indigenous peoples to have cultural property and the remains of ancestors repatriated from museums and archives of former colonial powers.

Controversy over the exhibition sprang largely from its sensitive subject matter: the representation and discursive construction of the indigenous peoples known by Europeans as Bushmen, over centuries of subjugation, including in anthropology, museology and popular culture. The history of the Bushmen under colonialism is marked by trauma, expropriation and genocide, and images propagated of them since the seventeenth century perpetuated tropes of innocent ‘children of nature’ and of ‘noble savages’, or as debased representatives of mankind in its infancy, and specimens of primitive and dying races<sup>112</sup>. The archival evidence of these histories formed the material of the exhibition. A challenge voiced by many commentators, but not discussed by the curator, was how to represent a people’s traumatic past using images and objects associated with that history, without again subjecting the victims and their descendants to that violence (Coombes 2003:236).

Skotnes (1996:18-19) notes the curatorial challenges of her “attempts to present a Bushman or San voice (or, better still, many voices)”, particularly as they were so severely dispossessed and marginalised. She chose to work “through various organisations which represent San interests in South Africa, Namibia and Botswana, through legal advisers and through anthropologists” (Skotnes 1996:19). How to decide which images were suitable for publication and exhibition presented another big challenge. After much consultation, Skotnes (1996:19) decided to include the full range of material collected, as it evidenced people’s attitudes toward each other and “this evidence should be exposed for all to see”<sup>113</sup>.

<sup>111</sup> In December 1995 the Griqua National Conference (GNC) called for government intervention in the return and burial of Baartman’s remains (Coombes 2003:240; Martin 1996:9). To enforce this claim, a letter was submitted to the French Embassy in Pretoria, invoking the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

<sup>112</sup> The controversy and critique elicited by this exhibition can’t be understood without an understanding of the physical and symbolic violence visited over centuries of white colonial rule upon the individuals and cultural groupings whose histories and images were appropriated for Skotnes’s curatorial project. This has been extensively documented from various scholarly perspectives, and is central to the *MisCast* book and I will not replicate research on the destruction of San peoples and culture, or their stereotyping, except where it pertains to analysis.

<sup>113</sup> In ‘The politics of Bushmen representation’, Skotnes (2002: 262) describes negotiating the display of “contentious material”, such as human remains, the nudity of early body casts and “trophy heads” of Bushmen. On exhibiting the latter, she consulted legal representatives of #Khomani-speakers in Northern Cape, the Khoisan Representative Council (KRP), and Griqua National Conference, both in the Cape. The Kuru Development Trust (KDT), Botswana and the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in South Africa {WIMSA} were also canvassed for opinion on the exhibition of human remains.



Fig. 3.2. Pippa Skotnes, *Miscast* installation archive boxes and cast body parts, 1996. South African National Gallery, Cape Town. Photograph by Jos Thorne.  
(Coombes 2003:234).

In line with the ethnographic turn in contemporary art, over the course of her career Skotnes has often used or drawn on archival material in her art, publications and curatorial projects, blurring the boundaries between artist, curator and historian. Mounted in a museum of art and not cultural history, the exhibition was also a departure from traditional museological practice, embracing international trends in exhibition practice.

Littlefield Kasfir (1997:6) points out that the career and interests of the curator and designer of the exhibition dictated a reading of Bushmen identity different to that of older museological approaches. Skotnes' art, writing and curatorial work both before and after *Miscast* show an enduring interest in Bushmen history and art, a concern with the genocide and cultural genocide of Bushmen peoples across Southern Africa, and dedication to the study, preservation and publicising of Bushmen cultural history. Her extensive work on the |Xam and !Kun archives produced by William Bleek, Dorothea Bleek and Lucy Lloyd also shows deep appreciation of their contribution to documenting and preserving Bushmen cultural heritage<sup>114</sup>. These factors impact on the reception of *Miscast* and ensuing debates, particularly as Skotnes was accused of perpetuating the objectification perpetrated by colonial modes of knowledge production, despite her informed critical position,

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<sup>114</sup> A list of the numerous publications and curatorial projects related to the extensive Bleek and Lloyd archive, on colonial representations of the San can be found Skotnes' staff profile at Michaelis School of Fine Art, UCT (Skotnes 2017).

liberal family and professional background, and her explicit aim of unsettling colonial archives and their discursive production of the Bushmen<sup>115</sup>.

It is the challenges not noted by Skotnes that may give insight into criticism of the exhibition and curator. The first is the relationship between the curator and her topic, and the power imbalances inherent in the relationship between a practising, white artist-academic and the substance or medium of her work: archival representations of deceased individuals from one of the country's most marginalised and dispossessed groups. The curator's identity, professional and political biases and authorial position as the project's creative director did not become an object for scrutiny. What is the relationship between the historical 'Native', the Bushmen of the archive, and the curator who is both white 'Stranger' and 'insider' to Bushman cultural history and its archive? What are the politics and challenges of the post-apartheid reproduction of the Bushmen, as historical objects of knowledge and archival aesthetic, by an artist-academic?

### The Bushman diorama

Criticism of *Miscast* must be understood in terms of the controversies surrounding its inclusion of moulds made from San people. Painted casts from these 'live' studies were exhibited at the South African Museum (SAM) from 1911. After 1959 they were exhibited in a 'natural setting' behind glass, which became known as the 'Bushman diorama'. I briefly discuss the origins and production of the casts that were to take a central position in *Miscast* and criticism of the exhibition.

Louis Péringuey, director of SAM from 1906 to 1924, initiated a project in 1907 to make life-casts of "pure specimens of the Hottentot and Bushman races" (Davison 2001:10-12)<sup>116</sup>. Péringuey was working within the paradigmatic anthropology of the time, engaged with salvaging and capturing knowledge, records, material culture and human remains of those 'races' considered destined for extinction due to the march of Western civilization. From its late nineteenth-century inception the academic discipline of anthropology was founded on social Darwinism, with social scientists undertaking ambitious projects to discover social laws in human evolutionary development<sup>117</sup>. Studying human bodies and cultural expressions, many hoped to show that

<sup>115</sup> Pippa Skotness was born in Johannesburg to Thelma and Cecil Skotnes, the latter a significant South African artist, founder of the Amadlozi group (1961). Cecil Skotnes was cultural officer and influential mentor at the Polly Street Art Centre, Johannesburg from 1952 until 1966, one of the few places black artists could receive training under apartheid. Pippa Skotnes holds a Master of Fine Art and Doctor of Literature degrees, and she is currently professor of Fine Art and the director of the Centre for Curating the Archive at the University of Cape Town (Skotnes 2017).

<sup>116</sup> He was motivated by Cambridge anthropologist A. C. Haddon's emphasis on the urgent need to conduct research and collect data of the "rapidly diminishing" peoples who represented "very primitive varieties of mankind" (Haddon cited in Davison 2001:10-11). Péringuey was an amateur scientist and collected skulls that he sent to London for morphological analysis in the hope of establishing physical differences between the "Bush" and "Khoikhoi" people (Davison 1996:11).

<sup>117</sup> During the nineteenth century two distinct disciplines of academic study were institutionalised in European academe, marking the distinction between people with documented history (Westerners and/or people considered white) and those without (non-

humanity is composed of different ‘races’ which evolved in a universal process of development from simple (earlier) to more complex (later) forms (Marcus & Fischer 1986:17; Errington 1998:11). Between 1907 and 1924 the museum modeller, James Drury, produced plaster moulds from 68 people, including 14 convicts (Davison 1996:12)<sup>118</sup>. The final products were displayed in a large glass case from 1911. The naked figures stood isolated, were described as “practically extinct”, and were ‘racially’ classified according to skin colour and anatomical characteristics (Coombes 2003:220)<sup>119</sup>. They were not shown as connected into any socio-political network, least of all to that of the colonial context that had directly influenced their rapid ‘disappearance’ which so alarmed anthropologists and led to the casts being made (Coombes 2003:220). In 1959 the casts were rehoused and contextualised in a diorama depicting an early nineteenth-century camp of |Xam hunter-gatherers in a Karoo setting (Davison 1996:11;2001:3). The accompanying text reaffirmed the rhetoric of extinction, but unlike with the earlier presentation, did make reference to the culture and lifestyle of the Bushmen. It also stated clearly that the plaster casts had been made from living individuals (Coombes 2003:222). The diorama became one of the most popular exhibitions in the South African Museum, and postcards of the diorama were produced until the 1970s<sup>120</sup>.

It is important to note the significance of the diorama’s location in a natural history museum where the casts were exhibited alongside taxidermy animals, fossils and dioramas of extinct mammals and dinosaurs. Excluded from the museums of art and culture where white settler objects and artworks were exhibited, in the country’s first Natural History Museum (founded in the mid-1800s) the Bushmen become the antithesis of culture, that is, became nature itself. Positioned within an episteme of socio-evolutionism, the Bushmen were imaged as stagnated at humanity’s infancy, lagging far behind the white man who had progressed to achieve the highest stage of humankind’s development, measured by science and by the ability to produce works of fine art which exist solely for aesthetic enjoyment and contemplation. Like the earlier arrangement of the casts, the diorama continued to provide ‘evidence’ for arguments of the alleged ‘racial’ and cultural superiority of Europeans, during those decades in which expanding apartheid legislation allowed an increasingly

Westerners and/or people considered not white). *Volkskunde*, later sociology, was used to study the former and *Völkerkunde*, later anthropology, to study the latter. By the end of that century, physical anthropology was established as an academic discipline distinct from cultural anthropology, or ethnography, and focused on studying the bodies and races of non-Western peoples.

<sup>118</sup> Drury was instructed by Péringuay to find “pure specimens”, with women more desirable than men (Coombes 2003:217). The chosen women had to exhibit steatopygia and enlarged *labia minora*, of which Drury had to obtain extensive measurements of both male and female genitalia, and ideally, produce mouldings to be added to the final statues. Taking the measurements and making the mouldings were processes which are aptly described by Coombes (2003:217) as involving “a hideous degree of humiliating scrutiny and manhandling”. The casts were later painted in the museum studio and, consistent with the emphasis on physical anthropology and perpetuating the stereotypes of the San’s racial primitiveness, the casts were exhibited without clothing.

<sup>119</sup> This approach was typical of physical anthropology and its obsessive scrutiny of the body’s surface to make visible the ‘facts’ of race, a paradigm and project rejected by European and American anthropologists between the early-to-mid twentieth century in favour of functionalist and structuralist models. The emphasis on race would, however, continue in South Africa under apartheid after its rejection in Europe (see discussion below).

<sup>120</sup> The diorama was taken down in 2001 and its future in post-apartheid South Africa remains undecided.

exploitative domination of black South Africans. Commenting on the general representation of the Bushmen in South African museums in the late twentieth century, Skotnes (1996:17; 2002:161) writes that exhibits focused predominantly on the physical characteristics of the Bushmen as distinct ‘racial’ type and “timeless, ahistorical hunter-gatherers”<sup>121</sup>. Bushmen cultural traditions, their intellectual legacy and oral history – of which there exists a wealth of evidence in university and museum archives – were not displayed or foregrounded, and neither was a colonial history of violence and extermination (Skotnes 2002:161). Skotnes’ (2002:161) aims thus included a visual confrontation with the diorama, and putting “both ‘archive’ and ‘storeroom’ on display”. Given these historical and contextual factors, an exhibition aimed at interrogating the discursive production of the Bushmen and the violence and omissions permeating this historic knowledge project, was potentially timeous and of great value. How this was executed was, however, the dominant cause of the controversy, criticism and pain it effected.

### **Grey areas, c.1999. Various artists and exhibitions**

Writing within a post-apartheid context, Atkinson (1999:13) notes the dearth of local discursive material on issues pertaining to the politics of representation in contemporary South African art, particularly as such discussions became more contentious as the old regime gave way to the new. With the end of the cultural boycott the work of South African artists was increasingly exhibited abroad, and a catalogue essay for the Oslo exhibition *Contemporary Art from South Africa* became a catalyst for renewed and intensified debate about “cultural ownership and representational aesthetics” (Atkinson 1999:16)<sup>122</sup>. An essay by curator Okwui Enwezor, and consequent written responses by artists and critics, initiated heated exchanges in the media and email communication<sup>123</sup>.

In ‘Reframing the Black Subject’, Enwezor positions his argument in the context of South Africa as a new nation, emerging from centuries of racist oppression and exploitation of its indigenous inhabitants by a white minority whose authority and privilege was guaranteed by the ethnic nationalism of the apartheid state. The country,

<sup>121</sup> Advertisers and film-makers further exploited this stereotype to perpetuate, according to Skotnes (1996:17), “an image of the Bushmen as cast out of time, out of politics and out of history – **miscast**” (bold in original).

<sup>122</sup> The essay was first published in the catalogue of the exhibition *Contemporary art from South Africa*, curated by Merith Hope in 1997. The exhibition featured the work of Andries Botha, Ernst de Jong, Geoffrey Grundlingh, David Koloane, William Kentridge, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Velaphi Mzimba, Patrick Ngobeni, Helen Sebidi, Penny Siopis, Martin Tose, Diane Victor and Lukas van Vuuren. The essay was brought to the attention of South African art community by critic Kendell Geers, who published a review article, ‘Dangers in foreign curating’, in *The Star* newspaper’s cultural supplement (Atkinson 1999:17).

<sup>123</sup> Enwezor is a Nigerian-born curator, writer and art critic who predominantly resides in the USA and Europe. Since the late 1990s he has contributed significantly to exposure in the West of contemporary art from the Global South, and from Africa in particular. In 1993 he co-founded *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*. From 1996, he has curated numerous international exhibitions, often of grand scale and focused on the economic, socio-political contexts of art-making in a postcolonial, globalised world. Among other positions, Enwezor was director of the Second Johannesburg Biennale (1997); between 1998 and 2002 he was artistic director of *Documenta 11*, the quinquennial contemporary art showcase in Kassel, Germany; in 2015 he was appointed curator of the Venice Biennale. From 2011 to 2018 Enwezor was the director of Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany.

according to him, was a “nation seeking a new identity, a new sense of self, new images, new geographies with which to ballast its strategic and mythological coherence and unity” (Enwezor 1997:22). As this new nation transitions to democracy the black body has been appropriated “as subject and prop in both the political and cultural expressions of the ‘New South Africa’” (Enwezor 1997:22). He identifies this in expressions of the ANC’s nationalist project of the ‘Rainbow Nation’, and in the work of white South African curators and artists who had used historical images of black subjects. Enwezor (1997:22,28) argues that, having lost the unquestioned authority granted by the apartheid state, these artists’ post-emancipation identity struggles found expression in the “anxious repetition” and “almost obsessive usage of old photographic images of Africans” or “ethnographic tourist postcards with near-naked women in a state of colonial arrest”. To produce their work, he writes, they had extracted “the black figure from the debased image-bank of the former apartheid state” (Enwezor 1997:22). According to him this is seen in the practice of artists like Penny Siopis, Lien Botha, Wayne Barker, Gunther Herbst, Candice Breitz and Pippa Skotnes. The struggle over the meaning for identity in post-apartheid South Africa therefore centres on “who controls the representational intentionality of the body politic, especially its archives of images, symbolic and literal”, and more specifically, the “control over the black body... its frame of analysis, the projection site in which its image is refreshed with the new insight of a suddenly untroubled social relation” (Enwezor 1997:23,25).

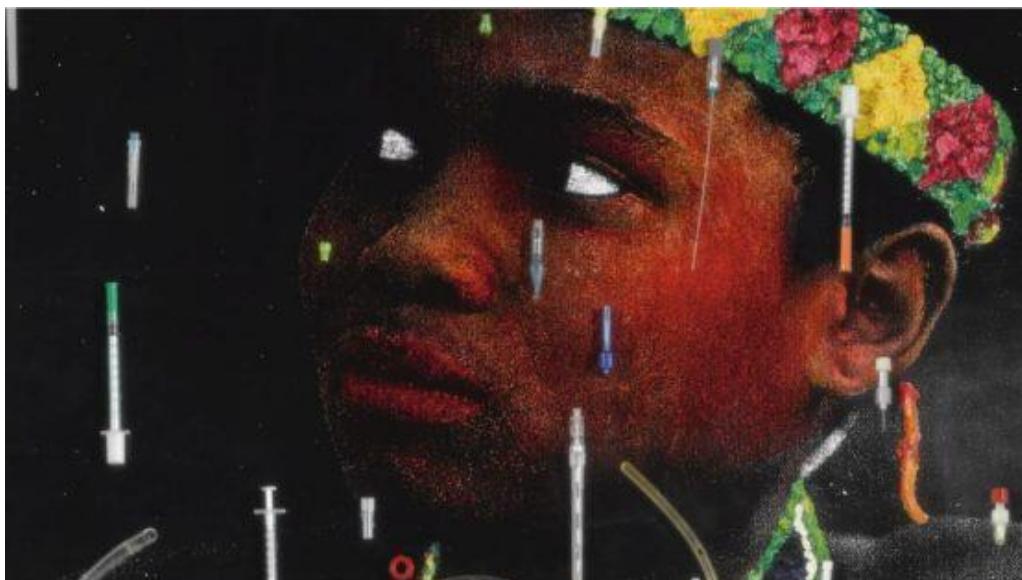


Fig. 3.3. Penny Siopis, 1995, *South African postcard ii* (detail). Oil paint and medical objects on laminated photocopy on board, 114 by 76cm.  
(Enwezor 1997:34).

Enwezor’s hard-hitting critique placed the question of the right of white artists to represent black bodies at the centre of the debate. Respondents and contributors to *Grey Areas* challenged the notion that representing

others constitutes silencing or even speaking for them. Artists and art critics also took issue with the idea that an artwork (signifier) corresponds to the person (signified) represented and can therefore harm, insult or objectify that person or others like her or him. This raises questions about artistic intention, assumptions about viewer perspectives and preferred readings of artworks, topics that also emerge in criticism of Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*.

***Exhibit B.* 2010 – 2016. Brett Bailey. Various venues.**

**Nineteenth-century human exhibits and description of *Exhibit B***

*Exhibit B* is the work of Brett Bailey, South African artist, playwright, designer, installation maker and director of performance company Third World Bunfight<sup>124</sup>. Appearing under the titles *Exhibit A* and *Exhibit B* (often together referred to as *Exhibit B*) in different countries between 2010 and 2016, the productions appropriate the format of nineteenth-century exhibitions of live Africans<sup>125</sup>.



Figure 3.4. Brett Bailey, *The Missing link, Exhibit B*, 2014. Installation and theatre production, Edinburgh, Scotland. Photograph by Murdo MacLeod. (Bailey 2014).

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<sup>124</sup> Bailey is described by Anton Krueger (2014:2) as “among the most consistently innovative, intelligent, mind and soul-bending artists from South Africa – and, actually, the world...”. Bailey’s productions have shown across Europe, Africa and Australia and won numerous awards.

<sup>125</sup>A list of venues and dates for performances of *Exhibit A* and *Exhibit B* can be found at the Third World Bunight website (2015).

Between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Africans – and other colonised peoples – were exhibited individually or in groups or as performing troupes, at international exhibitions as well as in zoos and private salons. From 1851, international exhibitions (or World Fairs) were mounted for the purposes of entertainment, nation building, education and furthering notions of ‘racial’ difference that came to play an increasingly large role in social theory and in European ‘common sense’<sup>126</sup>. Such fairs introduced visitors to the latest technological developments, and actively promoted national pride and European imperialism. The French were the first colonial power to exhibit living people at a fair, in villages installed at the Paris Exposition of 1878, a practice then copied in the USA and in other European colonial states, continuing into the early twentieth century (Coombes 1994:63)<sup>127</sup>. Showcases representing European colonies and exhibitions of colonised peoples, their material culture and technology, functioned to promote and justify colonialism, and displays were often mounted with assistance from anthropologists (Rydell 1998:48). As Lindfors (1999) and other scholars have shown, the height of colonialism coincided with, and stimulated, an appetite for exoticism, and throughout Europe, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA), audiences paid to see colonial subjects exhibited or performing – with varying degree of agency and remuneration – in a variety of locales and productions, from battle re-enactments, to singing and dancing troupes, to freak shows and in zoos alongside animals.

Upon the popular platform of international exhibitions and through new developments in print technology, a genre of popular anthropology was produced and widely publicised amongst metropolitan and settler colonial societies (Poignant 1992:66). At the exhibitions and through visually enticing educational, leisure or commercial publications the discourses of science and fantasy, edification and mass entertainment intersected (Coombes 1994:63). The people exhibited were usually grouped according to the ethnic or ‘racial’ categories designated by anthropologists and colonial administrations. On the fairgrounds, such persons were contained within demarcated areas or structures where they were displayed in a manner deemed traditional and of their tribal grouping. As with anthropological photographs and ethnographic accounts of the same period, colonised peoples were presented as belonging to exotic tribes existing outside history, often achieved by editing signifiers of modernity or Western influence from images or performances produced for white viewers. Such images and displays served to confirm European racial and cultural superiority and glorified the aggressive industrialisation and imperial policies of European nation states.

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<sup>126</sup> The first of the international showcases or world’s fairs was the Crystal Palace exhibition held in London in 1851, and its official title, the ‘Great exhibition of the works of industry of all nations’ makes clear its goals of displaying together the latest technological innovations and finest cultural products of different nations.

<sup>127</sup> The practice disappeared from European fairs after the 1930s, but continued in South Africa, most notably at the Empire Exhibition in Johannesburg in 1936 and Van Riebeeck Festival Fair in Cape Town in 1952 (Rassool & Witz 1996:359).

Several of *Exhibit B*'s tableaux resembled these historic exhibits and many of its critics asked how it differed from its colonial counterparts. According to the website of Third World Bunfight (*Exhibit B*, 2015), the *Exhibit B* exhibition was a “human installation” charting a river of racism that runs through the ethnographic displays, human zoos and scientific racism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and in the current dehumanising policies towards immigrants in various parts of the world”. In each of its thirteen striking *tableaux vivants* created in individual spaces, one or two “performers who identify themselves as black” (Anon 2015) stand motionless and silent, making eye contact with spectators who encounter each tableau and performer one-on-one. Each performer plays a specific character that represents a colonised people, in installations that each depict actual situations of abuse. The installations are based on Bailey's archival research on atrocities under German rule in Namibia (German West Africa) and in the Congo under Belgian and French rule. One tableau focuses on racial segregation under apartheid, and another depicts Sarah Baartman's public display in England and France (Fig. 3.4).

To locate this history in the present, Bailey turned to the contemporary status and experiences of asylum seekers and immigrants in the European Union (Kruger 2013:4). *Exhibit B* therefore includes African refugees and immigrants, who are displayed in tableaux labelled *Found objects*. These tableaux either reference nineteenth-century ethnological displays or depict the deaths of African refugees or immigrants who resisted deportation (Fig. 3.5)<sup>128</sup>. Each installation is titled and accompanied by descriptive text that provides historical information and details of the person(s) represented. Furthermore, to highlight the role of the viewer in the meaning of the work, the various media listed for each work include “spectator(s)”.

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<sup>128</sup> Although shifts in individual installations occurred, with alterations often made to speak more directly to the location of a performance, thirteen narratives or characters were constants in the work (see Vlachos 2014).



Fig. 3.5. Brett Bailey, *Exhibit B (Found object #1: Ghanaian Immigrant)*, 2015. Installation and theatre production. (*Exhibit B* 2015).

*Exhibit B* was received with great critical acclaim, but its various international performances also elicited objections, condemnation and protest action, particularly from people of the African diaspora. Bailey was accused of reproducing colonial displays, further denigrating and exploiting colonised peoples and causing their descendants humiliation and pain. Posters produced for protests in London in 2014 called *Exhibit B* “[t]he most racist show on earth” and “[a] work of unparalleled prejudice masquerading as art”<sup>129</sup>. In response Bailey insists that *Exhibit B* was not intended to produce fear, hatred or prejudice, but undertook instead an excavation of the machinations of racism, its historic roots in the colonial era and its contemporary manifestation in European Union policies towards immigrants, which he described as racist and xenophobic (Bailey 2014). For art historian Yvette Greslé, however, the show was unethical in its use of black bodies to represent black history and trauma. “If your intent is to subvert the long history of human zoos, why are you still using Black bodies? Why not address the white gaze?”, tweeted Mikki Kendall@Karnythia (cited in Greslé 2014).

#### The conception of *Exhibit B* and Manichean allegory of colonialism

In a public interview during the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, Bailey provides insight into the significance of archival visual material to *Exhibit B*’s origin. Bailey notes that in 2010, when given free rein to produce a show for the Vienna Festival, he had already been “tossing around this idea ... of a human

<sup>129</sup> The full text reads: “Barbican and Bailey Present. A work of unparalleled prejudice masquerading as art. *Exhibit B* The most racist show on earth. Roll up! Roll up! For only £20! See black people. Exhibited in chains and cages. It’s savage! It’s unhuman! It’s barbaric! This show must not go on! Good old-fashioned European clownialism[sic]” (reproduced in Greslé 2014).

zoo, an ethnographic spectacle" (cited in Krueger 2013:3). When asked about the genesis of the work, he recounts his impressions and experience of his discovery in 2010 of Berndt Lindfors's (1999) edited volume *Africans on stage: studies in ethnological show business*, which focused on the spectacles of human display discussed above. Bailey recounts being captivated by the book's cover image, a photograph of Guillermo Antonio Farini, Canadian-born acrobat, inventor and circus entertainer (Fig. 3.6). "It's exquisite" Bailey says of the image, "I just wanted to be that guy" (cited in Krueger 2012:4). This response offers an insightful frame for investigating Bailey's relationship to (the subject of) *Exhibit B*.

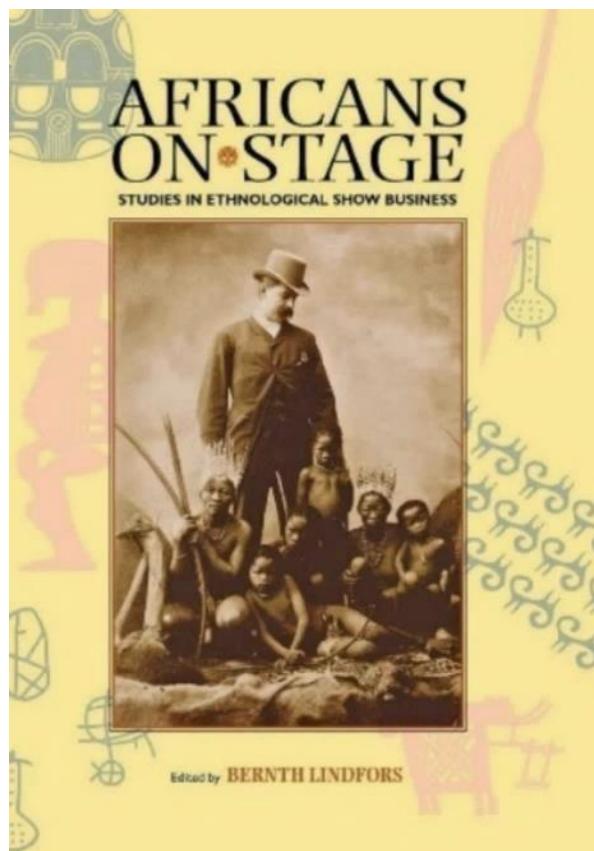


Fig. 3.6. *African Pygmies*, [S.a.]. Black-and-white photograph. Cover illustration of *Africans on stage: studies in ethnological show business*, 1999. Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. (Lindfors 1999).

The photograph depicts Farini towering, in suit and top hat, over a group of six crouching and reclining Bushmen, which he exhibited as 'pygmies', 'earthmen' or 'yellow dwarfs', in Britain and the USA during the nineteenth century (Fig. 3.6). The image presents an archetypal illustration of the colonial Manichean allegory

which Adbul JanMohamed (1985) describes as a field of binary oppositions that ultimately confirms the imagined superiority of the European and presumed inferiority of the Other<sup>130</sup>.

For the studio-produced photograph the Bushmen were arranged on animal skins in the lower half of the image and they mirror the white male standing erect. In juxtaposition, their semi-naked, dark bodies signify nature to his culture, infancy to his maturity, subordination and dependence to mastery, and primitivism to modernity. The photograph constructs a dynamic exchange of gazes, which in turn confirm the subjectivity (or its absence) of the different actors: Farini gazing down at 'his' troupe and the Bushmen gazing at the viewer outside the frame. As onlookers, the viewer's gaze confirms both the mastery of the white man and subservience of the Bushmen.

Bailey's recounted response to the image reveals the success of this composition to excite, seduce and invite white idealised identification with the modern and sophisticated male defined here by its binary opposite<sup>131</sup>. This response may further reveal the white viewer's experience of his subjectivity being affirmed by the gaze of the Bushmen who are presented as Farini's docile subjects. For Bailey – as I will show below – the creation and production of *Exhibit B* is a 'working through' of his own response as a white to colonial atrocities, something he seems to hope his work will facilitate in others. What is, however, not present in his response to the image is the conception of an embodied gaze that, unlike his, does not identify with Farini but finds resonance with the experience of the Africans in the image. The inability to imagine or address different responses to colonial depictions of Africans became a point of contestation in each of the debates discussed here and is central to debates about subject appropriation in design.

### 3.3 Key points of the debates

#### Perpetuating the colonial ethnographic gaze

A central charge brought against the artists and curators was that of perpetuating colonial modes of representing Africans as primitive and subjecting the black body to a voyeuristic (white) gaze. Despite their

<sup>130</sup> In 'The economy of Manichean allegory: the function of racial difference in colonial literature', JanMohamed (1985:63) writes that "[t]he dominant model of power- and interest-relations in all colonial societies is the Manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native. This axis in turn provides the central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist literary representation: the Manichean allegory - a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object".

<sup>131</sup> His full response to the book, as relayed to Krueger, was: "[W]hat I found really captivating was the image on the front of the book, which was a guy with a toothbrush moustache and a bowler hat, and a brown, rough sort of suit. And he's standing there like this well-built chap, and the Hottentots are arranged around him and they're reclining in a sort of Victorian pose. It's exquisite—I just wanted to be that guy, and I was like "Oh god, I want to do something like that, just to ruffle some feathers" (Bailey cited in Krueger 2013:3-4).

post-apartheid context, the style and technologies employed, their intentions and liberal convictions, the artists and their work are accused of perpetuating the violence and stereotyping they seek to challenge. For many, the photographs of Hilton-Barber and the ways that Skotnes and Bailey displayed or quoted colonial modes of exhibiting African bodies, too closely resembled colonial tropes constitutive of unequal power relationships between white and black, subject and object of the gaze. As also noted in Enwezor and Olu Oguibe's (1997) criticism of Candice Breitz, Minette Vari and Penny Siopis' work, the deconstructive aims and conceptual strategies failed to be appreciated or grasped by many viewers. Related to this charge is the notion of the curator or theatre maker who uses black colonial histories and archival material as raw material for his or her creative expression or socio-political critique, without regard for the ethical implications and affective repercussions for contemporary black people. Is it possible for artists and designers to use colonial representations of Africans or references to those images and imaging technologies to unsettle, challenge and demonstrate the violence of that gaze, without perpetuating its objectification and violence? Littlefield Kasfir (1997:6-8) asks whether it is "ethical or pragmatically advisable to objectify objectification itself in this manner?" How can artists use images of (other) people's traumatic histories to transform, inform and address contemporary issues without re-traumatising the victims and their descendants (Coombes 2003:236)? To address these questions, I provide a brief discussion of the notion of the ethnographic gaze and anthropological photography and its fraught relationship with colonialism and nineteenth-century sciences of 'race'<sup>132</sup>.

### **Ethnography, photography and colonialism**

Commenting on Hilton-Barber's defence of his *Initiation* series as both a documentary and aesthetic project, Richards (1999:357) alerts us to the conflict between, on the one hand, the politically tense, socially fragmented public sphere of the postcolony, and on the other, the quintessentially modernist ideals of both artistic autonomy and documentary (photographic) truth. The latter has a burdened and painful history and continues to cause debate around subject appropriation and objectification, particularly when white artists use photography to depict black people, their embodied culture and beliefs. Whether producing new photographs or using colonial images, the relationship between white and black, artist and subject can easily echo unequal colonial power dynamics and harmful stereotypes (Harris 1998:20). This is particularly so when

<sup>132</sup> From the 1980s scholars of anthropology, art history, photography, cultural and gender studies, postcolonial and critical race theory studied colonial photographic archives exploring, among others: the role of photography in misrepresenting and stereotyping non-Western peoples; the relationship between colonialism and photography (Landau 2002; Hine and Sampson 2002; Hartmann, Silvester & Hayes 1998) and the relationship between photography, anthropology and 'sciences' of race (Edwards 1992; Banta & Hinsley 1986; Pinney 2011). Elizabeth Edwards (2001) and Deborah Poole (2005) have focused on the international production and circulation of anthropological images as part of a broader visual economy. Poole (2005) further presents a critical overview of scholarship on colonial photographic archives and, as I explore in more depth in Chapter four, argues for the potential of visual technologies to unsettle and produce a surplus of meaning, opening potential for readings alternative to those intended by colonial photographers.

contemporary images resemble or evoke photographs used and/or created by nineteenth and early twentieth century social scientists.

Ethnography and anthropology developed as academic disciplines in the second part of the nineteenth century, within the context of rapid industrialisation, consolidation of European nation states, aggressive imperial expansion and the emergence of new scientific studies of the earth's human inhabitants in terms of race (Van Robbroeck 2006:65; Errington 1998:8). Within this context, Clifford (1988:24) holds that the study of "ethnographic scholarship cannot ultimately be understood in isolation from the more general political-epistemological debates about the writing and representation of 'Otherness'". Through a study of photography's relationship with the social sciences, particularly biological or physical anthropology, it is possible to consider the role it played in the development of racial theories and prejudice (Hight and Sampson 2002:3). According to Eleanor Hight and Gary Sampson (2002:1-2) colonial photographic archives evidence the production of "a dynamic rhetoric of racial and ethnographic difference between white Europeans and Americans and non-European 'races' and 'places'".

Photographic technology's close association with modernity, science, truth and objectivity made it an apt instrument for documenting and facilitating the work of anthropologists and ethnographers<sup>133</sup>. The use of this technology for documenting and classifying the world's inhabitants according to 'racial' and ethnic categories exemplifies both the Enlightenment project's totalising drive to categorise and systematise, and its Cartesian faith in instrumental reason. It further points to a modernist faith in the one-to-one relationship between the signifier and the signified, and a universal language of (photo)realism.

Like colonial discourse, the discipline of ethnography and the use of anthropological photographs of Africans focused on the perceptible – in this case the black body – as distinguishing feature of the native subject (Harris 1998:21). In ethnographic writing and images, black bodies became texts or surfaces to be penetrated for deeper, abstract meaning by the Western scientist who, it was believed, could understand natives better than natives could understand themselves (Poole 2005:160). From its beginnings and seen in studies that predate

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<sup>133</sup> Between 1860 and 1920 anthropological still-photography was deployed to define and classify racial types (Harris 1998:21; Edwards 1992: 3). Individuals were selected for documentation according to physiognomic traits understood (and outlined by European scholars) as representative of their respective tribes, and images of a characteristic specimen would in tautological fashion become an iconic reference for measuring the typicality of other tribespeople (Broeckmann 2008:148). This does not suggest a blanket and absolute faith in the empirical power of photography, and from the start anthropologists producing and using photographs had to "reconcile disciplinary norms of evidence and evolutionary models of race with the peculiar temporality of the photograph" (Poole 2005:161). This period saw shifts in anthropology from fervent pursuit of racial order, and photography's capacity to capture and represent 'racial fact', and suspicion about the medium's capacity to convey the imperceptible aspects of culture (Poole 2005: 161).

the camera, Poole (2005:164) writes, “race was about revealing – or making visible – what lay hidden underneath the untidy surface details - the messy visual excess - of the human, cultural body”.

### Reinforcing and perpetuating exploitative colonial relationships and stereotypes

Patricia Davison (1996:10), assistant director of SAM at the time of *Miscast*, writes that the exhibition engaged “the difficulty of representing these relationships without unintentionally reinforcing misconceptions or indulging in yet another form of cultural exploitation”. Here Davison sets out one of the challenges of the exhibition for which Skotnes repeatedly came under fire: reinforcing the abusive relationships she hoped to interrogate and expose. Similar charges were laid against Brett Bailey, Penny Siopis and Candice Breitz. According to Enwezor, Siopis’ collaged ethnographic postcards are “over-aestheticised” and because the postcards remain “untroubled” they are once again “vessels for pleasurable consumption” (Fig. 3.3). Enwezor (1997:35) argued that assemblages in Candice Breitz’s *Rainbow Series* produced a “degenerate form of African womanhood – without body, without name, the image of an image” (Fig. 3.4). The assemblages – postcard images of black women spliced with white women from pornographic magazines – presumably explored tensions underlying the discursive construction of the new South Africa. For Enwezor (1997:35), however, it lacked awareness of white women’s complicity in the historical exploitation of black women.



Fig. 3.7. Candice Breitz, *Rainbow series #1*, 1996. C-print mounted on Plexiglas, 152.5 x 101.6 cm. (Candice Breitz, 2018).

Unlike Breitz's work, Hilton-Barber's was perceived to lack a clear critical agenda, and the work was accused of sentimentalising and commodifying "aestheticised 'racial 'otherness'" (Atkinson 1999:15). His photographic process was also underscored by a power imbalance where the white, adult photographer had the authority (granted by another adult male) to photograph the black child initiates<sup>134</sup>.

Hilton-Barber was accused of depicting the initiates as insentient and barbaric Others which, according to Richards (1999a:355), "crosses another powerful but dubious Western cultural tradition, namely representing the contemporary 'other' as specimen – primitive, timeless, or at any rate, ahistorical, before our time, and exotic"<sup>135</sup>. The recurrence of the phrase 'noble savage' doubly anchors the exhibition's title in associations with centuries-old stereotypes, ranging from beauty and exoticism to violence and barbarism. The choice to depict the initiates who were his subject matter in black and white may suggest the objectivity of documentary journalism, a familiar genre to South African viewers, as elsewhere. However, Hilton-Barber's decisions to shoot in soft, low light, to exploit the effects of light and shade on form, and to enhance rhythm and balance through cropping and composition, produced objects that are of decidedly artistic quality. Several of the images evoke the sensual photographs of naked or semi-naked Africans by Leni Riefenstahl or Alfred Duggan-Cronin, which blur the lines between ethnography, fine art and eroticism<sup>136</sup>.

Publication of pictures of naked children raised questions about pornography, sexism and racial mockery, no doubt fuelled by the captioning of photographs published in the *Sunday Star* (Richards 1999a:358)<sup>137</sup>. Critics further noted double standards on nudity, raising the objection that black, but not white, nudity<sup>138</sup>, can be exhibited, published and sold openly under the banner of education or as tourist memorabilia<sup>139</sup>. The nakedness or semi-nakedness of some actors in *Exhibit B* and the Bushmen in reproductions of archival images

<sup>134</sup> Some raised the issue that he had personal connections to the site of the initiation school, and indirectly to the principal who organised and conducted the school (Dubin 2012:163). These factors tipped the scales in Hilton-Barber's favour and made it relatively easy for him to access and record a sacred and secret ceremony from which outsiders, particularly white people, are usually barred.

<sup>135</sup> According to Richards (1999a:358), the works "represent 'tribe' as wildlife - fair game for the dominant culture. This species of trophy-hunting is a familiar cultural pastime in the neo-colonies".

<sup>136</sup> Riefenstahl, a German film-maker and photographer, produced photographs and books about the Nuba in the 1970s, and Duggan-Cronin published studies of Bavenda women in the late 1920s.

<sup>137</sup> Richards (1999a:357-358) notes the changes in Hilton-Barber's captions according to context of display: in the gallery the captions provide light entertainment; in the *Sunday Star Magazine* captions are sensationalist and titillating; and in the later publication in *Staffrider*, captions are terse and conform to Fine Art conventions.

<sup>138</sup> Hilton-Barber responded by calling chauvinistic objections that he would never show white bodies in the same manner as black bodies, saying that his decision rather reflected "apartheid regulations that he did not create, but which dictated what could be openly shown" (Dubin 2012:163).

<sup>139</sup> The ethnographic gaze, which sanctioned the production and publication of naked photographs of non-white peoples for scientific and educational purposes, was quickly adopted by entertainment, leisure and tourism industries which reproduced anthropological or created quasi-ethnographic and soft pornographic images of indigenous people for sale as postcards, *cartes-des-visites* and in magazines such as *National Geographic* (see Alloula 1986; Van Eeden 2009). Similar images of white persons – especially women – would and continue to be classified as pornography. This point also emerged in debate about Breitz's *Rainbow series*.

used in *Miscast*, was a point of contestation for many who accused the artists of simply reproducing colonial representations. Commenting on the display of archival images in *Miscast*, Hunter Sixpence, Public Relations Officer for the KDT at D'Kar, northern Botswana, said the exhibition left KDT delegates with "painful hearts" and stressed that it's against San culture to "see nudity together as mother, father, child" (cited in Land 1996:9). Selinah Magu, another KDT representative, seconded this, saying, "showing these naked bodies is a very bad, bad thing" (cited in Land 1996:9). For the Khoisan, there are complex rules that govern who may speak of what, how, and to whom, a factor that was not considered, or did not influence the curatorial decisions of the curator (Coombes 2003:239)<sup>140</sup>.

Many critics accusing *Exhibit B* of racism based their allegation on the exhibition's resemblance to colonial fairs or 'human zoos'. For sociologist Kehinde Andrews (2014) this perpetuated the objectification of the black body which persists as standard trope of contemporary society. "[*Exhibit B*] crosses the line into racial exploitation and abuse, creating a grotesque parody of suffering played out by voiceless black cadavers", Andrews (2014) writes. For Sarah Myers, organiser of a petition to have *Exhibit B* cancelled at London's Barbican theatre, the show is "racial porn" and "about sexual excitement in seeing semi-naked women and men, in bondage, the power of the audience [being in] control, the subjects being objectified, and in short getting off on it and then feeling guilty for getting off on it" (Jamal 2014)<sup>141</sup>. Andrew and Myers point to an objection held by many black critics: the motionlessness of the performers turns their black bodies into objects that are powerless, dead and laid bare for a white gaze that is perverted, voyeuristic, if not sadistic (Joja 2014:86). Several commentators mentioned *The Couple in the cage* (1992), a parody of human zoos by performance artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, as a comparison to *Exhibit B* (Krueger 2013; Greslé 2014). The two artists presented themselves in various public locations in a cage, as aboriginal inhabitants from an island off the Gulf of Mexico, one undiscovered by Columbus. This bogus narrative, their over-the-top performances and dress – a melange of traditional dress, body paint, animal print and accessories such as sneakers, a wrestling mask and belt – were employed to avoid confusion with the historical exhibitions. Their interactions with the audience also served to disrupt the space and create distance between spectator and performer (Greslé 2014). The artists, who "themselves embody histories and lived experience of race", deployed strategies emerging from

<sup>140</sup> It was during consultation with various stakeholders prior to the exhibition that Skotnes (2002: 262-263) realised the contentious nature of some of the historic material associated with the Bushmen. Part of the reluctance of scholars and museum officials to allow contentious items (including the nudity of early body casts and materials featuring genitalia) was the "fear that it might be inadequately contextualised: the dignity of the individual photograph or cast would be insulted, the original humiliation repeated" (Skotnes 2002: 262-263). In negotiating this challenge, Skotnes (1996:16) decided to withhold any photographs of women's genitals from publication and exhibition.

<sup>141</sup> Sara Myers (2014) started a Change.org petition calling on the Barbican to withdraw the piece, stating that: "We, as black African people, do not need to be reminded or re-brainwashed into thinking we are less than. To camouflage this assault behind the mask of a 'respectable' institution such as the Barbican is tantamount to mental terrorism." The petition gathered approximately 23,000 signatures and the performance was cancelled.

the considered, self-reflexive relation to the discourse of race. Most importantly for Greslé (2014), the artists put their own bodies on display in the cage, for her a major difference to Bailey<sup>142</sup>.

### The curator as artist

Contestation over meanings and intentions around the work of most of the artists discussed was related to the failure of their critical or conceptual project to find resonance with some viewers. For respondents to *Exhibit B* and *Miscast*, the methods chosen to interrogate colonial discourse and racism were inadequate, confusing, and at worse, perpetuated historic abuses. Acknowledging that he deals with “difficult and contested territory that is fraught with deep pain, anger and hatred” Bailey developed two devices for producing his excavation (Bailey 2014; Krueger 2013:3). The first is the simultaneous beauty and horror of the installations, the former seductive and inviting of the gaze, while the latter shocks and induces pain, shame and revulsion. The second device is the intense gaze returned by the still, quiet performers. The spectator’s realisation that the person installed is not a mannequin and is gazing back at them would ideally contribute a level of embodied engagement and a deeper realisation of complicity in the work’s meaning.

Bailey’s detractors nevertheless felt that his critique of “human zoos and the objectifying, dehumanising colonial/racist gaze is nothing more than a recreation of those spectacles of humiliation and control” (Bailey, 2014). In a published response, he stated that *Exhibit B*’s actors perform a part and physically characterise an objectified human being (Bailey 2014). The role of spectators in completing each installation further differentiated *Exhibit B* from colonial exhibitions. Bailey (2014) writes that the focus is not the cultural or anatomical difference between spectators and performers, but rather the relationship between them, as supported in the exchanges of the gaze. “It is about looking and being looked at”, he argues (Bailey 2014). Greslé (2014) is not convinced that the performers’ return of the gaze is enough to disrupt objectifying spectatorship since “who decides what it is this gaze means?” Greslé further questions the artist’s assumptions about his viewers. Unlike the ethnographic photographs and world’s fairs displays of Africans which were intended for white, bourgeois consumption, artworks produced and viewed in postcolonial and contemporary spaces are viewed by diverse audience with different perspectives, cultural and social capital to that of the artist. There are no guarantees that audiences will grasp or appreciate the artist’s intentions or conceptual approach.

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<sup>142</sup> Bailey rightfully says that he produced a work of theatre, where actors play roles and characters written by someone else, as is standard practice. Turning the identity of the artist into the prime signifier of the artwork’s meaning is an issue central to the Grey Areas debate and is discussed below.

In line with international developments in curatorship and museology, *Miscast* marked a new departure in South African exhibition making. It brought together different institutions, blurred disciplinary boundaries, and questioned definitions and categories of art, culture and ethnography (Martin 1996:10). In Skotnes' approach to the exhibition, writes former SANG director Marilyn Martin (1996:10), "curatorship itself becomes the creative act". Enwezor (1997:32), however, condemns "Skotnes' attempt to make out of this history an artistic project", arguing that this approach radically disturbed the goals of the project.

Skotnes' aims were to interrogate the ways in which the visual discursively produced its object, and to expose how this knowledge was fundamentally intertwined with colonial power and provided justification for the human rights violations displayed (Coombes 2003:230). It further aimed at alerting viewers to the act of viewing and their own complicity in the discursive production of the Bushmen as topic and construct. For Coombes (2003:237) it missed the mark and many of its clues went unappreciated due to its assumption that viewers would be well versed in the histories, institutions and disciplines deconstructed, and familiar with conceptual art practices and postmodern museological strategies. Noting that the exhibition stimulated an amount of hostile reaction, Skotnes reflects that "very few people understood the exhibit as installation art" (2002: 268).

Readings contrary to that intended by artists or curators may be attributed to differences in social and cultural capital, or viewers' unfamiliarity with contemporary museum and artistic practices. For many museum-goers, museums are spaces of learning and the absorption of knowledge, rather than arenas for the critical scrutiny of the exhibits and institutions. For example, the aims of deconstructing existing or traditional modes of representation, particularly of the Bushmen in the SAM diorama, presumes an agreed-on dissatisfaction with the diorama<sup>143</sup>. Furthermore, the goals of works such as *Miscast* and *Exhibit B* are ultimately achieved through viewers' immersive and embodied experience of the exhibition, which makes use of light, sound and the viewers' physical engagement. The challenge for viewers is to mitigate this affecting immersion with their own critical distance, so that they may follow the critique implied in the exposition. Descendants of slaves or people nearly exterminated under colonialism, who still experience discrimination or marginalisation because of their skin colour and ethnicity, may not view such work with aesthetic disinterest<sup>144</sup>.

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<sup>143</sup> The diorama, as viewer and guide feedback over several decades have shown, remained popular with visitors, and had social and political value for descendants of the people and lifestyle depicted. Davison (2001:6) notes that the diorama was regarded by the majority of Khoisan as an accurate depiction and had political value for San groups claiming First Nations status.

<sup>144</sup> Coombes (1996:40) writes that the responses of the descendants of the Bushman may stem from their continued experiences of privation and economic vulnerability in the 'new' South Africa, and argues it is unreasonable to expect such visitors to view with critical distance the graphic evidence of the processes that caused their people's traumatic dispossession.

One of the more contested features of *Micast* was the vinyl tiles covering the second exhibition room, which were printed with reproduced newspaper articles and cartoons, government documents and archival photographs mainly featuring Bushmen individuals<sup>145</sup>. "The intention, as with other parts of the exhibit, was to make the experience of viewing active, rather than passive" (Skotnes 2002: 266). Many Khoi, Khoisan and Griqua commentators expressed distress and pain at having to "walk over" their ancestors (Coombes 2003:239). Selinah Magu (cited in Lane 1996:9) of KDT said: "I was walking on my own people; their suffering is too important to have been shown on the floor. This is a big insult on us; will this be how our children remember us[sic]?" Curatorial strategies intended for critical and conceptual effect were clearly not interpreted as such and instead horrified some viewers, causing pain and deep upset (Coombes 2003:238). Here it is clear that although consultation with representatives did occur, engagement about the details of the displays was not exhaustive, even as it aimed to include and show multiple histories and perspectives.



Fig. 3.8. Pippa Skotnes, *Micast* installation showing printed vinyl tiles, cameras in glass boxes and photographs by Paul Weinberg on the walls, 1996. South African National Gallery, Cape Town. (Coombes 2003:236).

Given the context of mounting pressure around human remains in South African and European museums, the resin-cast body parts exhibited in *Micast* became metonymic of historical trauma (Coombes 2003: 241-242). According to Littlefield Kasfir (1997:8), viewers "objected to the aestheticisation of pain and suffering" as the piled-up body casts were not read as installation art. "Viewers descending from the Bushmen felt that it was further humiliation [and] violation of their right of control over how they are represented" writes Davison

<sup>145</sup> Leading off the main room, the second included an installation of Paul Weinberg's photographs of Bushmen subjects taken between 1984 and 1995 in Botswana, Namibia and Smitsdrift.

(2001:5)<sup>146</sup>. The !HuriKamma Cultural Movement stated that the exhibition reaffirmed their “status as conquered people”, needlessly reminding the Khoisan of past humiliations, which they continue to feel “daily and hourly” (Lane 1996:9). Descendants of the people represented in both *Miscast* and *Exhibit B* acknowledged the truth of the violent and traumatic histories depicted. They objected, however, to the misrepresentation of black history through the omission of historical and contemporary expressions of agency, creativity, resistance and humanity. Seen as primarily concerned with their own aims, white artists and curators were criticised for misrepresenting black history in their exclusive focus on atrocity and violence, and the omission of contemporary issues facing people of colour. Upham (cited in Lane 1996:9), identifies the agenda of *Miscast* as “the white man’s problems”, overriding the pressing concerns and agendas of the contemporary people whose histories form the subject of the exhibition<sup>147</sup>.

The issue of misrepresentation also features large in criticism of Bailey’s choice of topics. Rapper and poet Akala and activist Sarah Myers (2014) both recognise that the events depicted in *Exhibit B* did occur, but argue that the work presents a very restricted view of the black experience under colonialism. For Akala (Onah 2014) the work is not a dialogue on racism and not representative of black experience and history, as it depicts only the “mute suffering” and not the building of civilisations, the struggle for freedom and military mobilising and revolutions that are also part of black history. “The problem people have with it”, he says, “is the continuous singular story about black suffering, disease, poverty, drug dealing and the particular type of white person who’s going to get a sadistic kick from seeing black bodies in human zoos...” (Onah 2014).

### **The ideal subject**

Questions about intentionality, about who the work is made for, and why, were central to all the debates. Numerous critics of the artists and work under discussion stated or intimated that the work was aimed at white audiences, whether to mitigate white guilt, to titillate and entertain, or address a bourgeois academic gaze. “Even if the motives are pure, the vehicle is tainted”, writes Andrews (2014) of *Exhibit B*. “This exhibition reproduces the idea that black people are passive agents to be used as conduits for white people to speak to each other”.

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<sup>146</sup> With reference to the inclusion of Paul Weinberg’s photographs of contemporary San people in the *Miscast* exhibition, Coombes (2003:242) writes that it was insufficient to present images of cultural exchange and modernity to offset those of objectification and victimhood.

<sup>147</sup> In his speech delivered at the *Miscast* forum, Upham characterised the exhibition as tokenistic and patronising as it failed “to explore the systematic dispossession of the Griqua from their land, and the South African government’s alleged continuing neglect of Griqua demands for recognition of their indigenous status, the return of their lands, and compensation” (Cited in Lane 1996:9).

### The ideal viewer: the penitent white subject

In a written statement about *Miscast*, the !Hurikamma Cultural Movement declared: "We are sick and tired of naked Brown people being exposed to the curious glances of rich whites in search of dinner table conversation" (cited in Lane 1996:9). The statement concluded that since it concerned European "manipulations of the image of the Khoisan", the exhibition was "'obviously aimed at white people'" (cited in Lane 1996:9). Commenting on *Exhibit B*, Andrews (2014) argues that the show "invites liberals to feel the 'discomfort' of their colonial history". Here the use of black histories is seen as exploitative and narcissistic because the appropriating artists' own painful responses to colonial history seem their main concern. Many felt the artists were unconcerned with the work's impact on black viewers, as it sought resonance with other penitent white subjects. While addressing colonial atrocity and white guilt, for critics like Akala, the work failed to interrogate white hegemony and authorial power in the present day. According to him, the show is the product of a "white liberal South African ... using the black body to allow middle class white people to masturbate over their own guilt, and say, oh, we're so bad, but we're so powerful!" (Akala cited in Onah 2014).

Critics of Siopsis, Vari, Skotnes and Breitz accuse the artists of using images of black people to come to terms with their own experiences of being white in apartheid South Africa. Marion Arnold (1999:137) views this with empathy, writing that artists constantly have to negotiate the questions "what can I represent? And what language might I use?" These are pertinent questions in a former settler colony where natives and settlers share histories, aspects of cultural heritage and, in numerous cases, ancestors. According to Richards (1999b:171), "a shared history" is a prime reason why white South African artists portray black people or cite the black body in their work. This history, he writes, is "...unevenly shared, yes; unfairly, yes; deniable, no; erasable, no; avoidable, no". In its absence from visual expression "such invisibility" would amount to an "act of denial of obscene proportions" (Richards 1999b:171).

*Grey Areas* respondent Lola Frost (1999: 133) points out that representations of cultural Others may operate as "mediations of guilt", but that "guilt is not the concern of those 'others' who suffered under apartheid, yet who are being represented by these artists". As in the feedback to *Miscast*, the emotion of shame was experienced by many who viewed *Exhibit B* (Krueger 2014:3). Bailey recounts being struck by shame ("the shame of one group of people perpetrated on another") while doing his research and states, "I suppose that's what I'm hoping the audience to take out ... that's how I know the piece works, to bring out shame" (Mills & Salie 2012).

Reviewer Tiffany Jenkins (2014) notes the vogue in theatre making for eliciting feelings of shame and complicity in audiences, exemplified in *Exhibit B*, which focused audience experience of horrendous scenes as

though viewers were somehow complicit. However, to experience shame (as felt by Bailey) out of a realisation of complicity, the spectator must identify with the white aggressor and feel implicated in the exploitation and abuse of the black subjects displayed. The spectator for whom such a shame results in catharsis, enlightenment and even redemption, is assumed the norm, and the norm presumed to be white.

Considering Bailey's reflections on shame in relation to the photograph of Farini and the Bushmen, one may posit that the artist's identification with the white show-maker and his own shame in recognition of complicity, stood in the way of consideration for the experience and perspective of descendants of Farini's Other: those he exhibited. Curatorial strategies implemented to induce feelings of complicity in colonial crimes will have very different effects on viewers who identify with the black subjects and histories exhibited, as was the case when descendants of Bushmen were confronted with the printed vinyl tiles in *Miscast*. A question not asked by the artists is: what about the effect of shame as experienced by black spectators, who identify with the black subject and history exhibited? How and why is it different to that of the artist? (Littlefield Kasfir 1997: 4-6). Enwezor (1997:34) accuses both Skotnes and Breitz of assuming that "we all see the same thing" – according to him a common factor in white representations of African experience. The disregarding of alternative, and specifically black, spectators and interpretations indicates to him the "belief that our gazes are constituted and therefore affirmed and defined by the same regime of looking" (Enwezor 1997:34). In Enwezor's (1997:34) opinion, the black spectator is therefore obliged to identify with the dominant reading, even though such a reading constitutes a racist re-inscription of her or his subjectivity or character. "This is one of the most distinctive markers of privileged whiteness: absence of humility, of a self-reflexive, considered dialogue with subjects who have a direct, historical (and traumatic) relation to racist lineages, overt and insidious," writes Greslé (2014). For Greslé (2014), Bailey's "own complicity in this history is absent from his work"<sup>148</sup>. Much like Skotnes' reflections, Bailey's opinions about the work contained no explicit appreciation of the complexities and implications of the power wielded by the creator of a work deploying black history and black bodies as medium. For both artists, this power originates with the privilege afforded them as white South Africans growing up in a racist state, and secondly, from their status as directors of artworks endorsed locally and abroad by institutions of high art and culture. Absent from their reflections are the myriad covert and overt ways in which these aspects inform the creation of their work and engagement with the archival material, the participants or actors in the projects, and viewers and critics of their work. While the producers

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<sup>148</sup> According to Bailey (2014), having grown up under the racist regime of apartheid ("albeit on the side of privilege"), as an artist he "continually reflect[s] on that system and its ramifications and implications. The UK performers of *Exhibit B* seconded Bailey's words and defended his right to represent black history in their joint statement, 'Exhibit B: is the 'human zoo' racist? The performers respond', published in *The Guardian* (2014). They wrote, "[a]s a white South African, despite not having the lived experience of black people, Brett Bailey recognises that he is not outside of the system that allows for racism to exist" (no author 2014).

of colonial discourse were interrogated, the role of the postcolonial artists and curators in producing their objects was not shown or scrutinised.

### The ideal viewer: the liberal, poststructuralist critic

The need for rigorous and focused analysis of representation and its relationship to interpretation is a theme that runs through the *Grey Areas* volume. Upon close reading it emerges, however, that several of the artists, critics and art historians presume and defend the notion of an ‘ideal viewer’ who can distinguish between art and reality and is able to access and appreciate conceptualism and art as social critique. Artist and writer Sue Williamson (1997:293), for example, argues that Oguibe’s (1997) critique of Breitz and Vari fails to distinguish between the intentions of the artist and his own readings thereof. For Oguibe (cited in Atkinson 1999:22), Minette Vari’s morphing of her own features with that of black women in her giant self-portraits, “objectifies [and] cannibalises them” (Fig. 3.9). In his opinion, rather than empower or empathise with “the Black woman”, for the white artist she is a “dispensable accessory, a body to be appropriated toward fulfilment of [Vari’s] desire” (Oguibe cited in Atkinson 1999:22).



Fig. 3.9. Minette Vari, *Self-portrait #1*, 1995. Digital print on vinyl. 1200 x 600cm. (Garnett 2018).

Williamson (1999:291) contends that “the ideal viewer” has the “sophistication and education” to distinguish between intention and interpretation and is capable of decoding works of art that function as critique. Arnold (1999:37) criticises the conflation of representation and art, arguing that artistic representation is the expression of an idea and the act of giving visible form to an idea. She emphasises that artworks are the products of the imagination and that “art reveals artifice; it discloses the strategies of its origin and as social

documents they bear the signs of their creators, who are members of the body politic" (Arnold 1999:37)<sup>149</sup>. Writing about the use of parody, quotation and intertextuality in Siopis' and Vari's use of images of black women, Frost (1999:134) argues that "these images are intended to critique, not perpetuate, racial abuse. True, some audiences may well not be sophisticated enough to read such critiques...". Williamson, Arnold and Frost predicate their arguments on the premise of "the work of art as critique" (Williamson 1999:291). Their arguments suggest that such work has an ideal reading, if only the reader has the required cultural capital to access and understand that the artist's intention and one's interpretation are not the same thing, and that artistic representation reveals an idea, and not reality.

Bailey (cited in Krueger 2014:4), in response to the question of how his exhibition differed from colonial exhibitions, points out that "it's just theatre ... here you've got people in individual little rooms playing a character. None of those are their real selves, they're playing a role". Bailey clearly distinguishes between signifier and signified: the staging or representation of a human zoo, and an actual one. The artist and critic's ideal viewer therefore understands that the sign is not the equivalent of the object or referent, but that it points to the signifier or mental image evoked by the sign. This ideal reader presumably shares the perspective and cultural capital of liberal arts graduates who, at the time of *Miscast* and the Grey Areas debate, were predominantly white and did not live (with) the psychological, economic and social legacies of racial discrimination. Although these critics subscribe to poststructuralist semiotics, they nevertheless fix and stabilise meaning (that the artwork functions as critique and not mirror) and do not allow for a fluidity that can encompass the readings of viewers who do not share their semiotic paradigm.

Enwezor (1997:34) writes that alternative perspectives that challenge and hold to account the "irrefutably conclusive" readings of 'ideal viewers', often cause resistance and anxiety. This manifested in the apprehensive, hostile and derisory responses that met detractors of *Exhibit B*. An article by author and poet Robert Greig (2014) is peppered with snide remarks insinuating that protesters are over-sensitive, opportunistic and opinionated zealots, their claims unfounded, and that they are unable to identify, understand and respect good art (see also Frost 1999:134 on critics of Siopis, Vari and Skotnes). He writes that it's "no good trying to explain the serious intent" of critically acclaimed art to protesters or "the enraged" (Greig, 2014). Greig (2014) attributes the critics' inability to appreciate the work to their irrational and

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<sup>149</sup> This point is can be contested in that photographs obscure the origins and strategies of their making (see Tagg 1998). Marx's critique that the origins and processes of commodity production are hidden from consumers is equally applicable to artworks as commodities.

traditionalist zealotry, and to their unsophisticated approach to art, which makes them blind to the workings of metaphor, symbolism and parody.

### The sanctity of high art

Opinions such as Greig's reveal the assumed sanctity of artistic authorship and the culture of its institutional protection. Debates around the moral responsibility of the artist and the legitimacy of objections put into question the authorial position of the artist. The latter's contemporary status emerges from the Enlightenment and from the idea of a right of free expression, that is, the idea of a benefit accruing to pursuing creative drives to the limit. This position became upheld by various structures and bodies that constitute the discourse of fine arts and culture and is enshrined in law (Coombe 1997:11)<sup>150</sup>.

As work of avant-garde theatre, *Exhibit B* is directed to an educated middle class and an audience of predominantly "high-culture consumers" (Sieg 2015:265). Large-scale protest against the work, the artist and participating theatres, thus pose a threat to the hegemony of 'high-culture' institutions. Andrews (2014) argues that critique of the "absolution of 'high art' to be morally responsible", is not tolerated due to white cultural hegemony and the power of white privilege. For Greslé (2014) the shouting down, diminishing and ignoring of critics seen in debates about *Exhibit B* occur when such critics are perceived to hold little social, political or economic power<sup>151</sup>. Freedom of expression in South Africa and abroad, writes Richards (1999a:356), is "largely conditioned by the needs of the dominant order", and while it allows for the voice of the individual to be heard, it does not place the act beyond reproach or without moral accountability<sup>152</sup>. In Greslé's (2014) opinion, the Barbican's response to criticism of *Exhibit B* therefore "opens up a space for thinking about cultural institutions in London and their relationship to histories of slavery, colonialism, and contemporary forms of racism". The debates discussed here and in Chapter five present important occasion to interrogate and address the power and anxiety of hegemonic institutions that welcome avant-garde,

<sup>150</sup> According to Coombe (1997:11; see also Ziff & Rao 1997:14), the construction of the author as autonomous individual, all the world available for his taking to give expression to his ideas, affirms the "dialectic of possessive ownership and liberal democracy". She further writes: "These are also the premises about authorship that govern contemporary intellectual property laws, particularly the law of copyright" (Coombe 1997:11).

<sup>151</sup> Sarah Myers (Jamal 2014) argues that black voices and opinions are not given equal legitimacy under the constitutional right to freedom of expression. To Jamal's elicitation of Biko's insistence on freedom of expression in relation to her petition to have *Exhibit B* shut down, she responds: "I agree wholeheartedly with Biko, we can write or create what we wish; and if it is really about freedom of expression then why is it not equal for all? [...] Those in power determine who can say what, who can create what, and whether or not it's heard or seen. [...] I am not against *Exhibit B*, I am against the system that allows it to be shown, but then attempts to silence me and 23,000 people. That is not equality, that is racism - an arm of the beast we call white supremacy. Let's call the monster what it is" (Jamal 2014)

<sup>152</sup> Butler (2004: xvii) writes: "The public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown. Limits of the sayable, of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors" (Butler 2004: xvii).

conceptual critique from within the institution or system, but not from outside, that is from the streets, factories, townships and rural villages.

### Divergent interpretive communities

The violation of cultural property through the publicising and commoditising of a living community's sacred, private ritual by an outsider was chief among the grievances expressed about Hilton-Barber's *Initiation* series (Richards 1999a:355). The photographer responded to this saying that he had "not revealed anything that was not already known ... I merely gave it a visual face" (Dubin, 2012: 163). He further explained that he attempted to document the events he observed, "in a way that would allow the situation to speak for itself" (cited in Dubin 2012:164). The photographer's defence of the project underscores his assumption of an agreed-upon, universal understanding that the photographic signifier mirrors the signified truthfully. His explanations further reveal a modernist faith in objectivity, and either ignorance or misjudgement of the effects of his own agenda and bias, his aesthetic decisions and the complex contexts of reproduction and reception of the interpretation of the work.

For Dubin (2012:164), "Hilton-Barber was probably guilty of one thing: naiveté". His defence, however, also reveals the inability or unwillingness to consider perspectives of, and relationships to, photographic images that differ from his own, a point of critique found in all four of the debates. As explained by Meagan Biese, translator for a group of San representatives, insufficient consideration was given to the different viewing perspectives of those visiting *Micast*, and in particular when the experiences represented were part of the viewers' own histories (Coombes 2003: 239)<sup>153</sup>. When images depict histories or experiences of violence and trauma, sacred and private ceremonies, or spaces of a community or group other than that of the artist, broad consultation about public display is required<sup>154</sup>. As seen with *Micast* and the *Initiation* series, the exhibition and publication of images ran the risk of violating the cultural codes of those represented, exposing sacred practices that are integral to a group and its sense of being in the world. Another point that white artists and critics participating in the four debates do not consider is the significance of ancestors – as represented in or by the histories and images exhibited – to many black viewers. For philosopher Drucilla Cornell (2008:142), photographs may keep open a passage-way between living and dead. "In a deep sense, the dead are allowed to speak to us", she writes (Cornell 2008:142). In response to *Exhibit B*, Minister Hilary Muhammad (Jetblakink

<sup>153</sup> Similar points were raised about white artist Dana Schutz's painting *Open Casket* (2017), exhibited at the Whitney Museum in New York, which caused significant discontent and protest. The painting was inspired by the photograph of African American youth Emmett Till's corpse in an open casket at his funeral. Till was fourteen when he was lynched in the Mississippi Delta in 1955.

<sup>154</sup> In 'Profound Offense', Young (2005:144) asks whether insiders are "reasonably offended when outsiders appropriate content of subject?". This question is deeply problematic as it suggests some universal understanding of what constitutes 'reasonable offense'. His qualifies this, saying that despite differences in "opinion about standards of conduct" between groups, it is "still, in principle [...] possible to say when someone is reasonably offended". This qualification only reinforces the presumption of shared values.

2014), stressed that the representation of black history and experience should be done with careful consideration of the suffering of ancestors. As the ancestors live through contemporary black people, he explained, it is their responsibility to accurately represent “the soul of our ancestors – as those representing we must be the ones to determine how our ancestors’ legacy is portrayed” (Jetblalink, 2014)<sup>155</sup>. What is at stake, he argues, is the “great substance” with which enslaved ancestors emerged from suffering, a substance which has allowed black people to keep “our minds intact” (Jetblalink 2014). This quality, Muhammad (Jetblalink 2014) argues, is guarded by representing “our ancestry the way they desire to be represented, and they don’t desire to be represented in chains, sitting on beds, for soldiers to rape”.

The representation of their ancestors in *Miscast* was also raised by descendants of Bushmen, a point not considered by many white critics. This may be because the tradition of a deep and living relationship with one’s ancestors is foreign to most whites. It is a relationship historically regarded with derision, being frequently dismissed as superstition by Western commentators. What Muhammad’s words make clear is that the contemporary identity, the spiritual and psychological wellbeing of black people, may be intricately bound to their ancestors, and this makes them custodians of their legacy and of its representations on earth, something that Bailey is not. The phrase “our minds intact” is a declaration of Black Consciousness, gained from centuries of struggle against, and emancipation from, dehumanising racial oppression, liberation from subservience and the positioning of blackness as subservient to whiteness. For some critics of *Exhibit B*, a more suitable subject for display would have been the aggressors of the atrocities committed. In a defiant statement and counterpoint to Bailey’s production, Akala (Jetblalink, 2014) offers, as an alternative challenge to racism, a Barbican production using the bodies of white actors to “represent the many thousands of slave masters, or the dead and mutilated white bodies that Africans had to kill in anti-colonial struggles”. For Muhammad (Jetblalink, 2014) what should be on trial are those who subjected “our ancestors to barbarism [and] the holocaust they suffered”.

What these questions and alternative suggestions attempt is to shift the gaze of reviewers and arts institutions that cannot fathom the horror that a show such as *Exhibit B* holds for some contemporary black people. A substitution of the black bodies of humiliated, murdered and tortured slaves, workers, immigrants and prisoners of war with those of whites is one strategy for achieving this. Another strategy of objectors to *Exhibit B*, was to suggest parallels between depictions of black suffering and depictions of Jewish holocaust victims, to reminds us of a tacit agreement that representations of Jewish victims ought not to turn them into objects

<sup>155</sup> The only clue that Muhammad (Jetblalink, 2014) gives to what accurate representation might look like, is the following: “your ancestors are not slaves, your ancestors are kings and queens and representatives of the divine supreme being who went through a holocaust in this Western hemisphere, divinely foretold in the scriptures...”.

of entertainment, decoration or profit. Akala (Onah 2014) counters the argument that Bailey's artistic expression is sanctioned by free speech, with the challenge that the Barbican commission a German artist to produce a "mock holocaust" featuring Jewish victims of the extermination camps. "They wouldn't entertain the ideal!" he exclaims, or if they did, it would not be without consultation with the Jewish community (Onah 2014; see also Andrews 2014). Why, do black critics ask, is the same respect and empathy not afforded those affected by the holocaust of black humans? The evocation of the Jewish holocaust is a cry and demand for the recognition of the lives represented in images of colonialism and slavery as grievable in equal manner to the grievability of Jewish lives. For Akala (Onah 2014), recognition must translate into practice within the public sphere, and all minorities must be afforded the same influence on the representation of their heritage<sup>156</sup>. For Andrews (2014): "The distress at the heart of this episode is that no one organising this exhibition sees this obvious parallel because of the devaluation of black life, suffering and experiences".

### **Artistic intention and the death of the author**

For Atkinson (1999:23), a chief concern in *Grey Areas* was the presumption by critics that they are able to straightforwardly retrieve artistic intention from a work of art, in the process usually ignoring the artist's own statement, and unreflectively reading the work in terms of their own agenda<sup>157</sup>. This concern is seen in response to Enwezor's (1997:26) questions, "what should images in a decolonised South Africa look like, and who has right to use which images, and what should the authorising narrative be"? This question elicited criticism about the suggestion that only members of given groups might act as legitimate voices (Rosengarten 1999:215). According to Breitz (cited in Atkinson 1999:21), this argument rests on the essentialist understanding that individual and group identities are inherent, static and inevitably linked to a specific political agenda. It assumes that such groups are homogeneous and united in their opinions of the best and correct use of their own images. For Frost (1999:134-135) this argument establishes the artist's identity as the dominant signifier of a work's meaning, irrespective of the codes deployed in the work<sup>158</sup>.

<sup>156</sup> Consultation with minority groups presents its own challenges and complexities, as shown in discussion of Skotnes' consultation with representatives about the display of human remains. In Chapter two, I highlighted that there are no cultural groups with unified views of, and representative policy on, the use or display of their heritage. The insistence that outsiders are obliged to gain consent for using black histories or representations thereof raises questions about cultural gatekeepers and censoring of cultural and artistic expression (Malik 2014).

<sup>157</sup> According to Atkinson and Williamson, this often results in "wildly misplaced allegations against an artist", and is exacerbated by reductive understandings of the meaning and workings of representation (see Atkinson 1999:20, Williamson 1999). Breitz (cited in Atkinson 1999:19-20) further contends that the meaning of the work is conflated with the intention as interpreted by the critic or art historian.

<sup>158</sup> In ironic manner, the inadequacy of this argument is illustrated by politician and former speaker of parliament Baleka (née Mbete) Kgotsitsile's acknowledgement that her condemnatory response to Thompson's *Useful Objects* (1996) would have been different had she known it was by a woman and a feminist (Friedman 1999:316).

These views point to conflict over the irretrievability of meaning, and the relevance of an artist's identity and intention. On the one hand, critics seem to say that an artist's intention (sometimes expounded in an artist's statement) is important to the interpretation of the work; on the other they suggest that the artist's identity should not determine the interpretation of her/his work. This would suggest that intention and identity can be uncoupled. This perspective could be substantiated with Roland Barthes' (1977) notion of 'the death of the author'. According to Barthes (1977:147-148), readers are the creators of meaning and the author's "only power is to mix writings"<sup>159</sup>. From a poststructuralist and deconstructive position, the final meaning of the text – like that of all signifiers – is endlessly deferred, and contingent upon the viewer's position and the context, space and time of viewing the work. Critics further protest readings that position the racial or gender identity of the author as the essential or dominant signifier for the meaning of the work, pointing out that identity is not essential and deterministic. Breitz (in Atkinson 1999:21) and Richards (1999b:170) challenge Enwezor for his reliance on the entity of 'the' black African subject, as though such a fixed and homogeneous subject exists or can represent all black Africans<sup>160</sup>. Such an essentialist position further denies the "extraordinary diversity of subject positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'", writes Hall (1996c:166). Richards (1999b:170,179-180) stresses that the instability of all subject-positions complicates questions around the representation of, and speaking for or about, Others. He reminds that the subjectivities of artists, critics and the 'spoken of' are fluid, multiple and the product of language, discourse and constantly-shifting contexts, as well as the multiple and shifting identifications made by individuals themselves (Richards 1999b:179-180). Furthermore, it is not only contemporary critical theory, but the complex and messy historic realities of colonialism, apartheid and the liberation struggle, that challenge binaries of self/Other, white/black and oppressor/oppressed (see Cronin 1996:95,97).

On the other hand, in some ways the author remains coupled to the text. If, according to Barthes, the artist's only power is the mixing of existing writings, he or she exercises authorial agency by selecting texts. There are also the myriad contextual, conscious and unconscious factors that influence such decisions. The author's background, ethnicity and habitus matter profoundly in the postcolony where representation of indigenous people by whites is historically fraught. Centuries of enforced inequality and of unequal power to represent or control representations of oneself, and where racist discursive constructions of black subjects underpinned subjugation, have left a deep context of power relations that finds expression in the everyday. It emerges especially where issues of representation arise. I don't suggest that the 'race' ascribed to an artist is a chief

<sup>159</sup> Barthes (1977:148) declared that "we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."

<sup>160</sup> At the end of his article, Enwezor (1997:39) warns against the fixing of blackness in any stable meaning and disavowing heterogeneity (see below).

signifier of meaning, but it does contribute to the readings made of intention, and in very a powerful way the artist's place in the historical system of social relations catalyses unconscious desires, fears and anxieties.

### **Speaking for or silencing the Other**

Several contributors to *Grey Areas* commented on suggestions by Enwezor, Geers and Oguibe that white artists 'speak for' black subjects when representing them. In contemplating works that to him "sentimentalise African images", Enwezor (1997:28) asks: "why am I unconvinced by the remonstrative gestures of those artists who ... persist with those images that are devoid of conflict, of the quietly suffering but still noble African. Since he can't speak for himself, he is spoken for." According to Oguibe and Geers, Breitz's reworked postcards silence African women in a violent and racist manner (Atkinson 1999:20). For Breitz, however, "representation is not reducible to straightforward 'speaking on behalf of'" (cited in Atkinson 1999:20). Frost (1999:133) suggests that artists "speak for themselves by speaking about others", but this does not make their representations abusive. Richards (1999b), Cronin (1999) and Oliphant (1992) illustrate this point by reminding us of white, middle-class artists and photographers whose struggle against apartheid involved depicting black subjects and experiences. To claim that each representation of the colonised by the colonist or the descendent of the coloniser enacts abusive relationships, freezes the creative and mobile interrelations of self and other into a presumed binary where the one always dominates and silences the other (Frost 1999:134).

Debate around this topic reveals the contested nature of the power to represent, and the unfeasibility of a binary model of white/black, empowered/disempowered, speaking/silenced oppositions. Critics of Hilton-Barber rightfully raised objections about the imbalances of power that underscored the negotiation for consent and access, which occurred between the son of a white farmer and a black principal who himself needed permission to conduct the initiation on the white-owned farm. Most focused their criticism on Hilton-Barber, not questioning the integral role of the principal, who conducted the initiation school, and that the access he granted was integral in the children's exposure to the lens and the gaze of outsiders. His decision on behalf of the minors and their legal guardians constitutes a form of silencing of the minors, which troubles the binary racial dynamic of exploitation and commercial gain that prevails in debate about this series. Rather than resorting to a binary model, Richards (1999b:183) suggests considerations that allow for shared exchange between 'white' and 'black', where the 'in-between', the "splinters of solidarity, fragile filiations, partial knowing, even bliss, are uncomfortably dislodged". Richards (1999b:186) objects to equating 'speaking about' as 'speaking for', suggesting that, "when 'we' talk of 'others', we surely talk less 'of' things than of *relations*" (italics in the original). Butler (2004:24-25) further challenges the possibility of distinguishing between self and Other: "One speaks, and one speaks for another, to another, and yet there is no way to collapse the distinction between the Other and oneself".

The international debates about Bailey's alleged silencing and exploiting of black actors reveal complex relations of power and agency at play. These relations involve not only the actors, the artist and his subject, but also their critics. In response to suggestions that the actors "aren't quite getting it" (O'Mahony 2014), the performers of *Exhibit B* publicly stated that their participation was a self-reflexive process and that they all knew from the start what they "were getting into" (no author 2014)<sup>161</sup>. As they continually bear witness to the "dawning of awareness" in spectators, the recognition that everyone plays a part in a racist system, they chose to continue participating in the exhibition (no author 2014)<sup>162</sup>. Rather than racist, as many critics labelled the show, the actors consider it a "powerful tool against racism" (no author, 2014). As such, the London protesters who effected the show's cancellation essentially vetoed the actors who – like them – were claiming affiliative ownership of black colonial history.

Many of Bailey's critics refused as matter of principle to visit *Exhibit B*, arguing that there were no legitimate aesthetic or conceptual reasons for producing such work and that only sell-outs and 'askaris' would pay money to see it or receive money for participating in it (Mamela 2014; Akala@London\_360, 2014)<sup>163</sup>. Sandile Memela (2014), South African civil servant and writer, questions whether African artists in shows such as *Exhibit B* have "any human agency". For Memela, such artists are unwitting accomplices who collude with a racist hegemonic establishment. For him, the artists' own intentions to redress and challenge are subsumed by this establishment. From this perspective, the black actors are inevitably silenced Others. Richards (1999b:180), however, cautions against a presumption that the Other is mute, abject, and her/his voice irretrievable, which for him would amount to "an unspeakable violation". Effacing the heterogeneity of the Other constitutes a further violation. Of relevance is Spivak's (1994) critique of a blindness to ideology and methodological contradiction in the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective (SSC) and to French philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze<sup>164</sup>. According to Spivak (1987:201), the SSC risks "insidiously objectify[ing]" the subaltern" as they "refuse to acknowledge the implications of their" attempts at retrieving, restoring and assigning a homogeneous name to the subaltern. In her critique of Foucault and Deleuze, Spivak (1994:66,68) highlights that the two thinkers "systematically ignore the question of ideology and their own implication in

<sup>161</sup> For many critics the black bodies of the actors – here standing in for black subjects – are dehumanised, silenced and disempowered because they are mute and shown behind fences or barbed wire, in glass cases or cages, shackled and enslaved.

<sup>162</sup> To counter their argument, Bailey (2014) cites the testimonies of approximately 150 performers, who found the experience "valuable, enriching and empowering".

<sup>163</sup> Many critics and signatories of the London petition did not see the installation and their right to denounce and judge the show was criticised. Young (2005:135) argues that something can cause profound offence even when unwitnessed, as the bare knowledge of it happening or existing, is offensive. Therefore, cultural appropriation may be offensive even if a member of the offended community does not witness or "experience the work themselves" (Young 2005: 135)

<sup>164</sup> Her analysis of poststructuralist critique of representation and humanist subjectivity focused on 'Intellectuals and power: a conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze', which took place in 1972.

intellectual and economic history". Where the critic's implication in dominant systems of representation is disavowed, the intellectual or critic is effaced as "absent representativ[e]" of her or his subject (Morton 2007:108). The danger is assimilation of the Other by appropriation, irrespective of the postcolonial critic or artist's "ethical and political commitment to the empowerment of the subaltern" (Morton 2007: 123; Spivak 1994:104). To recognise, however, the various ways that one is implicated and privileged by hegemonic structures is exceedingly challenging in the ambiguity and messiness of the human, institutional and political dynamics of the former colony. "The urgent critical and political task facing postcolonial critics and intellectuals" nevertheless remains, and Spivak urges thinkers (and equally creative practitioners) to "exercise ethical caution [and] invent a new idiom that is appropriate to articulate the [particular] histories, practices and agencies of the subaltern" (Morton 2007:123).

### 3.4 Conclusion

Taking place over more than two decades and focused on the fine arts, what can be gained from these debates when now looking critically at the politics of race and representation in décor and fabric design in contemporary South Africa? Firstly, it warns people to be aware that debates around appropriation, race and representation are not new but are simply taking place in changing social and political contexts, both in South Africa and abroad. My investigation has highlighted key arguments levelled against acts of subject appropriation, while complicating notions of racial identity and distinctions between cultural insiders and outsiders. These key issues show the great affective power of subject appropriation on descendants or those affiliated to the represented: men and women whose lives were dramatically, often violently, altered or destroyed because, as black, they were considered dispensable to or exploitable by the white world. Objections to historical portrayals being used as inspirational material for a cultural outsider's artistic expression, insist that recognition be made of the pain, trauma and anger reproduced by experience of the work. These objections oblige artists to pause to consider the lives of the represented as grievable to the living, which also demands recognition of relationships to and perspectives on images that are different to their own. Writer and activist Mandla Langa (1999:30-31) urges that artists work with

a certain humility, a capacity to ask questions and check out with communities, without being censored by their verdicts. It is a hard and precarious balancing act, but in this country, with its years where the voiceless have been subjects of interpretation, it is the least people can do.

Langa's recommendation is not at odds with the self-reflexive methodology of contemporary ethnography, which advocates consultation and co-authorship with subjects as ways of democratising representation. The work of contemporary artists who assume the role of archivist, historian or ethnographer when working with historical representations of cultures other than their own may benefit from such practices. Critics might also take heed of this by being reflexive of the hegemonic paradigms of art historical discourse (itself fluid and

unstable) and the ideological thrust of the institutional discourse that they produce, and are produced by<sup>165</sup>. Critique of the assumed universalism of dominant theoretical paradigms is needed, particularly in debates about representation and the relationship between signifier and signified, where alternative perspectives are regularly silenced and denigrated<sup>166</sup>. Reflexivity about the dynamics of institutional power and privilege afforded the authorial voices of white artists and critics is essential, particularly in a country with a long legacy of institutionalised racism. However, as my discussion reveals, white artists and critics frequently found themselves at an impasse as the self-reflexive positions they had assumed, were not acknowledged or regarded as adequate.

In contemplating the challenges of the representation of black women in feminist discourse, artist Penny Siopis (1999:247) asks whether the female body has been, “so completely and relentlessly colonised under patriarchy that its representation always serves its subjection?” In response, she refers to Minh-ha (1989:41), who asks:

Can knowledge circulate without a position of mastery? Can it be conveyed without the exercise of power? No, because there is no end to understanding power relations which are rooted deep in the social nexus – not merely added to society nor easily locatable so that we can just radically do away with them. Yes, however, because in-between grounds always exist, and cracks and interstices are like gasps of fresh air that keep on being suppressed because they tend to render more visible the failures operating in every system.

Minh-ha suggests a ‘both/and’ position, which may find rich ground in the liminal and interstitial, even as these interstices will reveal pain and failure. This approach to knowledge and artistic production resonates with the approach to black subjectivity suggested by Enwezor in the conclusion of his essay. Here he quotes Ralph Ellison who declares, “Black is/Black ‘aint’, and Aimé Césaire’s description of his *negritude* as “neither tower nor cathedral”, taking root in the “red flesh of the soil” and the “ardent flesh of the sky” (cited in Enwezor 1997:39). Ellison’s punchy statement and Césaire’s surreal and poetic rendering, present a political and racial identity that is not ‘either/or’, but ‘both/and’, thus pointing to a conception of black subjectivity that allows for heterogeneity and contradiction. Corresponding to a transcultural conception of cultural appropriation, the approach advocated by these authors and intellectuals does point to the potential of interstitial spaces and positions, but this offers no guarantee about interpretations of artistic work. As the debates have shown, audience reception is contingent upon factors not in the artist’s control. Furthermore, internationally

<sup>165</sup> This discourse is situated in, and disseminated by, university art departments, commercial galleries, auction houses and art museums. These institutions are directed predominantly by white arts graduates, whose training has only recently included critical theory and postcolonial perspectives.

<sup>166</sup> Raymond Williams (1983: 21) emphasises the inadequacy of analyses not taking cognisance of contextual factors: "Just because 'meaning', in any active sense, is more than the general process of 'signification', and because 'norms' and 'rules' are more than the properties of any abstract process of system, other kinds of analysis remain necessary. The emphasis of my analysis is deliberately social and historical".

marginalised and previously colonised peoples sometimes have embraced, and may well further choose to embrace, an essentialist identitarian politics in their quest for autonomy and redress.

In his contribution to *Grey Areas*, Jeremy Cronin (1999:98), writer and deputy-general of the South African Communist Party, urges that debates about representation move beyond the ‘white cube’ of the art gallery. According to him, the contestation of images, meanings and the trajectory of change is also a class struggle. In the ‘new’ South Africa, he writes, the collective struggle for freedom has been recuperated to give way to the individual’s freedom of consumer choice (Cronin 1999:99). In the next chapter I examine post-apartheid consumerism and its historical relationship to the makings of race.

## Chapter four: socio-economic contextualising of consumerism in post-apartheid South Africa

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter contextualises consumption and consumerism in post-apartheid South Africa, with a focus on the interrelation of race, class and consumerism on the one hand, and the commodification of the black body and subject appropriation on the other. The discussion is situated within the long trajectory of the historic emergence of modern, globalised capitalism, with the focus being on the period of South Africa's shift from racial capitalism under apartheid, to the embrace of neoliberal capitalism by the newly-elected ANC. This exposition presents a foundation for analysing the post-apartheid re-purposing of colonial signs of racial blackness into Africa-lite: blackness produced as a contemporary commodity that contains both traces and senses of an historical, colonial 'African-ness'. Predicated on primitivist discourse, such contemporary valuations of African authenticity derive from historical, binary oppositions such as modern/traditional, civilised/uncivilised, culture/nature, contained/unfettered, white/black. Such valuations cannot be divorced from the emergence of Enlightenment modernity, capitalism, colonialism and the bourgeois social order. From the early eighteenth century, the European Enlightenment, with its grand narratives of reason, empiricism, liberty, universalism, progress, humanism and individualism, presented a new and globally disseminated paradigm for the conception of humans, nature and society (Hamilton 1992: 23,57). Yet the allocation and withholding of modernity's freedoms according to gender, sexual orientation, class, nationality and skin colour reveal contradictions inherent to the Enlightenment paradigm<sup>167</sup>. The modern commodification of Africans as slaves, and the legal definition of black people, as property instead of persons, are factors central to a black critical theory critique of Enlightenment reason, humanism and liberal democracy.

A full grasp of the psychological affect and material impact of cultural appropriation on formerly colonised people, is not possible without an understanding of how centuries of exploitation and dispossession continue to shape current, socio-economic realities and the meanings and values attributed to the cultural property and representations of the historically oppressed. Furthermore, since earlier paradigms of racial configuration affect the nature and forms of contemporary rebellions, revolutions, subversive identities and movements, such a revisiting is necessary. To account for the complexity of the production of the black body as labour

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<sup>167</sup> Although critical of feudal, clerical and traditional constraints on the economy and almost all forms of private and social life, the Enlightenment *philosophes* were themselves from the upper classes and did not readily subvert traditional social structures (Hamilton 1992:22-23). They predominantly opposed participation in government to anyone but the landed gentry and propertied classes, and their own 'natural' rights were not extended to European women and the working classes (Hamilton 1992:22,33).

resource within a racist, capitalist system, and the concomitant commodification of the image of racial blackness as sign and luxury commodity, a confluence of political, historic and economic factors must be considered. I look at the interrelationship between the concept of race and the modernist discourse of liberty as it develops with the rise and global spread of capitalism and neoliberalism.

The exploitation and commodification of black bodies as resource and symbol persist, but also undergo shifts, while racial capitalism is being dismantled and as South Africa embraces neoliberal economic principles, since fully re-entering the global economy, after its partial exclusion during the final decades of apartheid. Not unlike other former colonies, South Africa underwent a change from a “society of control to a society of consumption” (Mbembe 2014), from “citizen state to consumer state” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:33)<sup>168</sup>. Since the 1990s the economic gap between the elite and the majority has widened, with a mass of disadvantaged citizens suffering unemployment and poverty, and being therefore unable to participate in many of the ‘freedoms’ offered by neoliberalism. It is against this backdrop that I investigate the contemporary consumption of decorative elements featuring images of historical blackness, designed and produced for domestic and leisure spaces.

This investigation focuses on the makings of ‘race’ as a social rather than a biological category, and the emphasis is on its centrality to the development of capitalism and consumerism in South Africa (Posel 2010). My discussion aims to show that, as Taylor (2016:127) reminds: “the history of race has *always* been a history of contesting and revising racial meanings.” Like class, race emerges as integral to modernity and part of the ideology of a modern bourgeois order, the values and aesthetic tenets of which continue to influence the aspirations of consumers worldwide. Under neoliberalism, political sovereignty is equated with market sovereignty, and the rhetoric of freedom emphasises a ‘freedom to consume’. The cost of safeguarding neoliberal freedoms appears to be the precarity and superfluity of billions of workers. Due to centuries of exploitation and appropriation under slavery, colonialism and racism, affected workers predominantly hail from and/or live in former colonised territories. As a precursor to the analysis of designers’ use of images of black bodies I pause to look at the repression of the human dimension of commodity production, and the discontinuity between the economic and political spheres in a capitalist, bourgeois regime of knowledge (Marx 2010; Billig 1999; Magubane 2004).

As I will show below, the structural inequalities established under colonialism continue to shape contemporary relations of consumption. The economic marginality of the Global South has further parallels in the continued commodification of territories and peoples outside the geopolitical West as a foil by which to confirm its own

<sup>168</sup> It is important to note that before 1994 the majority of the country’s inhabitants were not legally acknowledged as citizens, as the black population was consigned to eleven tribal ‘homelands’.

progress, or critique its own materialism, greed and inauthenticity. The contemporary ideological fields in which racial formations are constituted and where conceptions, classifications and hierarchies of race are fabricated, reactivated and revitalised, recall earlier models, including tropes of Africa and stereotypes of racial blackness (Thomas & Clarke 2008:8,19). Postcolonial fantasies rooted in colonial relations of race, power, desire and fear can find expression in fields as diverse as tourism and heritage, wildlife conservation and sport hunting, 'world music', spiritualism, cuisine, homeopathy, fashion, advertising and interior design.

I further examine the modern notion of the 'domestic' as a significant ideological space: a stage for the consumption and making of empire, race and the bourgeois order (McClintock 1995, Comaroff & Comaroff 1992). As markers of civilisation and class position, domestic arrangements and the consumption of objects for domestic space are important to the practice of distinction and bourgeois habitus (Bourdieu 1984:56-57). Historical contextualising is vital to my study, as the colonial images of Africa and black people that are appropriated for commodification, originated in the historical co-emergence of capitalism, colonialism and notions of race. Predicated on inequality and exploitation, and the repression or obscuring of the social relations of production, capitalism in colonial and then apartheid South Africa rendered black workers both invisible and hyper-visible, indispensable and superfluous, central to and banished from bourgeois white homes and neighbourhoods (Mbembe 2004).

## **4.2 Economic and historical context: neoliberalism, race and consumerism in South Africa**

### **Race and capitalism**

Capitalism is not simply a mode of production and consumption, but since its earliest days also involved an accelerating and increasingly global circulation of commodities (Mbembe 2004:377). As Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1978) pointed out, neither capital nor the bourgeoisie could emerge without wage-labour<sup>169</sup>. Under conditions of modern slavery and European imperialism, people of colour became - in the colonies, or in the former colony of the USA, or in Brazil – the primary labour resource. Western, industrial modernity and global markets cannot be disentangled from imperialism and its colonial conquests, and the dynamics of race, class, status and gender are thoroughly entangled with local and global histories of consumption (Marx & Engels 1978:9-10; Posel 2010:162). Deborah Thomas and Khamari Clarke (2008:11) stress the centrality of

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<sup>169</sup> For a discussion of the shifting and various meanings of the term 'bourgeoisie', see Williams (1983: 46-48). Marx and Engels (1978:9) describe the bourgeoisie as "the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour". According to them, "the modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society, has not done away with class antagonism, it has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of old ones..." (Marx & Engels 1978:9).

racialised labour in the emergence of global modern capitalism and they define modernity in terms of the “disciplining of a racialised labour force”. The dynamics of race, its production and inscription upon bodies – whether of coloniser or colonised – are further entailed in global and local histories of consumption and notions of subjectivity (Posel 2010:162).

The apartheid state entrenched and refined the colonial racial economy in its development of a corporatist model of “racial capitalism” (Koelble 2008:159)<sup>170</sup>. Apartheid as racial capitalism entailed the design of state enterprises and the manipulation of labour markets to benefit the white minority, while exploiting the black majority (Koelble 2008:159-160). For Mbembe (2004:380), “contrary to most Marxist analyses the circulation of capital is predicated not just on class relations but on human investment in certain forms of racial delirium”. In its production of a capitalist underclass, race was formulated as a convenient – though exceptionally tenuous – marker of a permanent underclass who served both as labour resource and as mirror to bourgeois subjectivity<sup>171</sup>. According to Thomas and Clarke (2008:11), the rise of capitalism, nationalism, imperialism, and new ideologies and sciences of mankind, emerge concomitant to and intertwined with definitions of subjectivity in racialised terms. As such, globalisation, capitalism and racial exploitation are intimately connected. Hall (1992b:282-283) charts the emergence of modern globalisation from the early fifteenth-century and the European voyages of exploration and capital accumulation. Globalisation’s acceleration over the next four centuries marks the making of the modern West and the emergence of a world market (Hall 1999:35-46, Marx & Engels 1878:10)<sup>172</sup>. Over centuries, Africa’s complex internal, histories and regional, social and economic ecologies were profoundly affected by shifts in global capital and imperial rule (Hall 1999:36).

The fifteenth-century voyages of European exploration and conquest, driven by goals of locating and exploiting resources for trade in gold, spices, ivory and slaves are often noted as the first phase of a new era of globalisation. From the fifteenth-century onwards, cultural and political engagement with cultural others, commodity and technological exchanges between socially and spatially separated groups (which had been previously only managed and sustained with great effort) were dramatically accelerated (Appadurai 1996:28). Encounters with other civilisations relativised Europeans’ conceptions of themselves, since cultural others

<sup>170</sup> In a critique of Marx, Cedric Robinson (1983) developed the term racial capitalism, building on the work of black radical intellectual and sociologist Oliver Cox. Robinson argues that the origins of capitalism lie in the Western feudal economy and that its global advance through slavery and colonialism were predicated from the start on racial discrimination and exploitation (Kelley 2017).

<sup>171</sup> McClintock’s (1995:52-55) exposition of historical constructions of the Irish as biologically inferior race highlights the instability of racial discourse.

<sup>172</sup> Western accounts of globalisation usually position its initial stages in fifteenth century maritime exploration by Europe, omitting the almost contemporaneous Ming voyages of exploration between 1405 and 1433. These exploratory voyages were headed by Chinese admiral Zheng He, who took his vast fleets to South-East Asia, India, up the Persian Gulf, visiting Medina and Mecca, to the Middle-East and East coast of Africa. Unlike similar voyages of European merchant-adventurers, these did not lead to the establishment of trading empires. However, in their wake, Chinese emigration increased, resulting in Chinese colonisation in Southeast Asia and the accompanying tributary trade, which lasted until the nineteenth century (Gronewald 2009)

invited comparison with and critique of European societies. The second phase of globalisation entailed conquest and annexation of territories across the planet, and the subjugation or outright enslavement of indigenous peoples (Hall 1999:36). A new era of slave-trading commenced when the first cargo of African slaves captured by Europeans arrived in Portugal in 1441 (Hall 1992:283)<sup>173</sup>. Numerous scholars underscore the indispensability of the modern Atlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades to the development of global networks of mass production and consumption (Baucom 2005, Rediker 2007). The birth of capitalism and modern slavery further intersects with the racialising or transforming of diverse people of African origin into 'blacks'. For Mbembe (2017:5,40), the term 'black' is a condition imposed on Africans and names the product of a metaphorical and economic process of transforming humans into financial and symbolic currency.

Within systems of chattel slavery, slaves were defined as property and commodities, as things and not people (Hall 1992:310). With freedom – particularly of the individual – emerging as one of the key tenets of the Enlightenment, in its treatment of other cultures the contradictions of the Enlightenment become most evident (Hamilton 1992:45)<sup>174</sup>. To Cedric Robinson, along with radical, black intellectuals Aimé Césaire, WEB Du Bois, CLR James, George Padmore and Oliver Cox "fascism [was] not some aberration from the march of progress ... but a logical development of Western Civilisation itself" (Kelley 2000:20). These thinkers regarded fascism as "blood relative of slavery and imperialism, global systems rooted not only in capitalist political economy, but racist ideologies already in place at the dawn of modernity" (Kelley 2000:20). In his critique of Western humanism, Césaire (2000:36) writes that Europe for centuries tolerated and mostly legitimised, absolved and ignored Nazism when it was inflicted on non-Europeans. For Europeans, he writes, the crime and horror of Nazism is the application "to Europe of procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the 'coolies' of India, and the 'niggers' of Africa" (Césaire 2000:36).

Debates in Europe about the treatment of New World indigenes and colonised peoples ultimately centred on whether or not they were fully human, or if they had souls and should therefore not be enslaved. Various indicators of humanity served the purposes of different empires, and evidence of industry, organised

<sup>173</sup> Chattel slavery commenced in Cape Town when a cargo of 174 slaves were imported on the Dutch merchantman, the *Amersfoort*, in 1658. At the time the Cape was under administration of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), one of the most powerful companies in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and a forebear of today's multinationals. The Cape's transcultural society was one of the most polyglot of the eighteenth century (Dietrich & Heese 2012). Its inhabitants and visitors included San and Khoekhoen from different groups, Europeans from some twenty-seven different countries and regions, and political prisoners from India and Indonesia. Slaves were brought from Africa's East Coast, Zanzibar, Madagascar and the Mascarene Islands, the Indian subcontinent and Ceylon, the Dutch East Indies, as well as the West Indies, Persia (Iran), Siam (Thailand) and China (Dietrich & Heese 2012). Britain abolished the slave trade in 1808, but slaves were still brought to the Cape until the mid-nineteenth century. After the banning of slavery in 1834, a system of 'indentured labour' kept many slaves in conditions of enslavement until 1838.

<sup>174</sup> European women, the working classes, the poor and unemployed, peasants, children, and minorities such as the homeless and insane were similarly excluded from full enjoyment of Enlightenment freedoms and human rights. As McClintock (1995) shows, the earth's dark-skinned peoples were increasingly classed at the bottom of European hierarchies of race, sex and class.

economies, laws, customs, religion were sought or refuted in the battle for the labour, souls or freedom of dark-skinned people. It is significant that abolitionist debates of the nineteenth century similarly questioned whether blacks (the slaves) were or were not fully human, with anti-slavery campaigners embracing the motto ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’ (Hall 1992:310, see chapter six for further discussion).

The third phase of globalisation was characterised by the world-wide spread of capitalism through the emergence of complex colonial orders, increasing colonisation, exploitation and permanent settlement of Europeans in the colonies (Hall 1992:283; Appadurai 1996:28). The fourth phase – the ‘scramble’ for colonies, raw materials, cheap labour resources and markets between 1880 and the First World War – culminated, according to Hall (1999:36), in a global economy, progressively fuelled by and generating transnational economic transactions, communications and movement of goods, people and money. This directly boosted industrial, technological and economic revolutions, and resulted in Europe’s world-wide expansion and domination of 85% of the globe by the end of the nineteenth century. The dehumanising and “thingification” of colonised peoples are key to Césaire’s (2000:32-33) definition of colonialism within the context of global capitalism<sup>175</sup>. Césaire (2000:32-33) is unequivocal that the primary motivation of colonialism is profit:

To admit once and for all, without flinching at the consequences, that the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale the competition of its antagonistic economies.

In the unfolding of globalisation and capitalism, colonial exploitation included the appropriation, consumption and circulation of the material and immaterial: fauna and flora, medical and cultural products, indigenous knowledge, labour, bodies and images (Sheller 2003:30-31). Focussing on the various economies of the (triangular) slave trade, Mimi Sheller (2003:30-32) stresses that “[t]he mobilities of consumption are not only material, but also cultural and discursive”, with the commercial circulation of visual images as an important element in the global emergence of consumer societies<sup>176</sup>. Hereby, the complex and intricate overlapping of European and colonial worlds in the era of modern, globalising capitalism “set the basis for a permanent traffic in ideas of peoplehood and selfhood” (Appadurai 1996:28).

<sup>175</sup> Césaire was a Martinican poet, playwright, politician and influential anti-colonial thinker. Along with Leopold Senghor and Leon Damas he was central to the development in the 1930s of the Négritude movement, a pan-Africanist literary and artistic movement for positive affirmation of black identity and revolt against racism and neocolonialism.

<sup>176</sup> The term ‘triangular trade’ is often used to describe the transatlantic slave trade. Ships left Europe and Britain carrying European-produced commodities (glass beads, textiles, guns and gunpowder, tea, sugar, tobacco, alcohol) to Africa; slaves were transported across the Atlantic to North America and the Caribbean basin; and slave-produced commodities, plantation and natural products (rum, sugar, cotton, indigo, cocoa, tobacco, timber) were transported back to Europe (Sheller 2003:30-31).

Numerous scholars have tracked the role of visual images in producing and perpetuating constructions of blackness over the centuries (Pieterse 1992; Phillips and Steiner 1999; Landau and Kaspin 2002). These studies show that shifts in the stereotypes of, and the meanings attributed to Africa and Africans mostly reflect concomitant shifts in political and economic contexts and agendas in the West rather than in Africa. Such representations have made a powerful contribution to the production and enforcement of hierarchical ideas of racial, social and gender difference, with consumer culture widely distributing and popularising racial stereotypes (Thomas & Clarke 2008:11; McClintock 1995:8).

Postcolonial research on discursive constructions of Africa over many centuries indicates that Africa has been whatever the West needed it to be, with the representations of Africans revealing more about their authors than the subject. Connecting the past and the present, the contemporary (Western) accumulations of capital, scientific knowledge and cultural innovation continue to be “made viable by far-reaching global circuits of knowledge-production premised on the consumption of the landscapes, plants, foods, bodies and cultures of ‘non-Western’ places” (Sheller 2003:28).

### **Commodity racism and domestic space**

Central to the emergence of the European bourgeoisie was a quest for freedom from economic necessity. Conspicuous consumption and the cultivation of an aesthetic disposition are preconditions for class distinction and cultural hierarchies within classes (Veblen 1912, Bourdieu 1984). Along with capitalism, this Western articulation of establishing and maintaining status through commodity consumption was exported to the colonies, where whiteness, power and freedom (from oppression, exploitation and dispossession) came to be associated with specific forms of accumulation and consumption<sup>177</sup>. Consumerism was a key technology of nineteenth-century nation-making and practices of consumption came to signify national progress, modernity and community (Foster 1999:267-278). According to Foster (1999:267), rituals of often “unremarkable consumption practices” fostered belonging and patriotism, as consumers purchased British, Dutch or French brands of tea, cocoa, sugar or soap.

Anne McClintock (1995) coined the term ‘commodity racism’ to account for the ways in which commodity spectacle and the Victorian cult of domesticity affected new conceptions and hierarchies of race. Both had profound impact on the lives of colonisers and colonised. McClintock (1995:33) argues that a shift occurred in

<sup>177</sup> Signifying status, power and wealth through consumption of goods, services and leisure was not new to Africa as people worldwide have for centuries relied on consumption to indicate status and wealth. The introduction or enforcement of western systems of (industrial) production, consumption and exchange, its particular valuation of goods and associated class system were, however, new to Africans who embraced or were hurled into its economy.

the late nineteenth century from scientific racism (embodied and promulgated through scientific medical journals and new disciplines of anthropology and ethnography) to commodity racism, as seen in Victorian consumerism and advertising. Commodity racism was particularly evident in the marketing of 'Empire goods', such as tea, coffee, cotton and cocoa. Advertisements, logos and labels frequently featured depictions of black people as benign or comical servants, as child-like or doll-like, and images of black femininity as exotic and mysterious, were used to suggest luxury or give products novelty appeal (Lury 2011:111). These goods signified the progress and reach of European imperialism and capitalism, and goods such as soap were frequently promoted as vehicles for Africa's moral and economic salvation (McClintock 1995:34). In promotions for Pears' Soap, for example, cleaning becomes a metaphor – shown through the lightening of dark skin – for the miracle transformation of black to white, dirty to clean, ignorant to enlightened (Fig. 4.1)

<sup>178</sup>



Fig. 4.1. *I have found PEARS' SOAP matchless for the Hands and Complexion*, c1884. Colour advertisement. (Exon Smith 2010).

It was not only in metropolitan centres that race was remade through the merger of sciences of race and commodity spectacle, but also in the colonies where colonial regimes produced a racialised underclass. The control of colonised and enslaved people's access to consumer culture further contributed to discursive and material formations of race and racial difference. Consumption and race in colonial Africa were frequently linked to discourses of 'civilisation', with the establishment of consumer culture in the colonies and consumption of Western products heralded as a prime means of transforming natives into loyal and productive subjects. Just like native dress and bodily adornment, living arrangements of natives were evaluated as

<sup>178</sup> These advertisements emerged as popular 'imperial kitsch' from the late twentieth century. In Chapter five I discuss post-apartheid designs that incorporate or reference such advertisements.

outward signs of civilisation, decency or barbarism<sup>179</sup>. According to Williams (1983: 58), the word civilisation "has behind it the general spirit of the Enlightenment". A "strong, difficult and persuasive [word] in everyday usage", its application reveals forms of thought and ways of seeing cultures and societies (Williams 1983:14-15). As an expression of social order and refinement, its meaning emerged "in conscious historical or cultural contrast with barbarism" (Williams 1983: 57-58). For Hall (1992:231), oppositions of civilized-barbaric, noble-ignoble, and rude-refined form an elemental part of the discursive formation of "the 'West' and the 'rest'". Arranged on a sliding scale from early or late, lower or higher, the 'rest' (represented by natives of Africa, the Americas, Oceania) "was critical for the formation of Western enlightenment" (Hall 1992:314). In its 'noble' state, the savage was used to critique Western society's hypocrisy, repression and over-refinement, while the 'ignoble' savage served the purposes of urging reform (Hall 1992:311). Without this Other, constructed as an opposing pole and negation, "the West would not have been able to recognise and represent itself as the summit of human history" (Hall 1992:314).

The historical motifs of modernity, colonialism and domesticity intersect, the Comaroffs (1992: 37-39) argue, in the ideological struggle waged by missionaries and social reformists to 'naturalise' a "doctrine of domesticity" among both London's urban poor and indigenous Africans. This struggle at home and abroad strongly suggests that the making of "modern 'home-life' in black South Africa" was deeply implicated in the makings of modern English society (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992: 37,39)<sup>180</sup>. Furthermore, the production from the early nineteenth century of a bourgeois regime of knowledge intersects with the doctrine of domesticity in that both drew parallels between black Africans and the British poor to effect reform in the metropole (Magubane 2004: 44- 45). Southern African, Khoikhoi pastoralists were frequently invoked by travellers, missionaries and reformists in disparaging descriptions of the English urban poor and vagrants as heathens and savages, "as ignorant as Hottentots" (quoted in Magubane 2004: 48). Through popular literature, theatre, and ethnological exhibitions, such perceptions shaped working-class opinions of Africa and black people (Magubane 2004: 66)<sup>181</sup>. The spectacle of Empire exhibitions and commodity racism further contributed to the production of black Africans as mirrors to the bourgeois social and domestic order.

<sup>179</sup> According to Posel (2008:163), "[i]n nineteenth-century South Africa, the regulation of black consumption was central to 'the civilizing mission' and its efforts to produce God-fearing subjects who were both docile workers and disciplined consumers. The inward transformation wrought by the acquisition of 'civilization' was deemed inseparable from the outward transformation of the body". Clothing became "the pre-eminent site for the performance of a Christian selfhood, covering the naked black body and demonstrating the adherence to ... civilising manners" (Posel 2008:263). Jean and John Comaroff (1992:38) write that 'the home' "has long been a crucial focus of European efforts to colonise Africa. Missionaries saw buildings and clothing as two sides of a single coin [and they] set about reforming Tswana dress along with their dwellings" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:54).

<sup>180</sup> It is important to note that no "full-grown, stable model of 'home-life' was taken from Europe to its colonies"(Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:39)

<sup>181</sup> Even labour reformists – who employed the figures and plight of black chattel slaves to highlight the exploitation of British workers – failed to refrain from representations of black people as base and/or comical figures (Magubane 2004:64-66).

Domesticity and the domestic realm are not natural, universal concepts or phenomena, but rather profoundly political concepts of historical genealogy, inseparable from Enlightenment discourses of progress and civilisation (McClintock 1995:34). “Domesticity denotes both a *space* (a geographic and architectural alignment) and a *social relation to power*”, writes McClintock (1995:34, italics in original). From its eighteenth-century use in English the term domesticity “connotes a particular order of values and dispositions”, shaped by and itself shaping – inadvertently in varied ways over time and according to socio-political specificities – relations and hierarchical positions of class, gender and race (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:39)<sup>182</sup>. These hegemonic values and dispositions find articulation in reformist discourse, advice dispensed in décor manuals and magazines, value judgements of living arrangements and ultimately, consumer decisions. Whereas Victorian middle-class homes became spaces for the display of imperial goods and the concomitant reinvention of race at the time, the colonies presented platforms where the display of Victorian domesticity in settler and native homes testified to the successful establishment of middle-class, British hegemony and transformed notions of gender and race (McClintock 1995:34)<sup>183</sup>. From these conditions emerged a “*dialectic* of domesticity”, “a simultaneous, mutually sustaining process of cultural reconstruction” in modern Britain and its colonies, with each established as “model for, a mirror image of, the other” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1992:39-40, italics in original).

### **Neocolonialism and the discourse of liberty**

While the quest for liberty has always numbered among the grand narratives of modernity, it acquires specific force under neoliberalism. For Hall (1992:282-283), the neoliberal era marks the final phase of globalisation, with former colonies’ dependence on former Western powers persisting, despite formal independence and decolonisation. Whilst advancing discourses of freedom – particularly of markets and the individual – the economic doctrines of neoliberalism exacerbate the processes and effects of neocolonialism. Anticolonial revolutionary and Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah (1968:ix), defines neocolonialism as the final and “perhaps most dangerous” stage of imperialism, affecting billions of former colonial subjects worldwide. Formally decolonised states subjected to neocolonialism may officially institute democracy, but governments are regularly established by financial and often military support of erstwhile colonial powers, frequently abetted by multinational corporations (Nkrumah 1968: ix-x). Entering the global arena with significant structural disadvantages, many ex-colonial societies are further crippled through ‘structural adjustment’ and

<sup>182</sup> The use of the term domesticity in English (c.1721) is rooted in the Latin *domesticus*, meaning “belonging to the household” or “attached to home and family”, from ‘*domus*’ or ‘house’. The term was used in relation to humans from about 1740 and from the 1630s to describe the taming of animals (‘domesticate’ 2018).

<sup>183</sup> The impact of modern capitalism on gender relations and the position of women in the economies and civil societies of Europe and the colonies does not fall within the scope of this study. In the analysis of select designs in Chapter five I elaborate on the impact of imperialism and commodity racism on black women.

the forceful institution of neoliberal policy measures by international banks and lending agencies (Ferguson 2009:173; Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:8)<sup>184</sup>. According to Ferguson (2009:173), the results of neoliberalism's application across Africa were disastrous, raising "the spectre of a kind of re-colonisation"<sup>185</sup>. Taking note of the social, political and economic implications for the African turn to neoliberalism and the emergence of the global as an open marketplace, Hall (1999:40-41) cautions against assumptions that power resides solely in the West, or even of the Group Seven (G7) nations<sup>186</sup>. After decolonisation, power and wealth have become less territorialised, their sites multiplied and globally disseminated as they shift from a West/South and coloniser/colonised axis to include the business elite of erstwhile colonies (Hall 1999:41). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (2004:98,102) scrutinises this complexity when focusing on the national bourgeoisie established as the ruling class after decolonisation<sup>187</sup>. As they often fail to introduce programmes to foster and develop necessary industries, or to institute a system of governance, subservient to the people, the populace is rendered increasingly precarious (Fanon 2004:98,102)<sup>188</sup>. Fanon further criticises their conspicuous consumption: "Major sums ... are invested for the sake of prestige in cars, villas, and all those ostentatious goods described by economists as typical of an underdeveloped bourgeoisie" (Fanon 2004: 103). In his critique of the new black economic elite, former president Thabo Mbeki singled out the conspicuous consumption of luxury vehicles, capacious houses and designer clothes<sup>189</sup>. For him these material goods, rather than "the seemingly ethereal and therefore intangible gift of liberty", had come to define "the meaning of freedom" (cited in Posel 2010:159-160).

Neocolonialism, Nkrumah writes (2009: 239), encapsulates "the sum total of ... modern attempts to perpetuate colonialism while at the same time talking about 'freedom'". 'Liberation' under neoliberalism has time and again, however, resulted in the escalation of violence, crime, public and political disorder, civil war and xenophobic attacks (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:8). With the abstraction of labour, increasing distancing

<sup>184</sup> Harvey (2005:28) writes that, from the early 1980s, the International Monetary Foundation and World Bank became centres for the propagation and enforcement of "free market fundamentalism" and neoliberal orthodoxy. In return for debt rescheduling, indebted countries were required to implement institutional reforms, such as cuts in welfare expenditures, more flexible labour market laws, and privatisation. Thus 'structural adjustment' was invented. (Harvey 2005:29).

<sup>185</sup> African economies were crippled as erstwhile colonial powers or international business consortiums unconnected to specific states increasingly seized control – sometimes by force, but mostly through economic means – over newly independent states (Nkrumah 1968: x; Ferguson 2009:137). Harvey (2005:27) draws a parallel between late twentieth-century American economic imperialism without former colonies, and the imperialism practised by European powers such as Britain, Holland, France and others.

<sup>186</sup> The Group of Seven, or G7, is made up of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and USA.

<sup>187</sup> One of the shifts in post-apartheid South Africa's political landscape was the emergence of a new politically-connected elite who accrued wealth by using connections to the ANC, which some critics regard as typical of post-revolutionary capitalist regimes which placate and silence their critics by co-opting them into the ranks of privilege and power (Koelble 2008: 166-167).

<sup>188</sup> According to Fanon (2004: 98, 100-102), the native bourgeoisie identify on a psychological level with the Western bourgeoisie, and become intermediaries, acting as a "conveyer belt for capitalism, forced to camouflage themselves behind the mask of neocolonialism" while turning their country into a resource and playground for Europe.

<sup>189</sup> At the same time, the state under Mbeki prioritised initiatives to redress the apartheid legacy of inequality according to the concept and processes of transformation that had been "conceptualised in terms of wealth and income redistribution to previously disenfranchised groups" (Narunsky-Laden 2010:2).

of production from consumption and cheap offshore production in less developed countries, neocolonial powers can absolve themselves of responsibility for exploitative labour practices and environmental degradation, thus compounding the precarity of the formerly colonised (Hall 1999:39)<sup>190</sup>. The world is at once increasingly interdependent and integrated, expedited through new and accelerated interconnections and space-time compression, while gaps between rich and poor, and between developed and developing countries have widened, and inequality continually escalates (Hall 1999: 39).

### **The making of capitalism and race in modern South Africa**

An understanding of the historically complex and fluid politics of consumption and race in South Africa is essential for a clear grasp of the complexities underlying the production of race and of the black body as labour resource (Posel 2010:162). As processes occurring across the colonial world, the co-productions of race, capitalism and consumerism took distinctive form in South Africa. For Biko (2013:30), apartheid was “tied up with white supremacy, capitalist exploitation and deliberate oppression”.

Although race and racial categorisation under apartheid were generally thought to have been based predominantly on biological factors, race emerged and was powerfully judged as social status or category, its signifiers linked to and determined by an individual’s class as formed by and negotiated within a racial capitalist society. “Race in South Africa first manifested itself as a peculiar investment in the cognitive framing of people, things, and relationships”, and this framing is inseparable from the concomitant development of capitalism, the production and exploitation of black labour, and state regulation of consumption (Mbembe 2004:380). Theories of race derived from “people’s relationships to the world of things” (particularly commodities) and the imposition of ‘racial’ categories shaped the access people had to those things (Posel 2010:165)<sup>191</sup>. Despite the legislative efforts of the National Party (the governing party of the apartheid state), however, race could not be “pinned to biological meaning” and as racial legislation proliferated, legal definitions of race became increasingly ambiguous and inconsistent (Mbembe 2004:384). Rather than residing in ‘blood’, or even skin colour, the epistemology of race was continuously shaped by issues of governmentality (Posel 2010: 65). As legislation of racial categories and racialised social and spatial boundaries permeated every aspect of people’s public and personal lives, people’s experience of their worlds and each other was

<sup>190</sup> As to why neocolonialism is the worst or most dangerous form of imperialism, Nkrumah (1968: xiii) argues that neo-colonial power functions without responsibility or moral obligation to those states and peoples it (often remotely) exploits. For Rob Nixon (2011) the aftereffects of slavery and colonialism persist and are aggravated by environmental, political and economic exploitation under neoliberalism. Steadily evolving, the effects of ‘climatic slow violence’ most violently affect the poor of the global south (Nixon 2011).

<sup>191</sup> Posel (2010:160) does not propose a causal argument or linear relationship between histories of racialising and specific racial positions, access to consumption and signifiers of freedom, and writes that interconnections between imaginations of freedom and materialism apply as much to the poor, black and marginalised as to others. The regulation of consumption as instrument for producing and maintaining class positions and social distinction has been intertwined with commodity exchange since antiquity, with social hierarchies often protected through sumptuary laws enforced through harsh penalties (Veblen 1912:69-70)

racialised, and race, in turn, became increasingly social (Posel 2010:165, 168)<sup>192</sup>. In panoptic mode, race was governed through the assessing gaze of officials and civilians, for whom noticeable differences in dress, living arrangements, employment and education became indicators not only of socio-economic status, but also of race as visual shorthand for such distinctions. Since perceptions prevailed that modernity and civilisation were synonymous with European industrialised societies and bourgeois domesticity, working-class and darker-skinned bodies were understood as signifying deficiency and lack of culture, development and refinement (Posel 2010:164-165).

In its contradictory workings, social and economic inequalities were legitimised and sanctioned by racial hierarchies, while those very inequalities were upheld as evidence of that hierarchy of racial differences (Posel 2010:168). Restriction on movement, limited access to education, restricted participation in consumer culture and poorly paying menial labour were the causes of black poverty and ill-education. These factors also prohibited people of colour from achieving through consumption the social and cultural capital to ascend from a position of social and cultural marginalisation.

Correlations between employment and decency are rooted in ancient taboos against labour for the elite, which functioned to uphold class distinctions (Veblen 1912:8). From antiquity to the present day, writes Veblen (1912: 37-38), labour – especially manual labour – carries associations of inferiority and even baseness, while limited contact with industrial processes and a non-productive consumption of time become hallmarks of self-respect, decency and a life of higher pursuits. By “mental short-cut” (Veblen 1912: 37-38), the converse of conspicuous leisure and consumption indicated intrinsic ignobility as they were “incompatible with life on a satisfactory spiritual plane”. Freedom from economic necessity is therefore required to manifest distinction through a cultivated, aesthetic disposition, for turning life into life-style and a product of stylisation (Bourdieu 1984:55-56). The circular reasoning that rationalised labour as indicative of innate baseness, presents two arguments, central to the hegemony of both capitalist ideology and a modern bourgeois order. These arguments naturalised a sharp distinction between the ‘economic’ and ‘political’ spheres (Magubane 2004: 40, 48). By situating the sources and causes of poverty in the natural disposition of the working classes, unemployed and people of colour, the structural and historical causes behind the poverty, behaviour and

<sup>192</sup> The creation of white suburbs, ‘reserves’ of cheap black labour in the form of townships and tribal ‘homelands’ and the attempted control of movement of racialised bodies between these areas, produced racialised spaces for living, working and consumption, in turn marking the bodies ‘belonging’ to ‘white’ or ‘black’ spaces in terms of race (Mbembe 2004:385). Territorial fragmentation under apartheid distributed separate freedoms according to existing ethno-racial categories, yet boundaries drawn within and between reserves, hostels and ‘homelands’ often divided black ethnic groups despite longstanding interconnections (Mbembe 2004: 392). There is also an ironic significance in the term ‘homeland’, suggestive of *Heimat*, domicile and domesticity which, according to modern, bourgeois conceptions of home and domesticity, makes it impossible for black people to attain ‘decent’ domesticity as they live outside the geographic and cultural space where this is possible.

disposition of the poor are obscured (Magubane 2004:40,48). Central to Marx's (2010:49) formulation of commodity fetishism, is the concealment of the social dimensions and human relations of labour and production. Commodity production and consumption obscures the "definite social relation between men [so that it] assumes in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx 2010:47). Marx's critique highlights a duality of visible/obscure or revealing/concealing inherent to commodity production and consumption, which is paralleled in the simultaneous hypervisibility and obscurity of black bodies and black histories, in the examples of subject appropriation discussed later.

The repression of the social relations of production facilitates arguments for the innate baseness of workers, and the need to 'civilise' the poor or colonised so they may become capable of rational and abstract thought. Simultaneously, the discourse of 'noble' savagery venerates and romanticises the supposed innate authenticity and peaceability of societies with no apparent industry or consumer culture (see Hall 1992:312-313)<sup>193</sup>. As 'naturally' Other to the bourgeois capitalist order, the native African of Enlightenment discourse comes to signify the lack that is both mirror of and elixir for an overly-refined, materialistic western society. The noble savage trope found expression in modern décor accessories like statuettes, plaques or functional sculpture of semi-nude black bodies in languid poses or bearing lamps and ashtrays. Alternatively, depictions of black workers and slaves featured on décor objects, furniture and crockery. According to Jan Neverdeen Pieterse (1992:158-160), commodity racism and imperialism reproduced the symbolism of an "iconography of servitude" that was the legacy of pre-capitalist chattel slavery. The visual device used to connote power, privilege and wealth is that of black servants juxtaposed with their white masters. This iconography was entrenched through Orientalist and Baroque art and globalised through modern brands, logos and motifs. It is seen on the eighteenth-century Wedgwood teapot in Figure 4.2, decorated with an image of a young slave waiting on a fashionable couple<sup>194</sup>. Though the teapot brings the image of the slave into the domestic realm, it disassociates the 'civilised' British ritual of tea drinking from the violence of slave-produced tea and sugar. Apart from the Rococo rendering of the homiletic scene, the distance between the slave and his masters – a break in the scene – divorces the couple from the slave's body and any traces of slavery it might convey. The man further disregards the slave entirely as he holds out his cup for filling: as index of European status, the black slave is hyper-visible, while as servant he is a near-invisible automaton.

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<sup>193</sup> In Veblen's (1912:36) teleological account of the emergence of the leisure class one sees a clear romanticising of those who have 'not yet' achieved a defined system of individual ownership. According to Veblen (1912:7), these groups "seems to include the most peaceable- perhaps all the characteristically peaceable - primitive groups of men".

<sup>194</sup> The same company produced the famous abolitionist medallion several decades later and the difference in its depiction of slaves may point to shifts in British attitudes to slavery (Morris 2016).



Fig. 4.2. Josiah Wedgwood, teapot, c.1775-1780. Lead-glazed earthenware with transfer print (Morris 2016).

### Race, biopower and superfluity

The presence of black workers in apartheid South Africa, in both white public and private spheres, was simultaneously denied and induced. Indispensable and yet expendable, the bodies of workers and servants in white spaces were at once invisible and hyper-visible. While Posel and Mbembe emphasise the social production of race, they also argue for the state's obsession with the physical body as prominent site upon which power is inscribed. As people, things and relationships are cognitively framed in terms of race within racial capitalist systems, bio-power functions through the subjugation of practical and mental forms to social utilitarianism, and the degeneration and reorganising of value, particularly of black labour and black life (Mbembe 2004:380-381)<sup>195</sup>. The racial bio-politics operating within the apartheid state and economy had the conjoined goals of maintaining racial segregation and regulating the different races' access to money and commodities and the meanings these could have (Posel 2010:167). For Foucault (1978:140-141), bio-power was "without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism". Following Foucault, Mbembe (2004:391-392) identifies two techniques of technologies of power and profit centred on both the

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<sup>195</sup> Since my focus is the commodification of historical images of black Africans, I chiefly discuss the subjugation and thingification of black Africans under conditions of slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism. As it is not within the scope of this study, I do not discuss – but by no means negate – the contemporaneous disenfranchisement and inhumane treatment of those peasants, slaves, workers, immigrants and social minorities who are not black and/or Africans.

(black) migrant worker's individual body and the racial body of the populace. The first is the anatomo-political, which focuses on the human body as machine, and the second focuses on the biological<sup>196</sup>.

As the hub of South Africa's economy and the source of new wealth, Johannesburg was founded, suggests Mbembe (2004:380), within the sphere of 'superfluity', a distinctive feature of late capitalism and metropolitan life-forms. While superfluity connotes excess and indulgence, for Mbembe (2004:398) it suggests several interconnected relationships, processes and experiences<sup>197</sup>. Distinctions between meaning and form collapse, and superfluity describes "a mode of psychic experience in which the distinctions between things, and thus things themselves, become meaningless (Mbembe 2004:389-399). It signifies extravagance, pleasure, luxury, conspicuous spectacle, vanity and caprice, and can be applied to the hypnotising, paralysing aesthetics of surfaces and quantities (Mbembe 2004: 378). It describes modes or relations to objects and manifests in "domains as varied as the consumption of food and drink, houses and interiors (types of furniture, floors, walls, ceilings, doors and windows, chimneys and fireplaces, furnaces and stoves), and costume and fashion" (Mbembe 2004: 378-379). Superfluity connotes waste, which Veblen (1912:85) identifies as evidence of pecuniary strength. Whether the consumer's expenditure is that of goods, services or even human life, for it to "effectually mend the consumer's good fame it must be an expenditure of superfluities. In order to be reputable, it must be wasteful" (Veblen 1912:96).

A key feature of superfluity, writes Mbembe (2004:381, 391-392), is the dissolution and reorganisation of value "in the realm of the biopolitical", which relates to Foucault's (1978: 139) notion of the anatomo-politics of the human body as one pole of bio-power. Here power centres on the body as machine: "its disciplining, optimisation of its capabilities, exhortation of its forces, parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls" (Foucault 1978:139). As a racist political economy, apartheid disciplined black labour through dehumanising and alienating black people. For Biko (2013:30-31) white domination's goal was black subservience, attained through material, spiritual and mental means: "producing at the output end of [its] machine a kind of black man who is only a man in form ... completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity".

<sup>196</sup> Evolving from the seventeenth century, according to Foucault (1978:139), bio-power constitutes two forms or poles of interconnected development, in turn connected by an intermediary cluster of relations. The first pole is the "anatomo-political. The second pole is focused on the body as basis of biological processes, saturated with the mechanics of life, its supervision accomplished through a series of "interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*" (Foucault 1978:139, italics in original).

<sup>197</sup> Mbembe's use of the term derives from Marx's notion of superfluity, part of the latter's broader discussion on money and commodity value in *Grundrisse* (Mbembe 2004:378). The commodities which "best serve the needs of *exchange as such* [...] represent superfluity, the form in which wealth originates" (Marx cited in Mbembe 2004:378, italics in the original). For Marx, "superfluity also pertains to 'the sphere of satisfactions and enjoyments,' to the 'world of gratifications and 'fleeting pleasures'" (cited in Mbembe 2004:378).

Foundational to the racialised institution of private property is the trade in black labour – demanded and valued for its industrial utility – by a market which is "predetermined by a logic of productive sacrifice" (Mbembe 2004:380). Mbembe (2004:380) defines the resulting dynamic as a "calculus of superfluity" within which racism functions in two ways: 1) maintaining the barriers of biological differences between people in contexts of increasing connections and hybridity; 2) creating a contradictory relation between the centrality and worth of black life in the market sphere, and the constant devaluation of its value and its quality through the forces of commodification and prejudice. At the intersection of colonialism and racial capitalism in southern Africa, black labour became both disposable and indispensable, rendering native lives expendable, yet essential for industrial growth and wealth accumulation by a white minority (Mbembe 2004: 381). As the world and its life-forms were subjected to exact calculating, measuring and enumerating, black workers became a "necessary sacrifice" (Mbembe 2004: 381,398). With little choice and little else to sell but their labour at the pittances offered, the landless, uprooted and disenfranchised indigenous peoples turned migrant labourers were rendered superfluous (Mbembe 2004:379). Here, superfluity connotes the precarity, waste, degradation and even termination of black lives and bodies as its calculus presumed black life as a necessary and redeemable sacrifice in furthering European civilisation, progress and capitalism (Mbembe 2004: 381). In such an economy, the native body is 'thingified'. "They talk to me about civilisation, I talk about proletarianisation and mystification", writes Césaire (2000:44) of the noble justifications for colonisation, proffered in bad faith when its goals are the reification and commodification of native lives and bodies.

No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonising man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. My turn to state an equation: colonisation = 'thingification'" (Césaire 2000:42).

Likewise for Biko (2013:55-56) "white systems have produced through the world a number of people who are not aware that they too are people". Both Césaire and Biko present an exposition of the primacy of bio-power to the development of capitalism, with native bodies monitored, disciplined, enumerated, constrained and rendered thing-like to make racial capitalism economically viable. As I show below, postcolonial consumer discourse and décor design retain traces of black people's reification under racial capitalism and frequently deploy these as standards of luxury and status.

#### 4.3 Neoliberalism, consumerism and the rhetoric of liberty

The initial democratising of consumption through industrialisation and capitalism is accelerated in late capitalism, and the increasing and instantly available possibilities for self-expression and distinction are indivisible from the changing status of production and consumption at the turn of the century (Schneider

2006:203; Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:9)<sup>198</sup>. To the Comaroffs (2001:10) the increasing virtuality of fiscal circulation and wealth accumulation exacerbates a tendency of “conceiving of humans as disposable” and it “enables the speculative side of capitalism to act as if it were entirely independent of human manufacture”. In this context, writes Maurizio Lazzarato (2009:119-120), “contemporary policies regarding employment ... are policies that introduce degrees of insecurity, instability, uncertainty, economic, and existential precarity into the lives of individuals”. With capital and governance managed technologically and according to algorithmic structures, so are useful knowledge and human life, which for Mbembe (2016) spells the sinister development that “contempt will be extended to anyone who has nothing to sell”: the ‘little’ people of neoliberal, post-industrialised societies, and those “who cannot be named” (Bond 2016).

As a mode of relation between objects, superfluity marks a sphere of decadence and caprice, capable of producing affects and surfaces that dazzle consumers, immersed in neoliberalism’s freedoms. Reflecting on the absence of service workers in retail areas, Iqani and Kenny (2015:103) write that it is only with the repression in public awareness of the difficult, daily reality of low-wage workers facilitating the production and circulation of commodities that consumption can be called an arena of freedom. The individual should consume commodities as items of pleasure and confirmation of status and identity, without having that experience disrupted by knowledge of the commodity’s social origins and conditions of production. “The object must be understood as if objectively characterised by its label and price”, states Billig (1999:319). In a process of repression, “consumers must routinely *not* think about labour relations involved in production of what they’re consuming” (Billig 1999:318, italics in original). However, as news media, humanitarian aid organisations and celebrities foreground exploitative labour practices, the origins of commodities in inequality and exploitation are not entirely unknown or suppressed.

As an alternative marketing strategy, some companies highlight relations and conditions of production as integral to company values. Consumption itself is also promoted as an antidote to the ills of capitalism. This manifested in nineteenth-century marketing discourse, where abolitionist discourse was appropriated to promote consumption as part of philanthropic effort (see Chapter six). Today this is seen in ‘fair trade’ companies, which may feature the identities and life stories of employees in promotional material or on the commodities (Wright 2004). Through partial exposure of social origins by employer or corporation, consumer pleasure remains intact, and spending is legitimated (and sublimated) as an opportunity to contribute to the

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<sup>198</sup> According to Ferguson (2009:168), twentieth-century social democracies (and to a greater extent socialist states), were “built on the putatively universal figure of ‘the worker’”. This changed following the end of the Cold War and near-global roll-out of neoliberal policies. Socialist ideals gave “way to a spirit of deregulation, with its taunting mix of emancipation and limitation” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:8).

alleviation of inequality (Wright 2004:678). “The repressed”, writes Billig (1999:127), “can also return in safe forms”. For Wright (2004:678), such campaigns may achieve better working conditions and fairer labour practices but as “respect for difference” occurs through consumption of difference, the misrecognition of minorities and persistence of Othering often prevails.

Since the early 1980s, neoliberalism has “become a hegemonic mode of discourse” with its principles of individualism and freedom incorporated into the “way we interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey 2005:3). Marxist critic, David Harvey (2005:2) defines neoliberalism as a “theory of political economic practices” which purports that conditions for human well-being are best created by freeing of markets and trade from state intervention and by guaranteeing strong property rights and individual entrepreneurial freedom. Weakened by ongoing global capitalism, the nation state is under continuous transformation as a ‘consumer state’ substitutes the ‘citizen state’ (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:33). As the market eclipses the state as reference point of national belonging, commercial ritual supplants the political, and citizens experience national belonging through common participation in a range of consumption practices (Foster 1999:264). South Africa embraced neoliberal practices and ideology more than two decades after its adoption became a widespread international trend. During the anti-apartheid struggle liberation movements and trade unions denounced capitalist values and systems, instead espousing an ideological position informed by socialist principles (Posel 2010:158). Following the negotiated transition to democracy and the ANC’s electoral victory in 1994, the South African economy was restructured according to neoliberal principles, largely relinquishing the Marxist ideology of the struggle movement (Koelble 2008:160).

According to many critics, neoliberalisation is a project of securing upper class economic power while causing greater inequality, and amplifying the precarity of the world’s poor and working classes (Ferguson 2009:170). Harvey (2005:158-159) has labelled neoliberalism “accumulation by dispossession”, identifying its greatest achievement as not the generation, but the redistribution of wealth and income to the elite. The discourse of the free market has become an acceptable and celebrated doctrine among subjects in consumer societies as they witness and participate in the “remorseless commodification of ever more finely targeted areas of everyday life” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:13-14). Through privatisation and commodification, enabled by instruments such as patent and copyright laws, neoliberalism allows for the profitable mining of areas until recently exempt from exploitation (Harvey 2005:160). These domains include: intangible, cultural heritage such as folklore and songs, knowledge, grassroots culture, creative practices and spiritual ceremonies, ethnic and tribal identities, biological material such as seeds, breeds and botanical varieties, and human bodily material such as blood, ova, semen and DNA (Harvey 2005:160; Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:38). Furthermore, under post-Fordist and knowledge-based capitalist production, it is intellectual, communicative

and immaterial labour power that are the dominant producers of surplus value and are therefore at the centre of accumulation (Hardt & Negri 2000:29). The production and consumption of immaterial products such as images, spectacular affects, information and experiences have achieved unprecedented prominence in markets and private lives. This shift occurred simultaneously with and intertwined with new technologies of media and platforms of consumption. Immaterial products – detached from their socio-political, historical contexts of origin or production – are readily available online, expediting re-appropriation and commodification.

Late, twentieth century shifts towards democracy and neoliberalism, presented the prospects that accumulation, consumption, entrepreneurship and speculation would be liberties available to the majority, including in former colonies (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:25). However, at the turn of the century, the working class, unemployed and ethnic, racial, gender and religious minorities remain predominantly excluded from such ‘freedoms’<sup>199</sup>. Zygmunt Bauman (cited in Lury 2011:11-12) observes that “...behind the ostensible equality of chances the market promotes and advertises hides the practical inequality of consumers – that is, the sharply differentiated degrees of practical freedom of choice”. With the notion that the wealth and opportunity produced by liberalised markets will ‘trickle down’ to the poor and working class, capitalism at the millennium emerges in ways messianic, salvific and even magical (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:2). This millennial capitalism, the Comaroffs (2001:2) write, seems to “present itself as a gospel of salvation; a capitalism that, if rightly harnessed, is invested with the capacity wholly to transform the universe of the marginalised and disempowered”. The increasing precarity and impoverishment of larger numbers of people worldwide, however, contradicts the rhetoric of liberty and salvation<sup>200</sup>. Where freedom is consigned to “freedom of enterprise”, warns Harvey (2005:80), it “unleashes negative freedoms”. For him, neoliberalism cannot coexist with majority rule and democracy, as it paradoxically suppresses democratic rights and liberties while proclaiming insurance of individual freedom (Harvey 2005: 66-70, 81).

Although knowledge-based production and venture capitalism by no means heralded the end of commodity production (material objects remain foundational to consumer society), neoliberalism has fundamentally altered the conditions of the worker (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:7). Full-time, permanent employment has globally been replaced with so-called ‘flexible labour’ in the form of short-term contracts, consultancy and

<sup>199</sup> A significant percentage of the populations of Euro-American societies are dispossessed, writes Lury (2011:11), and in the Global South the percentage is greater. In South Africa, 55.5% of the population live in poverty, of which 64.2 % are black Africans, and 28.4% live in extreme poverty, with children, women, black Africans and rural dwellers most severely affected (Poverty trends in South Africa 2017:14.69). The majority therefore cannot freely access the economic resources needed for engaging in various forms of commodity consumption.

<sup>200</sup> Recent research by French economist Thomas Piketty (2015) shows that income inequality increased internationally since the adoption of neoliberalism.

piecework, which have rendered the lives of a mass of workers increasingly precarious and insecure (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:4; Harvey 2005:74-75)<sup>201</sup>. Another impulse of millennial capitalism is a radical decontextualising of labour, marked by the distancing of labour from “placed and sociomoral pressures” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:13). While a globalised world is celebrated as a cosmopolitan (super)market open to all, for Thomas and Clark (2008:9), old parameters of measuring difference have been reactivated and reenergised to contribute to a rise in ethnic and racial hierarchies, tightly-drawn nationalisms, sectarianism, fundamentalism, xenophobia and racism. On the African continent the post-Fordist precarisation<sup>202</sup> of labour-power is accompanied by neocolonial dispossession, described as “crude battering open of Third World markets” by Ferguson (2009:173)<sup>203</sup>. Precarisation and superfluity have not gone uncontested, as shown by the global justice movements, international labour, social and youth movements, including strike action, formation of new socialist political parties, online campaigns and arts initiatives. Within its capitalist context of expression, such worker and resistance movements are regularly commodified and domesticated for consumption by those benefitting from the exploitation of protesting workers.

This finds expression in a magazine advertisement for the furniture design company, Southern Hospitality’s ‘lima sofa’ (Fig. 4.4)<sup>204</sup>. The advertisement features a modular sofa unit positioned on the dirty floor of a broken-down building. The largest of two walls bears a mural depicting a group of black men with fists in the air, heads lifted, and mouths open, as if singing. The mural, *Cape Town 2014 - Freedom Day* (2014) by street artist Ricky Lee Gordon (also known by the moniker, Freddy Sam), was painted in a building in Woodstock, Cape Town, to commemorate twenty years of democracy. Positioning the sofa inside the un-homely, inhospitable structure and against the mural, the advertisement brings together political and private, domestic and public. The advertisement’s substitution of upper-class interior - the sofa’s ‘natural’ habitat - with filthy, derelict structure and advancing, larger-than-life demonstrators, introduces a frisson of danger and excitement. Unlike Martha Rosler’s aim of affecting disquiet, with her juxtaposition of war and home in

<sup>201</sup>Under the banner of the freedom of the individual, maintains Harvey (2005:42), neoliberalism’s ideological programme captures the ideals and the rhetoric of freedom to impede labour regulation and dismantle state and labour union intervention, thereby protecting and restoring the interests of the capitalist classes. In Chapter six I elaborate on the appropriation of liberation symbols and discourse by post-apartheid designers.

<sup>202</sup> Precarisation is used here as derived from the political term ‘precarity’, used to describe the various uncertainties of life and work in post-industrial societies. Precarisation describes the increasing uncertainty and change in employment conditions, and the increase in the number of people rendered precarious, specifically workers in flexible, casual, part-time work, with women, children and migrants worst affected. In political terms it is not connected to Butler’s use of the term, but as global process certainly contributes to the (Butlian) precarity of people.

<sup>203</sup> Ferguson (2009:172-173) highlights two differences between the adoption of neoliberalism in the west and “neoliberalism in the African sense”, where it refers firstly to the forcing of policy measures on African states in the early 1980s. Secondly, Ferguson (2009:173) argues, neoliberalism in Africa was not very ‘new’ at all as ‘structural adjustment’ largely resemble “old-style *laissez-faire* liberalism in the service of imperial capital”.

<sup>204</sup> Southern Hospitality specialises in furniture design for the South African hospitality industry.

*Vacation Getaway* (Fig. 1.2), the charge generated through this juxtaposition transforms politics into domestic décor, rather than disrupting the domestic.

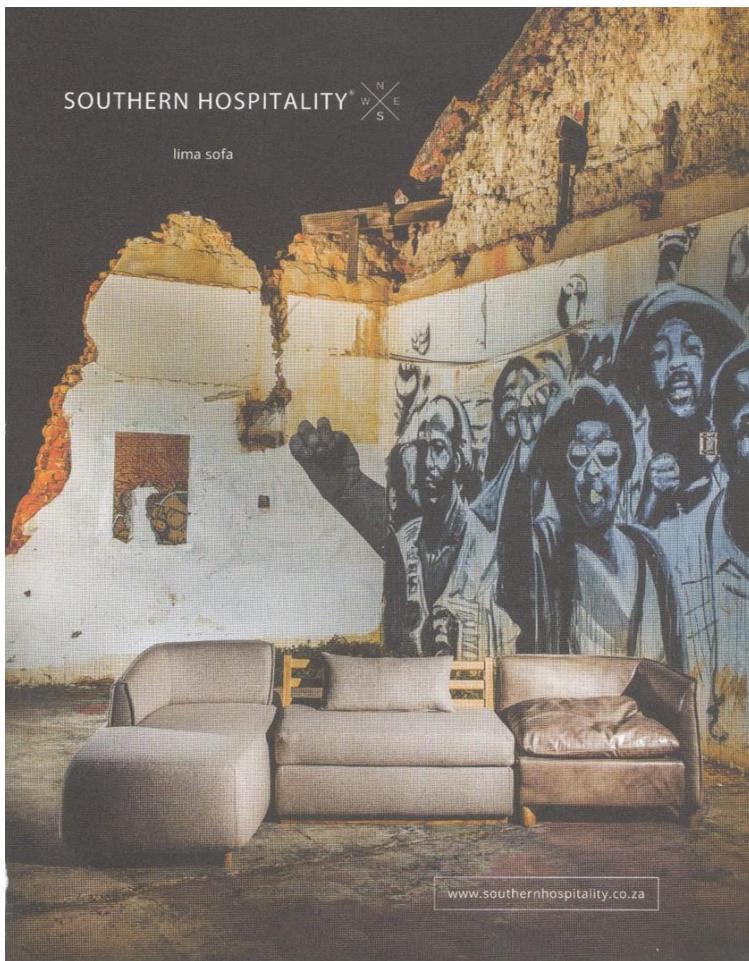


Fig. 4.3. *Southern Hospitality. Lima Sofa*, 2015. Colour magazine advertisement. (*Visi* June/July 2015:10).

Any charge of danger is promptly mitigated by the restrained, geometric proportions of both the sofa and typeface used for the brand name, Southern Hospitality. The crowd of black men participating in a public demonstration becomes representative of the body politic of democratic South Africa, and provides through contrast a foil and Other to the consumer and owner of the sofa. The singular designer item is an index of leisure that distinguishes the individual consumer's socio-economic position as one of freedom to cultivate an aesthetic disposition and focus on aesthetics, despite immediate social change and decay.

Under millennial capitalism, write Comaroff and Comaroff (2001:13): "The poor are no longer at the gates; bosses live in enclaved communities a world away, beyond political or legal reach." For Biko (2013:24), liberals who benefit from the apartheid status quo treat black oppression as "peripheral problem" and "an eyesore

spoiling an otherwise beautiful view". Bourgeois enclaves may provide some refuge but can't erase the 'eyesore' constituted by the dispossessed majority. Aestheticising poverty and struggle, often through appropriation of its visual records, offers a promotional strategy for mitigating fear, guilt, discomfort or disgust. Within the post-apartheid sphere of superfluity , urban design emerges as "acts of repression, separation, and fantasy", with such fantasies frequently involving the entralling power of race grafted onto things (Mbembe 2004: 405).



Fig. 4.4. Ricky Lee Gordon, *Cape Town 2014 – Freedom Day*, 2014. Mural. Woodstock, Cape Town, Photograph by Rory Allen.  
(Ricky Lee Gordon 2018).

The brand's name – Southern Hospitality – suggests friendly reception by the South, and thus Africa or Africans. Floating above the setting, the name produces extra charge in its ironic and transgressive juxtaposition of spheres conventionally separated: production and consumption, working and leisure class, poverty and wealth. The transgression is fleeting, as the images of urban decay, street art and mass action are

simulacra, surface and spectacle, which serve as mere backdrops to a designer couch<sup>205</sup>. The revolutionary symbolism, of raised black fists, is appropriated to bolster the exchange value and distinctive commodity fetishism of the brand<sup>206</sup>. The intention in featuring the men in Gordon's mural might have been to celebrate democracy and freedom. The mural is, however, cropped to exclude the soaring doves and the face of a laughing woman (Fig. 4.4). As Gordon's mural bears no title and allows for diverse readings, with its surest signifiers of freedom and celebration cropped, the painting of larger-than-life men set against a filthy, ruined wall and pitch-black background, invites associations with menace. With the prevalence of (frequently violent) service-delivery protests and industrial action in post-apartheid South Africa, performed almost exclusively by working class black men, readers of *Visi* would likely decode the mural as depicting expressions of anger rather than joy. Further, through visual equivalence it activates longstanding metaphoric equivalences – of black bodies with Africa as dark continent, of danger, evil and disease – that are entrenched in Western language, culture and terms of reference. The emphasis, particularly through scale, of the de-contextualised subjects and actions depicted, the textual and interpretive codes that direct the advertisement's decoding, enable "the subjects [to] finally become symbols of themselves" (Edwards 1996:209). Signifier and signified are conflated and under the illusion of denotation, the connotative and symbolic are presented as literal.

In contrast to the background, the white capitals of the brand name create a horizontal band running parallel with the solid base of the sofa: in a world of turmoil, brand and commodity bring stability and comfort to the home. The inclusion of ordinary, black South Africans celebrating democracy might have been an attempt by the company to address this demographic as consumers, newly-liberated to enjoy consumption of the brand. However, with the dominant readership of the magazine at Life Style Measure of 9-10, very few South Africans enjoy the financial means to consume either the product, or the magazine.

### **Freedom to consume**

For Comaroff and Comaroff (2001:4), "consumption, in its ideological guise – as 'consumerism' – refers to a material sensibility, actively cultivated for the common good, by Western states and commercial interests, particularly since World War II". Over the course of the twentieth century, consumerism in South Africa expanded, within the context of racial capitalism under apartheid, then shifting into and affecting the post-transitional economy. In fully re-joining the global economy, the South African ANC government's promises,

<sup>205</sup> Graffiti is an historically transgressive act and still illegal under Cape Town bylaws. From the 1990s Woodstock experienced increasing gentrification and the graffiti on its streets is used by estate agents and tourist companies in marketing the suburb's edgy, but charming character.

<sup>206</sup> Gordon (2018) stated that Southern Hospitality did not have permission to use the image of his mural. As Gordon too appropriated his source material, the advertisement presents a multi-layered instance of subject appropriation. Unlike Southern Hospitality, Gordon's motives were socio-politic rather than explicitly commercial. Gordon declined further comment on the issue.

to deliver ‘a better life for all’, have been constrained by having to negotiate between the demands of global markets and local business, and political mandates. The latter involve pressures to build a national identity, while attending to the often contradictory and shifting demands of diverse economic, ethnic, national and socio-cultural groups (Koelble 2008:168). Despite limited successes achieved with state programmes and policies of economic redress and economic deracialising, since 1994 South Africa has become one of the most unequal countries in the world<sup>207</sup>. It has a Gini coefficient of 0.65 and unemployment at 27,7% and with black people constituting the overwhelming majority who are unemployed, poor and lacking access to education (Living Conditions Survey 2014/15).

Consumption takes specific significance and shape in post-apartheid South Africa, where consumerism and commodity fetishism – rather than a new collective political project – emerged as a state-sanctioned expression of freedom and newly ‘arrived’ class position<sup>208</sup> (Kistner 2015: 249-250). As “individual and collective agency in the material realm becomes politicised”, write Mehita Iqani and Bridget Kenny (2015: 97), new publics are produced and the visibility of and participation in consumption are both contested and celebrated. The way in which freedom is imagined and signified is therefore rooted in the intertwined histories of the making of South Africa’s racial order and the regulation of people’s agency, aspirations and identities as consumers. “If blackness was produced as in part a restricted regime of consumption”, Posel proffers, “the politics of enrichment could readily adopt the discourse and symbolism of emancipation” (Posel 2010:173)<sup>209</sup>. For sociologist Mandisi Majavu (2013), black South Africans have come to regard personal enrichment as a subversive act and materialism as a revolutionary concept after apartheid, because blackness is historically associated with poverty and limited choices, while whiteness is associated in the popular imagination with wealth and ease<sup>210</sup>.

Posel (2016) and Ferguson (2009) caution against taking either a moralistic or celebratory approach to this development, recognising the transformative, creative and subversive potential – for self-invention, reclaiming space and authority – offered by greater participation in consumer culture. In the era of global capitalism,

<sup>207</sup> According to Piketty (2015: 5-9), income inequality in South Africa is currently “extremely high by international and historical standards”, the wealthiest 10% taking 60-65% of the income share, compared to 30-35% in Europe, 45-50% in the USA and 55-60% in Brazil. Statistics for 2014/2015 show that white-headed households had an income 3 times that of the average household and about 4.5 times of black African-headed households (Living conditions survey 2017: 14-15).

<sup>208</sup> Following 1994, transformation and redress rendered in the rhetoric of neoliberalism became prominent in public and media discourse, with “financial betterment and corporate success... as political objectives in their own right” (Narunsny-Laden 2010:8).

<sup>209</sup> The contested term ‘black diamond’ came to be used in South Africa to describe the new black middle-class, particularly those manifesting their class position through conspicuous acquisition. The term is applied to social structures and strata so heterogeneous as to make it unworkable as category of analysis and is used, according to Kistner (2015:249), rather as coinage where “advertising, market research and the media [attempt] to frame black South Africans as consumers”.

<sup>210</sup> Kistner (2015:247-248) reminds that interconnections between cultural-political forces and expressions of individual freedom through commercial means is neither new nor particular to South Africa. Further, by no means did conspicuous consumption as assertion of black independence and distinction suddenly emerge after the fall of apartheid (See Magubane 2004).

desire and aspiration find expression through consumption and reveal the “work of the imagination” (Appadurai 1997:7). Unlike fantasy that dissipates, the imagination, writes Appadurai (1997:7) “has a projective sense about it, the sense of being a prelude to some sort of expression, whether aesthetic or otherwise”. Consumption of interior décor offers scope for expressions of freedom (particularly for black citizens formerly denied the opportunities and access to consumer culture) and of belonging (particularly for white citizens desirous to express belonging to the new multiculturalist, democratic dispensation)<sup>211</sup>.

Although not arguing that consumption is liberating, Appadurai (1996:7), cautions against assuming an absence of agency among the working class, and that the masses are ineffective dupes. In a globalised context ,where both viewers (consumers) and images are de-territorialised and in motion, the human imagination has the potential to consume creatively. Not suggesting that “consumers are *free* agents, living happily in a world of safe malls, free lunches, and quick fixes”, Appadurai (1997:7, italics in original) argues that “resistance, irony, selectivity and, in general, *agency*” are provoked as people consume mass media, and that the pleasure generated through consumption should not be discredited as a source and exercise of agency. “Freedom, on the other hand”, he writes, “is a rather more elusive commodity” (Appadurai 1996:7).

Desire plays a vital role in consumer culture and is central to expressive acts of consumer appropriation. From psychoanalytic perspectives, the unconscious powerfully informs our desires and their expression through consumption. These desires are further elicited and forcefully shaped through overt and subliminal publicity. In 1899 Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1912) introduced the notion of conspicuous consumption, whereby the new financial elite of the industrial era consume and waste goods and leisure time to signify status and pecuniary power, and to distinguish themselves from the ‘lower classes’<sup>212</sup>. To consume and possess an over-abundance of goods and to abstain from work fails, however, to communicate wealth or power and yield admiration if those classed with oneself are not aware of this. “[E]steem is awarded only on evidence”, writes Veblen (1912:36). Conspicuous consumption is always about the desire for recognition and therefore the appraising gaze of others plays a central and powerful role in the establishment and maintenance of one’s power, status, dignity and acceptance by others. In addition, esteem can only be awarded when evidence of status is communicated to a community of similar habitus who appreciate and identify with that specific ‘language’ of distinction, who recognise and enjoy similar signs (Bourdieu 1984:170).

<sup>211</sup> It is important to note that the forms consumers give to imagined freedoms or belonging, their perceptions of consumer goods counting as necessities or luxuries, their needs and wants, sense of style and taste, cannot be placed in direct, universal relationship to their economic standing, or for that matter race (Lury 2011:12).

<sup>212</sup> For Veblen (1912) consumption is not a new phenomenon, but it takes specific form in the West with the emergence of a new leisure class, and the extension of consumerism to middle and working classes as feudalism gave way to modern capitalism, which in turn was globalised through imperialism.

In the twenty-first century, digital technologies, social media platforms and international, multimedia networks, facilitate instantaneous, international broadcasts of consumer spending. Until recently, most domestic interiors were only seen by those granted physical entry by its inhabitants. Today media sharing sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, enable individual consumers to document and publicise acquisitions and the curating of aesthetic disposition at home.

Veblen's (1912:36-37) argument, that conspicuous consumption secures recognition and self-esteem, resonates with Lacan's theorising of consumption and commodity fetishism in terms of desire. "Man's desire is the desire of the Other", states Lacan (cited in Hewitson 2017). For him, our desire is first and foremost a desire for recognition by the Other<sup>213</sup> This desire, however, is also the desire for what we believe or hope the Other desires; the Other that we desire recognition from. Advertising and the conspicuous consumption of others affect our perception of and relation to ourselves, always also the object of our own gaze<sup>214</sup>. When consuming publicity images, Berger (1974:134) writes: "The spectator-buyer is meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others". The state of achieved recognition by, or distinction from, others through the signifiers of consumption and commodities is, however, constantly deferred. As consumption is one of the primary methods of affecting the Other's desire and acceptance in consumer society, individuals continually search for niche markets and new distinctive products to generate respect, status, social differentiation and distinction (Kistner 2015:25). As I show below, new products frequently deploy older tropes and iconographic traditions to address consumer desire.

### **Whiteness and consuming to belong**

"Whiteness in the postcolonial moment continues to retain much of its status and desirability, if not its overt colonial-era power", writes López (2005:2). Although South African whites experienced a radical, political demotion in 1994, whites did not relinquish social, cultural and economic capital. For many white South Africans apartheid's end did however, mean the collapse of the ideological foundations of their identity, leaving many struggling to negotiate feelings of betrayal, alienation, fear and guilt. In this context, writes Melissa Steyn (2012:122), "being 'white' is replete with dissonance. Whites need to find new narratives to

<sup>213</sup> Theorising of alterity by authors such as Lacan and Fanon derives from Hegel's dialectic of recognition where the self is defined in relation to an 'other' through and as difference. As signifier produced through difference to the subject, the 'other' shifts perpetually. In Lacan, 'Other' might denote another person (a "more 'otherly' other", their desires inscrutable), or the symbolic order (the social domain of language, intersubjective relations, the law, social mores and ideals) (Hewitson 2017).

<sup>214</sup> This is amplified in a culture of selfies, and the endless scope for self-publicity and invention on media sharing sites. Although intersections of debates about race and appropriation with scholarship on the gaze, social media and identity offer rich potential, this falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

explain who they are, what they are doing in Africa, and what their relationship is to the indigenous people and to the continent".

New frames of understanding and identification had to be found, as political and social pressures militated against whiteness, seeking to deconstruct white privilege and the presumed "naturalness" of being thus privileged" (Steyn 2012:119,122). Through processes of reconciliation and nation-building, intergroup relations had to be re-articulated, which demanded "a substantial reframing of social identities" (Steyn 2005:119). As economies respond to and foster desires for both uniqueness and belonging, business and advertising appropriate dominant discourses (political, social, civil), to target consumers of various demographic groups. In South Africa, business, consumer culture and designers, contributed to and reflected the processes whereby the nation was imagined and branded anew. Upon scrutiny, promotional media and commodities reveal the tensions of establishing democracy, transforming society and rebranding South Africa as global player. Commercial visual culture further addresses and reflects the manifest and latent desires, uncertainties and fears of whites navigating belonging in a new nation and negotiating citizenship within a global consumerist context.

This is not to suggest that national belonging dominated white consumer choices during apartheid or since the end of apartheid. Forster (1999:279) reminds that the nation is just "one identity among others available in the global marketplace", with consumers participating in sub-national and international identities at the same time, frequently shifting affiliation, as trends or socio-political contexts change. Like consumers worldwide in nation states destabilised under neoliberalism and globalisation, whites may express affiliation to a multiplicity and diversity of "new imagined communities" through consumer practices, with consumer choices inflected by conscious and unconscious desire, always contextually contingent (Foster 1999: 264)<sup>215</sup>.

According to Michael Herbst (2005:17), promotional texts are designed to match target consumers' capacity to decipher and derive pleasure or meaningful information from the text. Design, like advertising and marketing, attempts to establish identification between products and consumers, not only in the function or use, but also the 'look and feel' of a product (Du Gay et all 2013: 59). In this way design communicates – on behalf of the product – in terms of identity and meaning, addressing a consumer as "a certain sort of person", and advertisements and products are thus encoded with a specific type of consumer in mind (Du Gay *et al* 2013:59). Although advertising cannot control how addressees decipher promotional texts, it does construct texts to match the target consumer's capacity to decipher specific forms of address, which includes

<sup>215</sup> Anderson (1983) highlighted the centrality of print capitalism to people's imagining of themselves as members of a community of fellow readers.

considering the media literacy and cultural capital of target audiences. Promotional material addresses existing desires, giving us objects that make our (conscious or subliminal) desires meaningful (Herbst 2005:15). Unstructured, already existing desire is linked by adverts to specific commodities, and according to Herbst (2005:17, italics in original), “the key to this linkage is *identification* – the process whereby one associates with something to take on some of its qualities”.

As a complex, multi-faceted practice, consumption involves processes of observation, selection, imagining, trying on, comparing, purchasing, taking home, composing, using, customising, showing and integrating commodities into one’s environment (Jenβ 2009:328). Through these processes, “mass-produced fashion becomes singular and personally invested with meanings, including charging it with the value of the personal and unique” (Jenβ 2009:328). Viewed as such, consumption is a “key practice in identity work and in localising oneself in society”, which offers scope for imaginative expression beyond the act of selection and purchase (Jenβ 2009:328). For Featherstone (2007:65,69), identities are defined and made recognisable through the aestheticising and stylising of everyday life by “figural means of signification”. Private, domestic space offers an ideal platform for the project of turning life into a work of art, as interior fashion “objectifies wealth in knowledge and competencies” (Jenβ 2009:331). It communicates not only taste and cultural capital, but habitus, or the “capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products” (Bourdieu 1984:170).

Postmodern projects to turn “everyday life into works of art”, are inter-related with the constant global flow of commodity signs and images that confront people with “dream-images which speak to desires, and aestheticise and de-realise reality” (Featherstone 2007:65,67). At the same time, material goods “have the effect of stabilising human life” and may give a reality or “concreteness” to cultural assumptions and beliefs (Lury 2014:16). Orvar Löfgren (1996:271) points to the ways in which routine and trivial consumption produce “feelings of belonging”, and how commercial media discourse and its manifestation in consumer discourse, images and goods may illuminate “the microphysics of learning to belong” (Laden 2008:142). Renewing and re-imagining national belonging was a dominant narrative in the immediate aftermath of the first, inclusive democratic elections, with whites responding through consumption and self-stylisation, to the challenge of asserting indigeneity and showing either alignment or displeasure with the new dispensation. For Ingram (1999:85), “post-colonisers” occupy a precarious position within the new order, their experiences of colonialism and apartheid very different to that of black subjects, with white indigeneity asserted vicariously through appropriating the native Other and their cultural idioms. Consumer culture provides the post-coloniser with myriad options to assert this indigeneity, from adhering to the advice of cultural intermediaries, to creative bricolage and subversive usage and/or re-purposing of mass-produced commodities and antiques.

**DECORATE**

**MADIBA FANS LOVE...**

- Nelson Mandela
- Graça Machel
- South Africa
- loud shirts
- extended families
- cultural diversity
- world peace

**MADIBA FANS HATE...**

- racism
- segregation
- negative South Africans
- confined spaces

**MADIBA FANS KNOW...**

- all the words to 'Nkosi sikelel' Afrika' (and how to spell it)
- all the words to 'Tshatsholoza'
- where Qunu is
- that children are our future
- that 18 July is Madiba's birthday

**MADIBA FANS READ...**

- Long Walk to Freedom
- Madam & Eve
- The Big Issue
- Newspapers, from cover to cover
- Vintage Drum magazines

**MADIBA FANS LISTEN TO... MADIBA FANS EAT...**

- music from old Sophiatown
- Hugh Masekela live
- Tim Modise
- peri-peri chicken livers
- modestly
- at family gatherings

**MADIBA FANS CAN BE FOUND...**

- visiting Robben Island
- at The Saxon
- at any national sports event
- whooping it up at Children's Fund bashes
- living on the dance floor at weddings
- brandishing the old South African flag at a rugby match
- without an Aids ribbon

**MADIBA FANS WOULDN'T BE SEEN DEAD...**

- wearing a Madiba postcard R5 in papier-mâché Lion frame R45, Madiba snowballs R45 each, all African Image, African Image (021) 423-8385; The Molville House (011) 726-3503; Oriental Plaza (011) 838-6752; Mapula Embroidery Project at Art Africa (011) 486-2052 ; Hip Hop (021) 486-7511; Piece at the Saxon (011) 292-6000

**MADIBA FANS' MOST TREASURED OBJECTS**

- Photos of themselves with Madiba

HL MARCH 2002 51

Fig. 4.5. *Madiba magic: decorate*, 2002. Magazine décor feature. (*House and Leisure*, 2002:51).

Political and ideological change demanded shifts in taste, entailing a naturalising of new habitus and becoming adept at differentiating new categories, styles and commodities. Interior décor magazines from the mid-1990s became vehicles of ideological instruction to bring consumers into line with expressions of taste desirable of fashionable, democratic citizens. *House and Leisure* magazine's 'Madiba Magic' (2002) offers an instruction manual of sorts (Fig. 4.5). It lists places, music, fashions, expressions, actions and people that "Madiba fans love", and those that "Madiba fans hate"<sup>216</sup>. Ostensibly reflecting existing trends, the feature seeks to produce and establish new taste and habitus amongst its readership. It does this by evoking the imagined community of 'Madiba fans', turning its ethos into do's and don'ts, that are signified through consumption, attitude, knowledge and action. Trendiness is therefore embodied, and with it, belonging to a democratic family presided over by the father figure of Madiba.

According to Bertelsen (1998:231), post-apartheid advertising absorbs the tensions of a difficult transition, uncoupling political discourse and the symbols of struggle and linking change to consumer discourse. For Bertelsen (1998:235-236), media and advertising discourse "induces a selective amnesia, as readers are required to recognize the aspirational power of the [rhetoric] while abandoning its context and history". Re-inscribing evocations of the recent (apartheid) past as unchallenging, depoliticised celebrations of freedom and change, obscures causal links between racial capitalism, apartheid and the hard-won democracy (Bertelsen 1998: 222-223). For example, Design Team's *I am an African* (2015) collection appropriates the title of Thabo Mbeki's landmark speech of 1996 (Fig. 4.6). Organic pattern and pictographic symbols evoke African mud-cloth or rock paintings, and seen together the designs loosely suggest African creative endeavour. The whole confirms belonging and indigeneity, whether of consumers, the designer or of the 'proudly South African' commodity. Launched nineteen years after Mbeki's speech, the performative proclamation 'I am an African' echoes an inclusive humanism at a time of increasing disillusion with the 'new' South Africa.

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<sup>216</sup> Under "Mandela fans love –" are included the following: Nelson Mandela, Graça Machel, South Africa, loud shirts, extended families, cultural diversity, world peace. Mandela fans also know the words of the anthem; they read *Long Walk to Freedom*, *Madam and Eve*, vintage Drum magazines and *The Big Issue*; they listen to music from old Sophiatown and to Tim Modise on the radio; they eat peri-peri chicken livers at family gatherings; and they would not be seen "brandishing the old flag [or] be caught without an Aids ribbon" (Madiba Magic 2002). Madiba fans hate the following: racism, segregation, negative South Africans and confined spaces (Madiba Magic 2002).

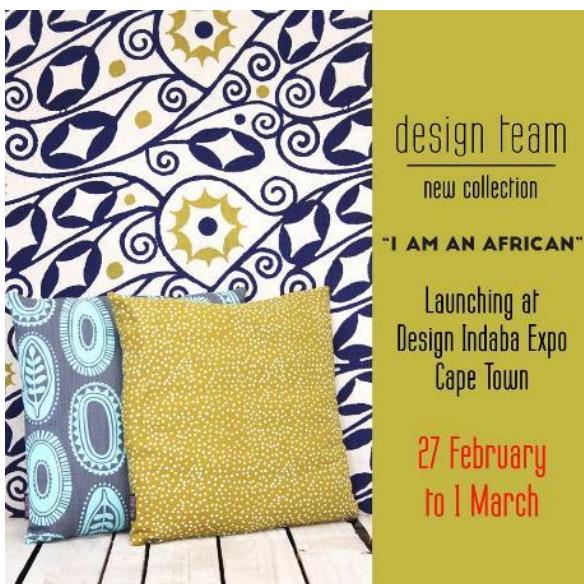


Fig. 4.6. Design Team, *I am an African*, 2015. Fabric collection.  
(Kit 2015).

The intention of white designers and consumers to enact belonging, and to embrace non-racialism and an African identity, through consumption and appropriation, cannot be denied. These intentions point to subjects wishing to project themselves as human agents striving to contend with the weight and debt of apartheid within a present democratic, multicultural world (López 2005:12). This is important in considering the intentionality of subjects who struggle with, subvert or cling to the force and legacy of “white bourgeois imperialism”, a form of hegemony, historically linked to colonialism (López 2005:12).

#### **Individualism, consumerism and iconographies of superfluity**

In the wake of the ending of the Cold War, narratives of collective commonality were increasingly replaced or reworked by consumer culture, by strident individualism and processes of subject formation achieved through consumption (Thomas & Clarke 2008:26). Though occurring unevenly across time and space, the dawn of millennial capitalism saw profound shifts in the “phenomenology of being in the world” and the emergence of subjects of “radically individuated sense of personhood” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:14-15). Millennial capitalism produces a platform for the impulse “to equate freedom with choice, especially to consume, to fashion the self, to conjure with identities”, and for “subjectivity [to be] distilled into ever more objectified ensembles of interests, entitlements, appetites, desires, purchasing ‘power’” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:43-44).

While broad scope exists for realising, reinventing and subverting identities and their markers through consumption, the modes of identification (gender, sexual, racial, political) are increasingly commodified,

standardised and copyrighted. While consumption has become a “privileged site for fabrication of self and society, of culture and identity” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:9), the extent to which different consumers are able to access or influence the global marketplace, is clearly unevenly distributed (Thomas & Clarke 2008:26). Nonetheless, material, political and affective dimensions of aspiration are not new or limited to particular classes (Iqani & Kenny 2015:98,99) and it would be wrong to assume that poverty prevents participation in commodity culture<sup>217</sup>. “No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption”, observed Veblen (1912:84). Intensifying the capitalist, cognitive disjunction between the economic and the political, and repression of the commodity’s social origins, under neoliberalism the roots of inequality and poverty are increasingly obscured where class emerges as “just another personal trait or lifestyle choice” (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:15)<sup>218</sup>. Whether ‘shack chic’ décor accessories or homeless-inspired couture, the affluent have unprecedented opportunity for ‘trying on’ aspects of poor and working-class life worlds<sup>219</sup>. Consumption of these activities, dress, accessories and sites may foreground the poor, but only through appropriating signs for translation into commodities. The structural causes, humanitarian plight and material origins from which the sartorial or architectural motifs and styles arose, are obscured as they are invoked to contribute to the commodity’s fetishism. Under neoliberalism’s rhetoric of liberty and liberation, the resistance and humanitarian movements that arise from or because of poverty and homelessness, are similarly subsumed and commodified as seasonal trends, or appropriated as brand identity. Such commodification rarely changes the material situation or even treatment of marginalised source communities (see Taylor 2016:129). The black oppression that is a mere eyesore for liberals is lived reality “from which [blacks] are unable to escape at any given moment”, Biko (2013:24) reminds.

In the Southern Hospitality advertisement, the product does not itself reference poverty and decay, but through juxtaposition, the derelict building, filthy walls and graffiti act as antithesis to the product and brand. As negative reference point, the setting and mural connote negligence, danger, the illicit, the working class and – through the black body – Africa. Against this backdrop, the modular sofa acts as metaphor for bourgeois aspiration: harmony, singularity (the owner determines the arrangement of the three constituent parts),

<sup>217</sup> A complex example is found in *Izikothane*, a movement of conspicuous consumption and destruction among youths based predominantly in Johannesburg townships, known for the conspicuous consumption and public destruction of designer clothing, expensive liqueur and even money. The majority of participants are of a generation with nearly 40% unemployment and their insistence on designer brands is mostly funded by their impoverished parents. These youths inhabit the paradoxes and chaos of millennial capitalism in a postcolony where consumerism (as signal of freedom) is deracialised, yet the material promises of the ‘new South Africa’ remain unrealised for the black majority. Here participation in consumer culture and the ritual of possession is rendered spectacular as the exhibiting, flaunting, comparison and destruction of luxury possessions are documented and broadcast via social media and *Youtube*, thus making and defying identification (Lury 2011:14-15)

<sup>218</sup> In the fashionable consumption of ‘homeless-chic’, designers extract and translate as trendy those signifiers that emerge from social, political and economic struggle. It further commodifies the ingenious, resourceful ways in which marginalised people have coped, survived and flourished within that context.

<sup>219</sup> A homeless-inspired fashion collection shown at 2017 New York Fashion week, by designer Daisuke Obana, of N. Hoolywood [*sic*] label, sparked controversy and raised pertinent questions about the appropriation of class.

nonchalant elegance (the one seat bearing traces of one recent sitter), and – in its functionality and geometric simplicity – European modernism. At the same time, the visually dominant back-and foregrounds serve to offset the distinctly bourgeois qualities with which the commodity is encoded, and which resonate with its target market. Considering the extent to which advertising and consumer culture mirror society, responding to its desires, or fabricating those desires, Herbst (2005:20) reminds that South African advertisers (one may add designers) are often from the same society as their target audiences, interpellated as subjects by similar discourses. Indeed, the designers and the cultural intermediaries, media and marketing platforms promoting and selling the fabrics discussed here are overwhelmingly white and can be said to reflect and reproduce the dominant values, ideals and the habitus of producers and consumers<sup>220</sup>. Furthermore, rather than being complicit in the hegemonic order, through passive consumption of industry-propagated ideals and stereotypes, consumer desire stimulates production of these. People participate – through consumer decisions – in perpetuating differentiation between self and other(s), “because they also *want* images of others against which to judge and determine themselves”, writes Herbst (2005:20, italics in original).

Produced through difference and differentiation, status and distinction are sometimes racialised in contemporary iterations of a classical iconography of servitude. Under millennial capitalism, the black servant is both hyper-visible and invisible, an essential but unrecognised appendage, in an iconography of black superfluity. This is epitomised in an Indian jewellery manufacturer advertisement of 2015, featuring a black child attending to a lighter-skinned woman bedecked in jewels (Fig. 4.7). The advertisement for Kalayan was withdrawn after a public outcry, with activists citing racism in the perceived emulation of Baroque portraits of noblewomen with child slaves, thus allegedly condoning child-labour and perpetuating the caste system’s racial hierarchy (Naqvi et al 2015). In apology, Kalayan’s spokesperson stated that the “creative was intended to present the royalty, timeless beauty and elegance[sic]” (Kalayan jewellers will withdraw... 2015).

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<sup>220</sup>The décor magazines, suburban crafts markets or winelands boutiques where I found the décor items discussed here are historically associated with bourgeois whiteness. While not suggesting a monolithic or homogeneous whiteness mirrored in consumer choices or the absence of agency, I do note that dominant, naturalised tastes and discourses prevail and often go unquestioned in such spaces. For this reason, I suggest, consumer objections to products are not understood or outright rejected as ‘over-reactions’, as seen in Chapter 6.5.



Fig. 4.7. Kalyan, *Kalyan* 2015. Advertisement.  
(Naqvi et al 2015).

Produced by a native-owned company in a former colony, Kalyan is India's biggest jewellery retailer and it targets a domestic market. The reliance on this colonial trope indicates its deep-rootedness in the global psyche. The uncoupling of the signifier from its historical origins and source leaves it sufficiently dislocated for re-appropriation by those it historically exploited and dehumanised. The viewer's gaze is immediately drawn to the lightest area of the advertisement: the face of actress and 1994 Miss World winner, Aishwarya Rai Bachchan. Her facial expression and open posture are inviting, coded with "to-be-looked-at-ness", which positions and identifies the viewer as aspiring consumer-subject (Mulvey 1989). The child's side profile, dark skin, and upward gaze dissuade identification, either with or of the child. In juxtaposition to the child's anonymity, dark skin and emaciated, semi-naked body, the world-famous actress' individualism and fullness is accentuated. The jewels advertised acquire fetish value, not only from monetary value or association with the celebrity, but from the power and wealth connoted by the regal woman, whose wasteful consumption includes draping her human property in jewels.

This visual shorthand for status and wealth continues to appear globally in magazine features for colonial chic décor, and in advertising campaigns for luxury fashion brands, hotels and safari lodges, where black servants in white gloves or pith helmets, frequently appear as if part of the scenery. Furthermore, retro designs often

appropriate representations of black servant's bodies from early twentieth-century advertising, popular culture and 'Black Deco' of the jazz age (see Pieterse 1992:152-165)<sup>221</sup>. Pervasive in vintage shops and retro décor articles is the Art Deco black butler in servant's livery and fez (see Archer-Straw 2000). Here the black servant of colonial times appears, as a painted, wooden cut-out, no longer reflecting a white employer's wealth, but its owner's ironic appreciation of colonial kitsch.



#### AFRO CHIC

In interior designer James de Waal's home, modern-day Africa meets classic Art Deco design in an interesting display of Colonial statues and tin cars alongside an iconic Eileen Gray side table; this timeless piece looks just as chic today as it did when it was first designed in 1926.

Fig. 4.8. *Showcase your style: Afro chic*, 2010. Magazine décor feature (*Garden and Home* 2010: 57).

While images of black waiters in livery, or imitation antiques, are not depictions of actual white/black, master/slave relations, or necessarily seem such in most viewers' minds, the Kalayan debate highlights the challenges of recycling colonial symbols and tropes, within a postcolonial context, where corporations and

<sup>221</sup> For many Europeans, African and African-American cultural forms merged into a general primitivism and included elements of arts and culture of pre-Columbian art, Oceanic sculpture, and the African artefacts that inspired modernist artists. These art forms were often called *l'art nègre* (black or 'negro' art). The stylistic traits and motifs of *l'art nègre* manifested in the arts, letters, music and performance of the Parisian avant-garde of the pre-war years and the 1920s, and was also absorbed by Art Deco designers, which catered for the European and later American elite. 'Black Deco' emerged in the context of an embrace of racial blackness, which Archer-Straw terms 'negrophilia'. Foster et al (2004:200) describe Black Deco as the "aestheticized use of tribal shapes and motifs within the decorative arts" (see Geczy 2013:144). Black Deco integrated not only the formal elements of primitivism but also its tropes of mysticism, deviance, the savage, primordial, exotic, and fetishistic.

designers must contend with global consumerist trends, as well as with local decolonised sensibilities and the plight of internally colonised groups (Sauthoff 2004:40).

#### 4.4 Conclusion

The seemingly endless possibilities for self-expression and-invention, for distinction through conspicuous consumption, and the gratifying consuming of dazzling surfaces and hypnotic simulacra, offered by neoliberalism, are all inextricable from the repression and social forgetting of human relations of production. Consumption functions on the simultaneous indispensability and superfluity, and invisibility and hypervisibility, of the worker behind the product, of whom the vast majority in South Africa are people of colour. The structural, historical causes of poverty and scarcity cannot be ignored and attributed to the ‘nature’ of the poor, of women and people of colour, historically deemed vulgar and uncivilised due to their lowly occupations, or to unemployment and lack of pecuniary strength. In the concurrent and seemingly contradictory discourse of primitivism, the authenticity of the ‘noble savage’ is rooted in the supposed natural, unpretentious lives of natives, rural dwellers and peasants, regarded as freer and less materialistic than the bourgeoisie. Supposedly not alienated from nature and the products of their labour, in modernist discourse they represent a state and time to which the western consumer nostalgically longs to escape and return home to<sup>222</sup>. I explore this in my analysis of colonial chic in Chapter five. In the postmodern incarnation of the modern/traditional dialectic, it is the worker, the shack-dweller, township entrepreneur and unemployed, that are cast as the ‘noble savages’ of postcolonial worlds. The vernacular expressions of those with precarious lives are valued in postcolonial tourism, heritage and design sectors as spontaneous, raw and refreshing in their perceived imperfection and naïveté. This discourse emerges powerfully in post-apartheid attempts to forge an aesthetic, suited to and situated within democratic South Africa and the African continent, as explored in Chapter six.

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<sup>222</sup> For Bourdieu (1996:58), representations of the lower classes as social picturesque produce them as objects of contemplation, pity, indignation or nostalgia. This translation of others as idealised spectacle grants viewers the “opportunity to experience the relationship [with the other] of distant proximity”, for Bourdieu (1996:58) a basic condition of the bourgeoisie’s relationship to workers and peasants.

## Chapter five: imperial nostalgia in the postcolony

### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the international trend colonial of chic, which can be described as an instance of colonial nostalgia that emerged in the 1980s. The décor trend has its aesthetic roots in the luxurious interiors of the Hollywood film *Out of Africa* and Ralph Lauren's *Safari Home* collection. The greater accessibility of colonial archives in recent decades has generally given easier access to colonial materials, whether to descendants of colonisers and colonised, scholars and arts practitioners, or to entrepreneurs who repurpose colonial photographs with the aim of producing commodities for mass consumption. The *Cameo* collection of fabrics by the South African company Design Team provides an example: the range features portraits of indigenous southern African women photographed at the turn of the nineteenth century. These photographic portraits were among numerous others presented to the public by the 2001 project of Michael Stevenson and Michael Graham-Stewart, which culminated in the book and exhibition *Surviving the lens: photographic studies of South and East African people 1870-1920*<sup>223</sup>. To contextualise my examination of Design Team's *Cameo* range, I position it at the intersection of three late twentieth-century cultural phenomena: the archival turn in visual arts and curating; retro; and colonial chic in interior design.

My critique of colonial nostalgia is by no means a denunciation of nostalgia, or of people's use, display and attachment to goods or images that evoke the past, memories or feelings of nostalgia. Such practices and objects serve vital functions in people's sense of belonging, for commodities can and do present "stable anchors and instigators of memory, feelings and concepts" (Keane 2006:202). Individuals may use nostalgic signifiers for different ends: to remember or mourn the past, or vanished or destroyed places and people; to conscientise or raise a mirror to their own time and society (Rosaldo 1989:116). Different forms of nostalgia exist and histories are valued differentially and memory and nostalgic feelings are contradictory, impermanent and as much about forgetting as remembering (Rosaldo 1989:116; Frow 1991: 135). As Jacob Dlamini (2009) shows in *Native Nostalgia*, there is also the surprising longing for aspects of colonialism or apartheid by some black South Africans<sup>224</sup>. Dlamini's book highlights the complexity, ambiguities and heterogeneity of nostalgia and of memory, including vicarious nostalgia about pre-democratic pasts<sup>225</sup>. My critique focuses on colonial

<sup>223</sup> The exhibition *Surviving the lens: photographic studies of South and East African people, 1870-1920* showed at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town (2001) and at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg (2002).

<sup>224</sup> Nostalgia for oppressive regimes by the oppressed is not isolated to South Africa, as studies on post-communist nostalgia in Eastern Europe reveal (see Boym 1995; Cook 2005).

<sup>225</sup> It is, however, not only outsiders and colonists who mourn or are nostalgic about past ways, but also cultural insiders some of whom brought about change themselves, whether by necessity or choice, through the embrace of 'progress', religious conversion, western schooling, or commodification of their cultural heritage (Rosaldo 1989: 115).

nostalgia manifesting as a décor trend featuring in commercial platforms and media that are overwhelmingly white and bourgeois. As nostalgia is never neutral and always ideological, imperial nostalgia manifesting as décor trend is read against the grain. Using Aimé Césaire's (2000:44) equation "colonialism = thingification" and unpicking the indexical signifier of racial blackness, I examine ways in which colonial photographic portraits and racial difference are commodified and gentrified for nostalgic, vicarious consumption. I pose the question 'whose colonial?' to interrogate the way this trend mythologises the colonial era as a style trend which relies heavily on images of black bodies and African material culture to manifest, by proxy, an indigeneity within the bourgeois privilege of whites in Africa.

### 5.2 *Cameo* and archival turns.

Part of Design Team's *Novelty* collection, *Cameo* features a repeated motif of photographic portraits of four indigenous southern African women taken between the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries (Fig. 5.1). All four portraits are reproduced in Stevenson and Graham-Stewart's *Surviving the Lens*.



Fig. 5.1. Lise Butler and Amanda Haupt, *Cameo* pattern repeat sheet, 2014.  
(Design Team fabric collection 2014).

Two of the portraits, *Korana Girl* and *Bakgatla* (both first half of the twentieth century) are by Alfred Duggin-Cronin<sup>226</sup>. On the reverse of the photograph *Korana Girl*, he wrote: "She is the daughter of the woman (no 53)

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<sup>226</sup> Duggan-Cronin immigrated to South Africa from Ireland in 1897 and started working at De Beers Consolidated Mines in Kimberley where he began photographing migrant workers in about 1904. His photographic work focused increasingly on indigenous cultures,

and a very good specimen of the people" (Stevenson & Graham-Stewart 2001:96)<sup>227</sup>. The third portrait, entitled *Woman with beaded hair* (late 19<sup>th</sup> century), which has the words "A Zulu Girl, Hair strung with beads" written on the reverse, was taken by JE Middlebrook (Stevenson & Graham-Stewart 2001:62) 228. The fourth, *Portrait of a woman* (late 19<sup>th</sup> century) is by John Gribble, and has the words "Kaffir woman" on the reverse (Stevenson & Graham-Stewart 2001:62,122,124)<sup>229</sup>. The images were at the time produced within a documentary and scientific paradigm that valued photography for its "realist mode", offering a fixity in which the signifier is treated as though exactly recording a pre-existent signified (Tagg 1988:99).

The historical register of the portraits was emphasised by the designers, through cropping and setting each in a decorative, oval frame. The black, brown and sepia motifs are offset against a predominantly light, natural-coloured background. The ornate frames, references to older technologies of engraving, black and white photography or photogravure, and the women's poses, combine to convey an air of romantic old-worldliness. This connotation is augmented as the portraits reference cameo jewellery and classical Greek and Roman traditions revived in eighteenth and nineteenth-century fashions.

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dress and customs, and after the First World War, he started travelling to document groups of black people in Southern Africa. Between 1919 and 1939 he travelled some 128 000 kilometres, taking approximately 6 000 photographs. His photographs and collection of indigenous art and objects of material culture are housed in the Duggan-Cronin Gallery, part of the McGregor Museum, in Kimberley, South Africa. He published selections of his work in the eleven-volume *The Bantu tribes of South Africa* between 1929 and 1954.

<sup>227</sup>In 1925, the photograph was reproduced in SS Dorman's *Pygmies and bushmen of the Kalahari* (Dorman 1925; Stevenson & Graham-Stewart 2001:96).

<sup>228</sup>A commercial photographer, Middlebrook had studios in Kimberley from 1888 to 1894 and in Durban from 1898 until approximately 1902 (Stevenson & Graham-Stewart 2001:124).

<sup>229</sup>Four generations of the Gribble family worked as commercial photographers in the Western Cape from 1860, with studios in Cape Town and Paarl (Stevenson & Graham-Stewart 2001:62,92).



Fig. 5.2. *Deco now: natural terrain*, 2007. Magazine décor feature.  
(*Elle Decoration* 2007: [sp]).

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, *Cameo* was featured regularly in South African interior design magazines such as *Elle Decoration*, *House & Leisure*, *Ideas, Garden and Home*; at South African design fairs such as *Design Indaba*; and on local and international design websites and blogs. Within these contexts, the visually seductive fabric is shown on upholstered furniture, wall decorations, home and fashion accessories such as scatter pillows (Fig. 5.3), handbags, and even a wedding gown<sup>230</sup> (Fig 5.4).

<sup>230</sup> The production and marketing of the collection was recently halted. *Cameo* is only printed to client order and select cushion covers are sold online (Strey 2016). At the time of writing I still encountered the fabric and scatter cushions for sale in South African décor boutiques.

In an article in *Elle Decoration*, entitled ‘Natural Terrain’, fabric samples, pebbles and cardboard shapes are arranged with a *Cameo* swatch showing *Korana Girl* (Fig. 5.2). Knowledge (gleaned from my Master in Art History degree research on colonial photography), of the portrait’s historic origins in colonial racial science and the wider context of the radical dispossession and displacement of indigenous peoples, troubled the harmonious composition of colour and texture artfully arranged for the magazine feature. The racism and cold instrumentalism of especially the Korana woman’s description in the original context appeared at odds with the same portrait’s presentation by Design Team and in *Elle Decoration*. In its contemporary commodity form the fraught social scientific history of the portrait is absent, but the idealised production mobilises primitivist tropes central to Duggan-Cronin’s project. For example, the contemporary textual framing retains earlier associations of black people with the childhood of mankind, with the natural world and traditionalism and tribalism. The caption, “Earth child textures add ethnic flair to subtle shades”, supports these associations (*Elle Decoration* 2007:15)<sup>231</sup>. As I show below, within both colonial exploitation and neoliberal consumerism, the encipherment of the portrayed subjects obscures African history even as it is foregrounded.



Fig. 5.3 St Lorient Boutique, bridal gown in *Cameo* fabric, 2011.  
(Design Team photo gallery 2013).

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<sup>231</sup> In ‘Natural Terrain’, associations between the Korana woman and the natural world are promoted through the portrait’s inclusion in the composition of organic shapes and textures, monochromatic hues of light blue, grey and brown. Through the chain of signification and interaction of caption and image, the natural is tied to the ethnic, the earth to the juvenile. In the absence of obvious signifiers of ‘ethnic’ or ‘child’, the familiar associations of black Africans as tied to the earth and cultural tradition facilitate equation of these terms with the black woman’s portrait.



Fig. 5.4. Design team, *Cameo scatter cushion*, [s.a.]. Scatter cushion, screen printed linen, 60x60cm. (Material Life 2017).

### Archival turns

In recent decades, through scholarship, artistic projects and curatorial interventions, colonial archives have been opened to new and diverse viewership and readings. Galleries, museums, public interventions and information technologies facilitate unprecedented access to documents and images. This new access has facilitated and enriched the work and understandings of artists, curators, scholars, members of the public and descendants, and has enabled people to consume and reproduce elements of archives more easily. As a project of archival retrieval, research and dissemination of historic photographs, the publication *Surviving the Lens* can be said to exemplify the archival turn. For Cheryl Simon (2002:101), the term denotes the increase of historical and archival photographs and artefacts, and the approximation of archival forms, in art and photographic practices since the 1990s.

The four photographs that feature in *Cameo* originated as commodities: whether taken for artistic purposes, or commissioned by the sitters or reproduced as postcards or *cartés-des-visité* on sale to tourists and collectors. The photographs spoke to their owners and viewers of loved ones, exotic Others and racial types, or served as evidence of disappearing lifeways (Godby 2010). Scholars of colonial anthropological photography have uncovered and scrutinised photographers' interventions and inventions in the documentation of their subjects (see Edwards 1992; Godby 2010; Pinney 2011). To record unspoilt and 'authentic' indigenous culture for posterity, photographers such as Duggan-Cronin actively constructed an idea of purity by careful selection of

models and sites. This was done, for example, by removing signifiers of Western modernity (such as enamel basins, coats and watches), or adding props that denote tribalism and tradition (such as animal skins, blankets and items of material culture) (see Godby 2010:59-63). These kinds of images presented Africans as belonging to pure, static ethnic monads, each with discernible material and ceremonial culture, undisturbed by the forces of colonialism. Considerable intervention was required to produce such visions at a time when the Southern African landscape and the lives of indigenous people were transformed radically by industrialisation and legislation that dispossessed Africans of their land. Focusing on Duggan-Cronin's *The Bavenda* of 1928, Michael Godby (2010:76-78) argues that the sheer beauty of the photographs endorses a myth of tribal Africa as harmonious and autonomous, which presented exploitable visual proof to proponents of racial segregation. Blurring the boundaries of art and science, anthropological photographs granted an air of veracity to an old stock of African 'types': the 'noble savage', nubile maiden, stately chief, fierce warrior and sinister witchdoctor.

In *Surviving the lens*, Stevenson and Graham-Stewart (2001:2) situate the photographs within the contexts of the colonial economies of commodity and knowledge production, noting that they reflect the influence of early anthropology and ethnography regarding the representation of black Africans. Stevenson and Graham-Stewart (2001:21,24) discuss the asymmetrical relationships of power that underscored the production of these images and explore recent critiques of the idea of the photographic image as record, evidence or truth, positioning them as "rhetorical constructs and symbols of white imagination". However, the authors also emphasise the possibility of a multiplicity of contemporary readings, noting that, as works of art with conflicted legacies, the portraits may become, for descendants, evidence of beauty, pride, resistance, dignity, and of lived experience (Stevenson & Graham-Stewart 2001:31, 33). In fact, from the start these images were unstable racially-constructed signifiers that facilitated diverse objectives and readings. The soft lighting, classicising and sentimental poses and atmospheric qualities of the portraits attest to the artistic aspirations of the photographers (Godby 2010:63), while the captions and notes are evidence of racial classification in accordance with, to use Foucault's phrase, a scopic regime of hierarchical differences (Pool 1997:19).

Stevenson and Graham-Stewart (2001:13) further position the photographs as works of art and urge public art galleries to reconsider them as more than social and ethnographic records. Through scholarly and curatorial projects such as *Surviving the lens*, colonial photographs-as-objects are made to traverse new epistemic and commercial terrains of academe and art galleries, acquiring new layers of meanings and sets of values. The photographs were arguably already commodified by their transposition from the enclaved zone of historical archives to the aesthetic domain of the art gallery, "where exchange is less confined and more profitable" (Appadurai 1986: 26-27). When exhibited in major art galleries and associated with the powerful brand of, in this instance, Stevenson's commercial art gallery, the photographs are invested with an aura of scholarship and

connoisseurship usually reserved for works of fine or decorative art<sup>232</sup>. Endowed with the status of artworks, they acquire pedigrees as ‘authentic’, singularised objects of artistic and historical value, desirable commodities whose exchange value is boosted by the semantic spaces of art galleries and exhibition catalogues.

The new sites where archival materials are showcased and publicised in turn provide rich visual sources for entrepreneurs. Previously the reserve of administrators and scholars, archives are now accessible from smartphones and, with the internet functioning as “mega-archive” (Foster 2004:4), historical images are only a quick ‘click and drag’ away from the surfaces of new products. Adorning scatter cushions and handbags, lifted from the interpretative contexts of anthropology, critical scholarship and connoisseurship, they are made to signify anew, and, in the process, previous meanings are obscured or displaced, as I show below.

### 5.3 Nostalgia in interior design

Cheryl Simon (2002:101) regards the archival turn as a late-stage manifestation of postmodernist appropriation. It is contemporary with Retro, defined by Elizabeth Guffey (2006:10-11) as the “half-ironic, half-longing” stylistic evocation of the recent past in visual and popular culture. Retro-chic has been called the ‘nostalgia industry’ by fashion writers, who linked it to a wistful revivalist turn in 1960s counter-culture, and another such a turn in the 1980s, when nostalgia became ubiquitous in design and advertising (Guffey 2006:14; Samuel 2012:91). Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003:19) note “an astonishing ‘nostalgia boom’ marked by classic brands or rejuvenation of brands through recourse to nostalgia” in the late twentieth-century.

The term nostalgia is derived from the Greek *nostos* (to return home) and *algia* (a painful condition), emerging as a clinical description in the seventeenth-century<sup>233</sup>. The term became part of everyday speech by the 1950s. Most definitions of the term explain it as the pleasant feeling about a previous time or an object from the past (Rutherford and Shaw 2011:59). It refers to a general yearning for the past and may contain melancholy emotions, notions of exile and bitter-sweet longing for places, things and people from yesteryear (Guffey 2006: 19-20). Although derided by some critics, nostalgia is a complex and important emotion, as it allows

<sup>232</sup> One of South Africa’s foremost art galleries, Stevenson was founded in 2003 by Michael Stevenson and Andrew da Conceicao, and is one of the foremost South African art galleries. Stevenson has galleries in Johannesburg and Cape Town and deals in contemporary art from South African as well as African and the diaspora. It is also a major contributor to local art publishing. Stevenson has developed into an influential local and international brand and participates in local and international art fairs, including Frieze New York, Art Basel, Art Basel Miami Beach, Paris Photo and Frieze London.

<sup>233</sup> The term’s use dates from about 1688 when it was used in the thesis of physician Johannes Hofer to describe the clinical condition of acute homesickness among Swiss soldiers stationed far from their native land (Rutherford & Shaw 2011: 158). It was a medical rather than psychological affliction and until the nineteenth-century nostalgia was regarded primarily as a medical condition (Rutherford & Shaw 2011: 158).

connections between past and present, which contribute to one's sense of identity, heritage and belonging (Rutherford & Shaw 2011:162). Here is where it differs from retro, which is primarily ironic. Though it may express admiration for the past, retro revivalism is done with cynicism and detachment, whereas nostalgic images or places trigger feelings experienced as significant and may evoke earnest associations with the past (Guffey 2006:20). Simultaneously, idealising the past is a prime feature of nostalgia. According to Svetlana Boym (2001:135), "one is nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been". To supplant the "past as it was" with a romanticised version requires omitting or masking those memories and historical events that may disrupt the reverie.

The term 'nostalgia industry' (Samuel 2012:91) is an apt moniker for the sentimental colonial chic, an interior design trend which emerged in the 1980s. With little regard for historical accuracy, this style indulges in romanticised notions of colonial privilege. The wealth and status implied by the luxurious interiors pictured in magazines was hardly the reality of most whites living in the colonies. The settler middle class was small and only a minority of patrician families and high-ranking colonial officers would have lived in the luxury presented in late twentieth and twenty-first century designer images. As far as domestic consumption, furnishing and decoration goes, colonists living on the frontier did not have many material possessions and "lived an unendurably simple life by the standards of sophisticated travellers who encountered them" (Freund 1992: xiv). Most homes would have been quite bare and furniture often handmade from locally available materials<sup>234</sup>.

Colonial chic is connected to no single nation and or historical epoch. In this sense, it differs from Colonial Revivalism, which appeared from the 1880s to the 1940s in American architecture, decorative and fine arts, museum displays, literature and music<sup>235</sup>. In the spirit of postmodern appropriation, there was also a brief flourishing of Colonial Revivalism in the 1980s and 1990s, critiques of which are applicable to colonial chic. According to Richard Wilson (2006:3): "The Colonial Revival is an attitude or a mental process of remembering and maintaining the past that generations of Americans have quite consciously created." Unlike colonial chic, this Colonial Revivalism is closely linked to the American nationalist spirit of the late eighteenth century, when patriotism was promoted as nations competed as industrial and commercial powers (Wilson 2006:5,8). In

<sup>234</sup> The "democratisation of taste" (Parissien 2007:89) stimulated by the European industrial revolution was not as readily felt in the colonies where there was less wealth and a much smaller proportion of the population able to afford non-essentials.

<sup>235</sup> For Wilson (2006:3), Colonial Revival is the longest-lasting, most widespread popular expression of identity to have developed in the USA. He calls it the "single most persistent theme in American art and culture" (Wilson 2006:3). The movement extended to historic preservation and re-enactments, popular and commodity culture, and was influential in defining notions of the American home, with the hearth at its core (Wilson 2006:5,6). Greenfield [s.a.] situates the origins of the revivalist movement at the Philadelphia International exhibition of 1886 and the centenary of the Declaration of Independence. Colonial Revivalism was an American expression of an international 'trend' in the late nineteenth century with the formation of nation-states, ideas of nationalism, patriotism and its rootedness in soil, and the figures and events of the past (Wilson 2006:8).

contemporary American Colonial Revivalism, simulacra, nostalgia and commodity fetishism come together around romanticised notions of settler colonialism. In colonial chic, signifiers of late nineteenth-century British settler colonialism reference a vague colonial epoch.

Colonial chic as stylistic impulse or trend is above all sentimental and like retro it is unconcerned with historical accuracy, the sanctity of tradition or reinforcing social values (Guffey 2006: 10-11). Some manifestations playfully or ironically mock the histrionics of longing with the result that they resonate with retro. Nostalgic colonial chic décor is, however, never satirical; it is indulgent and wistful rather than subversive in its appropriation of archival images. Weylandts' range of scatter cushions featuring photograms from the late nineteenth century illustrate this embrace of sentimentalism<sup>236</sup>. The names of some of the designs – *Reminiscence*, *Melancholia* and *Nostalgia* – echo the romantic sentiments of nostalgic chic. The faded, seemingly scratched copies of botanical prints suggest vintage film or photography, and conjure a mood of nostalgic reverie (Fig. 5.5).



Fig. 5.5. Weylandts, *Nostalgia* scatter cushion, 2017. Scatter cushion, pigment printed linen, 72 x 44cm. (Scatters and cushions [s.a.]).

According to the Weylandts website (Scatters and cushions [s.a]), the designs are copies of “[p]hotograms dating back to 1880”, from a “rare collection ... hidden in South African archives for over 35 years before being discovered”. Here the company or designer emerge as (archival) explorer and the viewer or consumer may partake of the discovery through consuming the product. The promotional narrative mimics colonial tropes of exploration and discovery. These tropes and the discourse of discovery frequently emerge in colonial chic, as I show below.

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<sup>236</sup> Weylandts began as a traditional furniture manufacturer in Windhoek, Namibia, in 1964. Today the store has eight retail showrooms in South Africa and one in Melbourne, Australia (About us 2018).

Nostalgia plays a significant part in the marketing and consumption of colonial chic and, if understood as an outflow of modernity, is akin to primitivism – itself an ambiguous longing for a romanticised preindustrial past. According to Dlamini (2009:16) nostalgia is “an incurable condition of modernity”, and Frow (1991:135) suggests that the longing to return home became a key metaphor for the condition of modernity. The home, or *Heimat*, represented simultaneously a place of safe refuge and a lost origin, longed for in a world rendered increasingly unfamiliar through industrialisation, urbanisation and the rise of capitalist relations (Frow 1991:135)<sup>237</sup>. The state of transcendental homelessness produces primitivism in its most acute modern forms, writes (Torgovnick 1990: 192), “with its various desires to go home to something simpler, more comfortable, less urban and chafing and crowded”. The ubiquity of nostalgic and exotic primitivist images in interior design and fashion, and their persistence in circulation and re-use, testifies not only to a perceived charm, but also to the enduring metaphorical and emotional appeal of these discursive tropes to contemporary consumers.

In promotions of ‘colonial style’ décor, the designer-as-explorer frequently ventures into the past to retrieve the authentic and real. The decorator and consumer become armchair travellers who journey back in time. Their vicarious experiences of travel are animated through the designer’s narrated selection and extraction from archives and museums, and the consumer-owner’s consequent acts of browsing, buying and home decorating. Narratives of discovery promote Evolution Product’s collections. Several of this company’s collections are informed by colonial archival material, such as visual records of early colonial explorers, botanists and artists, with owner and chief designer Amanda du Plessis acting as discoverer and mediator of the hidden and untold. Du Plessis states that her designs are inspired by South Africa’s “diversity of spectacular landscapes and the untold nostalgic narratives” (Thatcher 2017)<sup>238</sup>. According to a feature by décor store Mr Price Home (2013): “Amanda is in love with sumptuous fabrics, textures and nostalgic narratives” and she draws “her inspiration from nature as seen through the eyes of Africa’s first explorers”. Images of native Africans – as captured by colonial photographers - feature in a two of Du Plessis’ collections.

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<sup>237</sup> The German noun *Heimat* may be translated to mean ‘home’, ‘home town’ or ‘native country’.

<sup>238</sup> Evolution Product predominantly produces cushion covers, throws and fabric wall panels printed and embroidered with patterns, motifs and images copied from archival texts. These designs are evocative of old photographic negatives or botanical and landscape illustrations.



Fig. 5.6. Amanda du Preez, Scatter cushions by Amanda du Preez, pictured on the right, for the Mr Price Home Co-lab project, 2013.  
(Thatcher 2017).

The first is from a collection for Mr Price Home's Co-lab project. The cushion covers feature abstract designs and patterns, or suggest notes and sketches by explorers or naturalists. One design features an ethnographic photograph of men dressed as though for battle or a ceremony, posed in two rows in front of a hut. Unlike the other designs, this image provides an index of black, historical Africa that is much more specific than a pattern or a naturalist's sketch (Fig. 5.6).



Fig. 5.7. Evolution Product, An assortment of cushions from the Varied Origins collection, 2017.  
(Varied origins 2017).



Fig. 5.8. Evolution Product, *Ladies with branches* cushion, 2017. Scatter cushion, linen, 72 x 42cm. (Varied origins 2017).



Fig. 5.9. Evolution Product, *Tribe* cushion. 2017. Scatter cushion, linen, 72 x 42cm. (Varied origins 2017).

In *Varied Origins*, historical modes of production and originary myths are invoked (Fig. 5.7). Described as a “lodge specific textile assortment”, the collection uses “ancient patterns from African creators to modern day alchemists who experiment with plants to create colour and patterns on cloth. Truly original and embracing

our continents" [sic] (*Varied origins* 2017). The description of production and materials suggests the authenticity associated with small-scale, manual and pre-industrial manufacture. Linen used for the cushions is hand-dyed in colours described as stone, ochre, charcoal, rust and taupe, thus evoking the natural and earthy. The cushions are adorned with minimal organic or geometric pattern, some with horizontal lines, and two with printed photographs (Figures 5.8 and 5.9). As in the Mr Price collaboration, archival photographs of black Africans anchor a collection of relatively abstract and ambiguous designs as African and historical. Describing the collection as African makes sense when racial blackness becomes metonymic of Africa. Arranged with the other cushions of this collection, the reprinted photographs establish the abstract designs and the collection as African and indigenous. African historicity is added through the choices of subject (images of black people) and the medium (black and white, analogue photography connoting the past in ways that natural pigments and geometric patterns do not). The African women posing as if working in the bush, and African men at rest or in tribal gatherings, evoke familiar tropes of African exoticism: closeness to nature, beauty, black femininity, and black masculine authority and patriarchal hierarchy.

Colonial chic also features the artistic expression of indigenous people, and designers frequently mine colonial archives for inspiration or source material. For scatter cushion covers both Weylandts and Evolution Product appropriated drawings made in the 1880s by two *!kun* boys Tamme and !nanni<sup>239</sup>. The drawings feature in *Roots and Leaves*, part of the *Desert Diaries 2* collection (Fig. 5.10). Du Plessis (Evolution Product 2013) states: "I looked into botanicals for a while, but all the designs I found were too 'perfect'. This range hopefully reflects the honest nature of the designs and the manner in which these boys reflected their surroundings."

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<sup>239</sup> The children's drawings are from the Lucy Lloyd and William Bleek digital archive, published by the Lucy Lloyd Archive, Resource and Exhibition Centre and the Centre for Curating the Archive at University of Cape Town. Du Plessis obtained permission from the South African San Institute to use the archival images (Evolution product 2013).



Fig. 5.10. Evolution product, Two cushions from the *Roots and leaves* range, *Desert Diaries* collection, 2013. (Crewe-Brown 2013).

The designer's admiration for the boys' drawings is expressed in terms similar to European modernists who valued child art as naïve, unmediated expression. Several modernist primitivists valued children's creative expression – like that of indigenous peoples, European peasants and the mentally ill – as uninhibited expressions of the creative impulse, the subconscious or of spiritual forces (see Rhodes 1994). Such 'primitive' art was supposedly unfettered by artistic training or rationality, and therefore deemed suited to modernist aims of rejuvenating western art and society, regarded as stagnant, overly materialistic or too refined. Both modern and neo-primitivist veneration situates the Other within evolutionary time, representing a lost point of origin for those nostalgic for a past imagined as simpler and pure. The company name – Evolution Product – connotes gradual change and the link between past and present, ancestors and contemporaries. Du Plessis's archival explorations become travels along a space-time continuum that establishes historical Africa – often connote by racial blackness - as touchstone of authenticity and purity supposedly lacking in contemporary worlds.

### ***Out of Africa***

In its appropriation of photographic portraits of black women from colonial archives and vintage adaptation thereof through collage, *Cameo* also conforms to the tenets of colonial chic. Colonial chic or 'colonial style', as it is also called in design features, is rooted in the mythologised images of adventurers, explorers and settlers in popular media. Two significant influences on the trend of recreating the look of luxurious safari camps and glamorous settler homes are Ralph Lauren's *Safari Home* collections launched in the 1980s, and the 1985 film

*Out of Africa*. Advertising campaigns for Ralph Lauren's *Safari* collections create a romantic vision of colonial era exploration. They entices consumers with fantasies that set the historical within the present by means of luxury bed linen, clothing and perfume (Fig. 5.11).



Fig. 5.11. *The Ralph Lauren Home Collection: Safari*, 1984. Colour advertisement photographed by Bruce Weber. (Bloom 2014).

*Out of Africa* is the title of Danish aristocrat Karen Blixen-Finecke's (Isak Denisen) memoir, published in 1937. It recounts the seventeen years during which she lived and farmed in Kenya, then British East Africa. The film adaptation was directed by Sydney Pollack, starred Meryl Streep as Blixen alongside Robert Redford, and won seven Academy Awards. The film offers a romantic and beautifully styled rendition of the trials and tribulations of Blixen's life as it plays out in her luxurious home and Kenyan landscape, against the backdrop of an enchanting and dangerous Africa, populated by natives who are variously docile, obstinate, wild or loyal.

Ralph Lauren's colonial safari camps and recreations of *Out of Africa*'s film-set in magazine pages and suburban homes, conjure versions of a past that never was. Both offer opulent, seductive visions of upper-class European domestic interiors in imagined colonial settings, using design, accessories and props, and have had a lasting effect on interior design enthusiasts who continue to cite these in magazines and blogs. The design feature 'Channelling *Out of Africa*' does not merely show consumers how to recreate a trend (Fig. 5.12). It invites them to harness the 'spirit' or essence of the film and the consumerist myth of Blixen's African

adventure. Suggestive of a designer's mood board, the feature includes film stills of contemplative leisure and romantic encounters in the African landscape, rather than images of Blixen's home interior décor. For Wilson (2001:2) colonial revivals exist in "forms both physical and mental, objects and ideas". Designer and consumer 'channelling' of colonial chic finds expression through consumption of selected objects imbued with ideas: products that address consumer desires for the nostalgic and exotic.

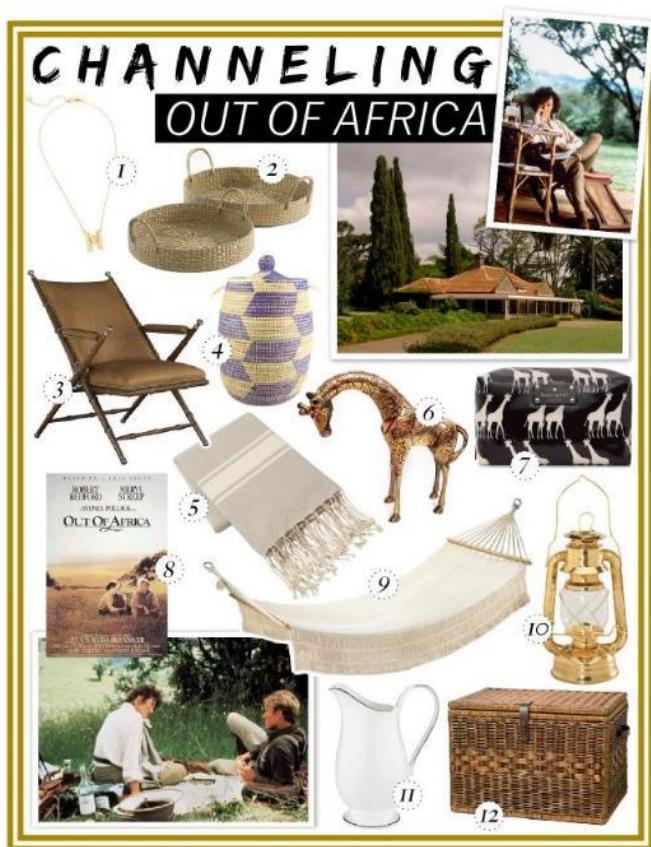


Fig. 5.12. *Channelling Out of Africa*, [s.a]. Décor feature.  
(Beltran [s.a.]).

For Daniel Huppertz (2009:24-25), Lauren's "nostalgic styles [reflect] a yearning for tradition, stability, and history in a rapidly changing society". Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003:19) argue that retro brands "hark back to a time when the world seemed safer, more comprehensible". Fred Davis (1979) posits that nostalgia responds to the discontinuities of modernity and helps to shield and comfort individuals and communities by helping people maintain internal continuity in times of instability (cited in Rutherford and Shaw 2011:162). Entrepreneurs and marketers thus capitalise on the sense of stability offered by signifiers of the past in the face of the ephemeral and uncertain present (see also Lowenthal 2015:41). The discursive construction of the colonial as a simpler, more comfortable era is evident in articles on the 'colonial style' where adjectives such as 'innocent' and 'calm' are used (Sargent 2013:64). Theo Williams (cited in Sargent 2013:64) of John Lewis

Home exemplifies this stance: "Customers want a look that taps into nostalgia and takes inspiration from a time of innocence, celebration and optimism. The 'colonial style' is perfect for this" (Fig. 5.13). "Colonial imagery has commercial value, can aid in sales and consumption", writes Wilson (2006:5) of American Revivalism. Although it is ideologically burdened, "it [is] a simple image easily copied" (Wilson 2006:5).



Fig. 5.13. Lara Sargent, Out of Africa: the sun will never set on the laid-back classic colonial look, 2013. Newspaper article.

(Sargent 2013).

The choreography of colonial adventure and settler pastoral idyll in *Safari* and *Out of Africa* have become a 'look' reproduced globally in décor and fashion magazines, blogs, luxury lodges and safari camps. The historical accuracy aimed at in the period piece film is relaxed in the twenty-first century incarnations, with stylists and designers suggesting that one or two 'statement pieces' can 'set the tone'. Its aesthetic codes of reference are multiply duplicated, echoed and recirculated in advertisement campaigns and décor features, where only a small number of easily recognisable, if clichéd signifiers (pith helmet, pieces of 'campaign' furniture, wolf hound, wooden ceiling fan, and postcards of Africans in traditional dress or naked) are needed to convey the essence of 'colonial style'. According to Swedish décor blog Fixa Stilen (2017) "it's not hard to achieve the colonial style for your home" and it gives suggestions for purchases that includes everything from zebra skins and palms to Chinese porcelain (Fig. 5.14).



Fig. 5.14. Jannice Wistrand, *Så fixar du den koloniala inredningsstilen* (This is how you get the colonial design style), 2017.  
(Wistrand 2017).

As seen in Fixa Stilen, colonial chic is promiscuous in its inclusion and selection of geographic territory, peoples and cultures. With colonial chic there is no concern with authenticity and the careless assembly of different periods delivers a “hodgepodge of oldness” (Harris 2009:310). As in the taste for quaintness, designers and home-owners “cobble together a generic past, a moody atmospheric gestalt of what might be called ‘pastness’, a perfectly imaginary representation of the good old days” (Harris 2009:210). The global décor industry has further spawned stylistic variations, such as ‘British colonial style’ and ‘plantation style’<sup>240</sup>. References to ‘British colonial’ may refer to or include British colonies in the West Indies/ Caribbean basin (sometimes called ‘tropical British colonial’), India, South East Asia or East Asia. ‘Plantation style’ usually references the grand homes of slave-owning sugarcane barons and the style – according to one décor writer - “remains a favourite for its escapist feel and balance of familiar classics and exotic new territory” (Frederick [s.a.]).

Overall, it is individual accessories that suggest specific geographic areas, and the elements used to situate an interior style geographically are copies of old maps, pictures of natural formations, animals or plants, the architecture and indigenous material culture<sup>241</sup>. Prominent features in ‘colonial style’ interiors are ethnographic photographs, postcards, archival portraits or travel illustrations of indigenous peoples.

<sup>240</sup> Lisa Frederick [s.a.] of Home Portfolio website, writes: “In the 1600s and 1700s, a stream of French and English settlers staked their claim to the islands of the West Indies. During their years of colonial rule, they presided over massive sugarcane farms, and this lifestyle – combined with native culture and their own old-world aesthetic – gave rise to the look we now know as ‘plantation’”.

<sup>241</sup> This includes: indoor palms, ceiling fans, furniture in dark wood and rattan patio furniture and shuttered windows for the Caribbean or American south; mosquito nets, travelling trunks and folding chairs (campaign furniture)s, African sculptures, jewellery or textiles,

Much like in the tourist industry, the interior design and décor industries extensively rely on photographic images (Edwards 1996: 201). According to Edwards (1996:203) photography fragments space and time, peoples and objects, and such fragments are consequently collaged into the illusion of a unified experience. If consumers of products coded as exotic or nostalgic can be said to ‘tour’ vicariously via consumption – as when browsing magazines or collecting images on Pinterest – they too compose conceptions of other cultures from fragments. According to anthropologist Ted Polhemus (1996), consumers are “style surfing”, free to pick and choose from a global “supermarket of style, where every world and every era you dreamed of ... is on offer like tins of soup on a supermarket shelf”. For Jameson (1991:5,16-18), producers of culture in postmodernity have only the past to turn to, and the present world is dominated by a culture of the image or simulacra, mediated by representations and imitations of dead styles of the past, exploited as an “imaginary museum of now global culture”.

In décor magazines and blogs, and in the various commodities depicting Africans, contemporary notions of historic Otherness intersect with ethnographic images of Otherness cultivated by magazines such as *National Geographic*, or in televised documentaries about foreign or disappearing cultures, in-flight magazines, coffee-table books, films and news reports. These may seem culturally authoritative, but nevertheless “embody, or are capable of being consumed, in terms of exotic or romantic notions of the ‘Other’” (Edwards 1996:201). For Root (1996: 42) exoticism is interconnected with recognition, with cultural difference connoted by signs – usually fragments - recognisable to the cultural outsider because they were part of her or his conceptual framework prior to the encounter with difference. Exoticism is thus devised and experienced through a “structure of recognition” and such fragments connoting difference present ‘shortcuts’ to the desired and expected exotic experience (Root 1996:42). Such fragmentary images may also be deployed to connote cultural, ethnic and sexual difference, to stand in for the whole of a culture, people or region or connote ‘nature’, ‘sensuality’, ‘freedom’ and more (Root 1996:42). This is seen in suggestions for statement pieces needed to achieve the *Out of Africa*, ‘colonial style’ or ‘ethnic’ look. Numerous décor features present ethnographic postcards or portraits of black women as indexes of ethnicity, earthiness and tradition that belong to times past. Such portraits are often juxtaposed with high modern design and contemporary trends, with the ‘ethnic’ or ‘traditional’ implied or named as an exotic foil for the contemporary and Western.

A Plascon colour forecast article is illustrated with an enlarged early twentieth century ethnographic postcard of a Senegalese *Femme de Griot* (Wife of a Griot), photographed in Dakar by François-Edmond Fortier<sup>242</sup> (Fig.

animal horns or bones, zebra, leopard and Nguni-cattle skins or print for Africa; the ‘colonial style’ linked to India, South East Asia and East Asia resemble that of the Caribbean plantations, with the addition of bamboo furniture, and textiles and objects referencing Indian (the word ‘Raj’ is sometimes used), Chinese, or South East Asian cultures.

<sup>242</sup> Griots are oral historians, genealogists, advisors, musicians, praise-singers and storytellers from West Africa, historically originating from with the court of the Mande empire. A photographer and ethnographer, Fortier ran a very successful photographic studio in

5.15). According to the stylist, “though this look features trendy elements, the print adds an ethnic feel”. Here the ‘trendy’ and up-to-date elements of the room are offset by the ‘ethnic’, as symbolised by the African woman in Fortier’s postcard. In juxtaposition with the shiny and new, the object-image is imbued with an “aura of pastness” (Samuel 2012: 88).



Fig. 5.15. Liezel says, though this look features trendy elements, the print adds an ethnic feel, 2016. Magazine décor feature  
(The big picture 2016:18).

A black woman as index of African ethnicity and tradition is seen in the article ‘A piece of Africa’ in Afrikaans women’s magazine *Rooi Rose* (Fig. 5.16). David Ballam’s large black and white photograph of a woman with painted face, stretched earlobes and woven basket on her head dominate the décor feature<sup>243</sup>. The caption reads: “Why not experiment with décor items in various ethnic styles?” (‘n Stukkie Afrika 2017). *Rooi Rose*

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Dakar. He was a prolific postcard photographer and published over 3000 original postcards of West Africa in the early twentieth century. These predominantly depicted indigenous Senegalese peoples and cultures (Prochaska 1991).

<sup>243</sup> The picture is one of the South African photographer David Ballam’s black and white photographic images of semi-nomadic and pastoralist Africans in traditional dress marketed by interior design outlets Weylandts and Outpost Originals.

selected décor objects to echo the patterns and hues in Ballam's image. The objects are of a "generalised exotic", a term Edwards (1996:208) uses to describe recognisable cultural expressions which particularly inform the primitivist or romantic responses of consumers. The décor products are authenticated as 'ethnic' through approximation with the black woman in presumably tribal dress, her difference rendered exotic through de-contextualising in a magazine consumed by white Afrikaans-speaking women.



Fig. 5.16. 'n Stukkie Afrika (*A piece of Africa*), 2017. Magazine décor feature. (*Rooi Rose* 2017: 78).

Tagg (1988:99) argues that the realist mode of photography obscures production in a manner analogous to what takes place in commodity production under capitalism, and "the complex codes or use of language by which realism is constituted is not accounted for". Using the visual conventions of ethnographic photography, Ballam's portrait presents a tribal woman presumably living outside of a Western socio-economic context. However, the multiple economies at work and the (probable) entrepreneurial spirit of the woman photographed are hidden from *Rooi Rose*'s readership. Displaced and impoverished predominantly by the Ethiopian government's Gibe III hydroelectric dam, dressing up for outsider photographs has become a crucial form of income for indigenous people (Temperley 2015). The indigenous people of Ethiopia's Omo Valley and Kenya's Lake Turkana augment their traditional dress and body modification to satisfy outsider tourist and fine

art photographers' desire for spectacular tribalism and authentic Africa. Ballam's photographic construction of African tradition for bourgeois consumers is therefore a process in which the represented participates in performative fashion. Furthermore, Ballam's images and his views of his subjects are informed by nostalgia for a bygone era 'still' embodied in the peoples he regards as ancient and exotic. He describes subjects photographed in Southern Ethiopia's Omo Valley as "beautifully unique ... with traditional customs and beliefs...that are still largely unaffected by outside influences" (Ballam 2017).

The temporal distancing of Africa and African others figures prominently in the subject appropriation of 'colonial style' décor. This occurs in the use of the ethnographic present in décor rhetoric and the conflation of historical and contemporary signifiers, as seen in Mr Price Home's *Tribal Lady* scatter cushion (Fig. 5.19).



Fig. 5.19 *Tribal Lady* scatter cushion, 2015. Scatter cushion, 50 x 50cm. Mr Price Home, Blue Route Mall, Cape Town.  
(Photograph by author).

The design combines three colonial ethnographic postcards, postage stamps with African fauna and a contemporary image of a Himba woman. The design offers a miscellany of African women's dress and hairstyles. As the postcard captions are obscured, these cultural markers differentiate the featured women according to ethnic type. Although the designer selected the African subjects their cultural and ethnic difference, this difference is doubly domesticated in the design. First, through the framing and commodification by the colonial postcard as ethnographic types and objects of the tourist gaze, and second,

in its postcolonial reproduction as fabric cover and decorative accessory. The contemporary photograph of the Himba woman has been altered to match the soft monochromes of grey and sepia as in historical postcards. This creates an equivalence between her and the women of the colonial postcards: she is archaised and, like them, becomes the sign of a bygone era. This visual strategy effectively removes the Himba woman from the present of the twenty-first century designer who used her image (Fabian 1983:30). In an epistemological act of separation and distancing, she is denied coevalness with her contemporaries: the consumers of her portrait (Fabian 1983: 27,30)<sup>244</sup>. The larger image also functions to establish a metonymic relation between African women and nature, the land and the earth<sup>245</sup>.

For Root (1996:45, 47) the outsider's desire, curiosity and engagement with cultural Others marked as exotic, are self-referential. Exoticism, writes Root (1996:34), is a primary trope of primitivism, and functions through the viewer, consumer, designer or entrepreneur's complex and ambivalent relationship to cultural difference and her/his valorisation of certain perceived qualities of the 'primitive'<sup>246</sup>. Exoticism is moreover dialectical and contingent across various times and places, where it may serve different and even contradictory ideological purposes (Huggan 2001:12). Never politically neutral, it can be deployed to rationalise projects of reconciliation and social harmony, and the same exotic stereotypes have been used to legitimise discrimination, exploitation and violent conquest (Huggan 2001:13). It is the metaphorical function of the exotic or nostalgic commodity-image facilitates its potential to stand for something else (Edwards 1996:202,205). It is a process occurring through analogy rooted in established lexicon and the familiar binary oppositions of colonial discourse: urban/rural, modern/traditional, past/present (Van Eeden 2009:127). As a symbolic system, the exotic also functions dialectically, by translating the exotic as both strange and familiar. It domesticates and renders recognisable that which is foreign and culturally different, structuring these "in a way which makes them comprehensible and possibly predictable, if predictably defiant of total familiarity" (Foster cited in Huggan 2001:14).

<sup>244</sup> In *Time and the Other: how anthropology makes its object*, Johannes Fabian (1983:27) describes the practice of situating non-Westerners outside of modern time as the "allochronism of anthropology". This allochronism appears in subtle ways, for example through the ethnographic present which fixes the Other forever in an unchanging present tense, which is paradoxically past. The ethnographic present can be found in the synchronic, single-culture studies and a-historical models of Functionalist and Structuralist anthropology, which fixed living and constantly changing cultures in an idealised time and space prior to significant European contact (Littlefield Kasfir 1984:166). "Locked in an anti-historicist, de-contextualised framework", writes Joseph Reilly (2005:217), past and even some present ethnographies "treat Africans as static subjects magically avoiding history".

<sup>245</sup> Van Eeden (2009:126) notes that the typical trope of sole Himba woman in traditional dress only emerges in the 1960s, and in the decades thereafter came to connote the 'unspoilt native': raw, natural beauty, imbricated in both the land and the private, domestic sphere of African tribes. By the 1990s and Namibia's independence, touristic images of Himba women came to stand in as cultural marker for Namibian nationhood, as part of and like the landscape, Himba women become scenery to be gazed at.

<sup>246</sup> From earliest contact, foreign desire for culturally Other goods stimulated African production and performance of 'authentic' culture (See Steiner 1994).

What happens when the historic archival image – and the image of the subject – are appropriated and reproduced as commodity a second and third time, with traces of previous commodification often visible or highlighted? Do such reifications of the same tropes result in ever more ‘inauthenticity’ or distance from a ‘real’ of the colonial past? I propose that it is misleading to assume that reproductions or imitations of colonial images by designers or photographers are ‘less authentic’ than those of their colonial forebears or those used as inspiration, simply because more time has elapsed, or due to their clear commercial purpose and accelerated reproduction and manipulation. To suggest this would presume that there is an original or referent to return to. As Said (2003:95) declared, there is no ‘real’ Orient or Oriental, only Western projections onto the Orient. As established above, late twentieth-century research has exposed photographers’ interventions in the documentation of their subjects as attempts to realise their own conceptions of tribal authenticity. Numerous colonial photographers and ethnographers expressed nostalgia for the perceived lost authenticity of native cultures that were assimilated by Western modernity (see Rosaldo 1989).

Regarded in relation with Young’s conception of appropriation, the initial depiction constitutes subject appropriation. According to a poststructuralist approach, this image is a signifier without stable or natural signifier, and for the postmodernist it constitutes a simulacrum. To designers and consumers, the diverse colonial archive presents a form of knowledge (of Africa and Africans) widely promulgated and recognisable in the world. Through mass production and circulation archival images of Africans have, however, become simulacra and have accrued greater force than the appearances of the world (Frow 1991:125).

In tourism, argues Frow (1991: 125), the consumer’s knowledge of places and objects precedes and informs touristic experiences. The same can be said for the interior décor industry. For ‘tourists’ browsing styles, motifs, objects and images for inspiration and appropriation, the knowledge of and familiarity with exotic and nostalgic coloniality precedes the creative and consumer decisions of those who seek out and ‘discover’ its signifying texts as if anew. According to Frow (1991:125), objects, places, images and people are easily recognisable as ‘essences’, “as types of the beautiful, extraordinary or culturally authentic”, and they are read as “signs of themselves”. John Urry (1990) uses the term ‘hermeneutic circle’ to describe this chain of signification and recognition. “What the traveller sees is what is already given by the pattern”, he writes (1990:140).



**LOUIS VUITTON**

Fig. 5.1.17. Louis Vuitton, *Spirit of Travel*, 2014. Promotional film, filmed by Peter Lindberg, directed by Tim Wright.  
(Wright 2017).

Stewart (1993:23) writes that the past sought by the nostalgic "never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack". This observation is applicable to the hyperrealities conjured from familiar signifiers of 'colonial style' in the marketing campaigns for Louis Vuitton's *Spirit of Travel* (Fig. 5.17) and the 2018 Las Vegas Market trade show (Fig. 5.18)<sup>247</sup>. Citing *Out of Africa* and *Safari*, the retro campaigns recreate colonial chic elements in highly polished advertisements. Signifiers of 'the colonial' connote a luxury lifestyle, which attributes new meanings to the historical term and epoch (see 5.4).

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<sup>247</sup> Las Vegas Market is a home décor trade show described as "world-class experience" and "premiere gift and home market in the West" (About Las Vegas Market 2018). Its bi-annual trade shows feature furniture, home furnishings, textiles and gifts.

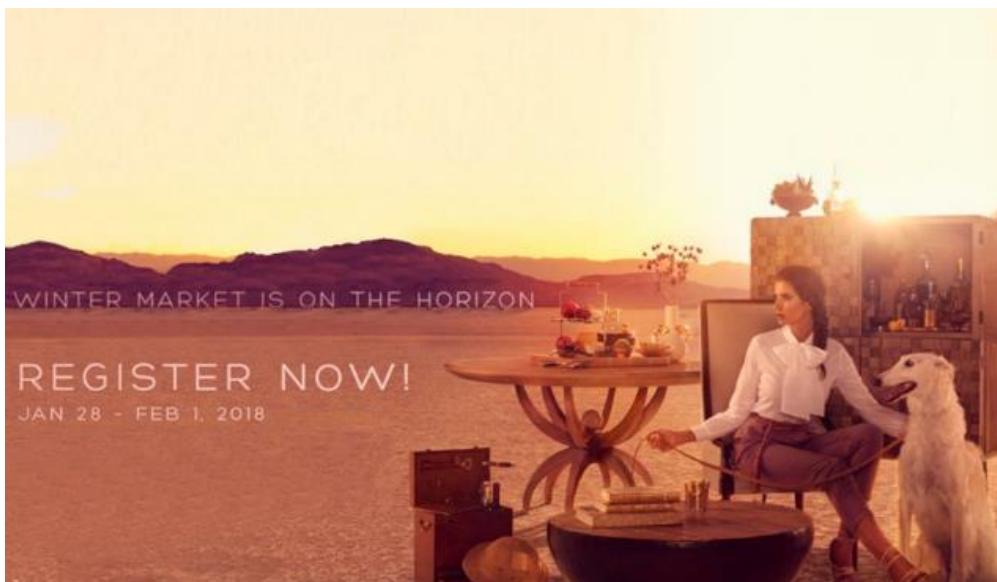


Fig. 5.18. Las Vegas Market, *Winter market is on the horizon*, 2018.  
(About Las Vegas Market 2018).

Attempts at authenticity are mostly irrelevant and trumped by the desire for the sweet nostalgia and luxurious exoticism of an Africa popularised by Hollywood and Lauren's celebrity-studded advertisements. Stewart (1993:23) speaks of "the social disease of nostalgia", defining nostalgia as sadness without an object, "a repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition". The object of desire is endlessly deferred as the only authenticity that can be possessed is that of original branded goods. For consumers and companies alike, this may be the only authenticity that matters<sup>248</sup>.

While the subjects depicted in colonial-style accessories are frequently tied to and metonymic of the land, their consumers are frequently land owners who are wealthy enough to be unrestricted by boundaries. In Vuitton's *Spirit of travel*, the narrative urges consumers of colonial chic to disregard borders in the quest for authenticity. This is a freedom only accessible to an upper-class minority with the correct passports. In a neoliberal capitalist context, the elite consumers and target market of 'colonial style' are supra-national; the guests of luxury lodges and world-citizens. Their consumption comprises viewing, previewing and purchasing anything from colonial chic accessories and design collections to luxury safaris from nearly anywhere on the globe. For such globe-trotters, the Africa-lite of colonial chic presents the opportunity for reviving and getting back to nature, with the bonus of luxury and comfort.

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<sup>248</sup> Louis Vuitton is one of the most counterfeited brands and vehemently fights the market in imitation products. Vuitton brand loyalists are heavily invested in owning the 'real' brand and will minutely scrutinise product finishes for evidence of authenticity.

In this economy “moving images meet de-territorialised viewers” (Appadurai 1996:4) and sites of consumption and production are disconnected. The virtuality and materiality of things oscillate at lightning speed between virtual and material manifestations. This is the state of superfluity where things float “with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money” and “have neither singularity nor originality except through their quantification and their equation with money” (Mbembe 2004:399). Promotional material for colonial chic inter-weaves colonial tropes of discovery and adventure with stereotypes of African cultural authenticity, which are presented in contra-distinction to the materialism and contrivance of the urban and digital world.

#### 5.4 Whose colonial?

Pollack’s *Out of Africa* offers a fantasy of Africa as paradoxically a site for luxurious domesticity and simultaneous liberation from bourgeois society. Here repressed femininity – as represented by Blixen – is emancipated through mastery of both nature and the natives. For McClintock (1995:15), films like *Out of Africa*, Lauren’s *Safari* collection and Banana Republic clothing “peddle neo-colonial nostalgia” for an era and locale where white women achieve self-actualisation and liberty as they hunt big game, immunise the natives and pursue illicit love affairs. Part of colonial chic’s seduction is the illustrated freedom of the owner and consumer of the style; yet this is a freedom from material want and productive labour, which relies historically upon the extraction of wealth and service from colonised peoples and places. Colonial chic décor may serve the identity-work of post-settler subjects who wish to assert belonging to and a love of Africa. However, in colonial chic African subjects are seldom if ever depicted as consumers, while they are highly visible as servants and aesthetic props. Their belonging in Africa is limited to their value as symbolic and labour resource. Along with other symbols of white imperial habitus, black servitude underpins this look and lifestyle, with the luxury of chandeliers, groomed Irish hounds and crisp linen in the heat and isolation of the African veld, signifying wasted, though indispensable, black labour.

To tease apart the ideological underpinnings of the visually seductive colonial chic, I pose the question: *whose* colonial is evoked? Judging from media features, it is the (imagined) luxury of the colonial master’s house that is emulated. On glossy pages, the very word ‘colonial’ and its stylistic props have become designer shorthand for privilege, comfort and luxury. Despite the stylistic foregrounding of the quasi-historical, this trend obscures history, rendering signs (especially tropes and stereotypes) natural and neutral as décor elements, obfuscating their ideological functioning (Pickering 2001:48). hooks’ (1992:25) engagement with “imperialist nostalgia” is instructive here. For her, the term denotes the celebration of “a continuum of ‘primitivism’”, taking the form, in mass culture, of “re-enacting and re-ritualising in different ways the imperialist, colonising journey as narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the Other” (hooks 1992:25). One can argue that the ‘colonial’ of the design world presents ‘re-enactments and re-ritualisings’ of imagined colonial experience and

its settings – not that of the colonised, but of the coloniser. The fantasy enacted is that of the master’s house, and hidden from view, or silent in white gloves and aprons, are the disenfranchised indigenous populations. They are the “instruments of production” (Césaire 2000:42) harnessed to create and sustain the luxury and comfort of the ersatz aristocracy.

As a material manifestation of white nostalgia, design presents an active screen between subject and world, filtering out unwanted present realities (Mbembe 2004:403). From the estrangement confronting whites when racially segregated cities collapse, writes Mbembe (2004:403), there materialises an “architecture of hysteria”. In post-apartheid Johannesburg, this is exemplified in themed, revivalist architecture (Mbembe 2004:403). For Mbembe (2004:403) this marks a “return to the ‘archaic’ as way of freezing rapid changes in temporal and political structures”. The same, I contend, emerges in colonial chic décor. Conceived as a vague historical period or style, colonial chic presents an abstract mythology of colonial subjects and their lived realities under colonial subjugation. The black Africans of colonial chic are safely docile. They are not talking back, are not politicised and are not demanding restitution. It is significant that the trend burgeons as colonial subjects confront settlers and imperial nations with the legacies of colonial subjugation and appropriation. A “magic mirror and a specular moment”, colonial chic facilitates hallucination of a lost or threatened imperial whiteness, writes Mbembe (2004:403). “Contemporary nostalgia is not so much about the past as about the vanishing present”, writes Boym (2001: 351). The popularity of colonial chic may indicate nostalgia and mourning for a vanishing era of whiteness as plenitude and undisputed authority.

Myth, according to Roland Barthes (1991:117), is characterised by constant games of hide-and-seek between meaning and form. When dominated by form, the contingency of meaning is left behind. “It empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains” (Barthes 1991:117). Meaning offers form “an instantaneous reserve of history”, which can be called upon and dismissed (Barthes 1991:116). “Put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed”, writes Barthes (1991:117). In this manner the indisputable form of the historic subject is domesticated and the subject of (colonial) history can become an accomplice to nostalgic whiteness. Following Mbembe (2004:403), I proffer that the simulacra of colonial chic are “attach[ed] to a lost object that used to provide comfort”.

I further contend that, to facilitate consumption, the sentimental commodities created for this neocolonial style require amnesia and the emptying of history of all but its surfaces. This process facilitates vicarious nostalgia, as utilised by marketers. Unlike ‘personal nostalgia’ – the consumer’s longing for a lived past – vicarious nostalgia describes wistful longing “for a period outside of the individual’s living memory”, and is

never directly experienced by the consumer (Merchant & Rose 2013:2619, 2621). The term suggests emotional connection to, and fantasies about, experiences and associations from past eras, of which the consumer has no first-hand experience. By consuming goods and brands that evoke vicarious nostalgia, individuals can indulge in an idealised past. Appadurai (1996:77-78) calls this “armchair nostalgia” or nostalgia without “lived experience or collective historical memory”, where merchandisers’ images supply the “memory of a loss [...] never suffered”, for him exemplified par excellence by “catalogues that exploit the colonial experience for merchandising purposes”.

For Rosaldo (1989) the apparently benign character of most imperialist nostalgia uses a captivating pose of innocence that distracts and conceals its complicity with brutal regimes. It casts the accountable colonial agent as innocent, if not benevolent, bystander. Inspiration for Evolution Product’s collection *The Magic Veld – Circa 1600-1800* was taken from drawings by European naturalists, whose work, the website tells us, has nothing to do with the sordid and violent business of colonisation:

It was their passion for knowledge and a desire to explore the uncharted spaces that lead the early explorers to the Cape [...]. They came not to conquer but to meticulously record the plants, trees and animals they encountered on their perilous journeys into the veld (*The Magic Veld* 2017).

The marketer’s reassurance exposes rather than alleviates unease about the source material, perhaps anticipating a consumer’s disquiet about colonial legacies that may haunt the evocative drawings and maps adorning soft furnishings (Fig. 5.20). The unsolicited absolution both highlights and obscures how colonial ideology and conquest underscore the cultural expressions of all imperial agents. It disconnects the work and presence of European artists and scientists in Africa from the theft and destruction of native land and lives. In postcolonial worlds, this trend exemplifies “a case of traumatic amnesia and not of forgetting, of the disavowal of time as opposed to memorialisation” (Mbembe 2004:403). The discreet assertion of colonial innocence may suggest that not all anxieties are soothed, or all histories masked, when records of fraught histories are commodified as romantic accessories.

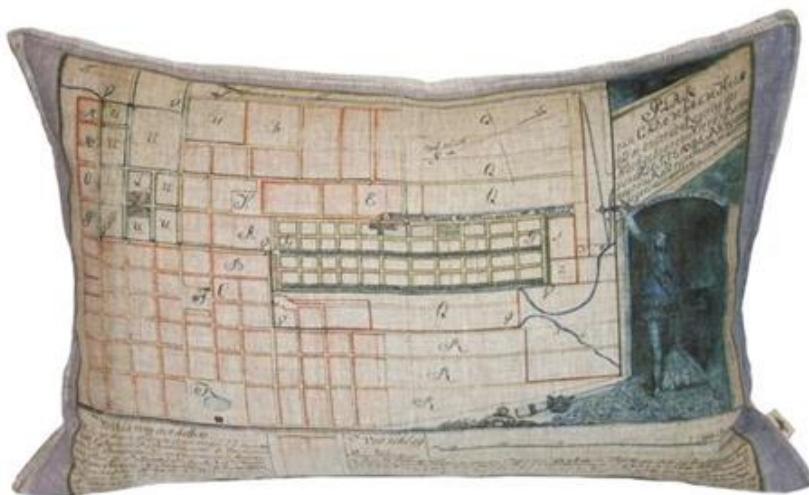


Fig. 5.20. Evolution product, *Plattegrond cushion*, Cape collection. 2018. Scatter cushion, linen, 72 x 44cm (Evolution product 2018).

#### Appropriation and the commodification of racial blackness

Writing in the context of late twentieth-century America, hooks (1992:21) argues that blackness is consumed as a sign of transgression, as a domesticated product offering consumers self-transformation through safe and comfortable encounters with other cultures<sup>249</sup>. It is possible to sample the styles, objects and images of cultural others without relinquishing mainstream status or class privilege, and without engaging with the people, lives and histories that constitute the resources of those commodities (hooks 1992:21,23). For hooks (1992:21), “ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture”. Within contemporary homes, images of historic black bodies and faces – like ‘tribal’ sculptures, hand-woven textiles and hunting trophies – may thus serve to spice up an otherwise classic palette with frissons of worldliness and Otherness. The manipulated images imbue commonplace, recently manufactured objects with an aura of the historical and natural. Adorned with simulacra of historical black femininity, *Cameo* may present a versatile, yet safe, commodity fetish that promotes whichever noble or romantic version of colonial Africa is desired by entrepreneurs and consumers.

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<sup>249</sup> One may argue that black cultural identity and even racial blackness are consumed as temporary lifestyle choices. The latter is exemplified in the body modification of Martina Big, a German glamour model who since 2017 modified her skin colour from white to black through intensive artificial tanning and melanin injections. Allegedly identifying as black, she further altered her facial features with Botox and modified the texture and colour of her hair. Here it seems that black skin – the screen of blackness and its most vivid signifier – is appropriated as commodity, albeit in surgically reversible form. In March 2018 Big was baptised in Nyeri, Kenya, and changed her name to Malaika Kubwa.

I proffer that the specific selection of photographic portraits by *Cameo* suggests that a particular ‘trace’ was desired for this design: the images were chosen because they are historical photographs of black women. To resonate with the desires of its target market, the collaged portraits are encoded as indexes of a romantic, old-worldly Africa. The target market is likely to decode the collaged portraits according to well-established codes of race and gender. The signifiers of scenic black femininity are further inflected with idealising nostalgia, turning the portraits into conduits for vicarious nostalgia.

Yet what about consumers who do have “lived experience or collective historical memory” (Appadurai 1996:78) or those unaffiliated to hooks’ (1992:21) “mainstream white culture”? The deployment of signifiers of blackness as simulacra and traces, within both colonial discourse and contemporary design, is premised on the need for a multiplicity of sign functions allowing for both comfortable stability and suggestions of the illicit and dangerous. The stereotypes created by dynamic and ambivalent colonial discourse, whereby subjects are constructed through the articulation of difference, are inherently ambiguous, paradoxical modes of representation and application (Bhabha 1994:94-96). Owing to the combined paradoxical fixity and volatility of the racial signifiers selected for *Cameo*, the fabric can lend both charm and spice to domestic contexts. By the same token, the images can also serve as affirmations of the consumer/owner’s political ideals or ancestral relations. The flexibility of the racial signifier and the diverse contexts and modes of domestic consumption may, as anticipated by Stevenson and Graham-Stewart, therefore contribute to its re-appropriation as records of resistance, celebration and remembrance.

In locating the fashioned role of black femininity in *Cameo*, it is helpful to consider the semiotic and economic functions (as well as the value) of the indexical sign denoting racial blackness, through an unpicking of the signifier from its referent. For Raengo (2013:13), the “image of blackness” functions as “perfect sign”; an intelligible, trustworthy and transparent visual sign where “the surface bears the self-evident trace of what supposedly lies beneath it”. She explains this in terms of the visual ontology of “face value”, formulated as the possibility, desire and belief that one may read value (also understood as reference, truth and meaning) on an image’s face and its surface. This approach traps the body within the visual field where it becomes both “proof and product of the visuality of race” (Raengo 2013:13). I believe that it is owing to this perceived relationship between signifier and signified – the black body and racial blackness – and through the consequent activation of an archive of accumulated associations, that the four photographic portraits were initially produced and consequently reproduced in *Cameo*. The re-inscription of meaning by entrepreneurs and consumers is thus facilitated by a de-contextualised racial signifier, which although a potential “accomplice” to a myriad of even contradictory concepts, remains a palimpsest of prior meanings (Barthes 1991:117).

This codified and re-contextualised palimpsest assumes exchange value(s) because it can be affixed to commodities that compete within global image economies where Otherness is marketed as commodity. Having accrued currency as metonymic of Africa in the popular imagination, the image of the black body becomes a lucrative readymade commodity that functions to set apart both entrepreneur and consumer. Signifiers of racial and ethnic difference enable entrepreneurs to differentiate their products from “culturally ‘other’ goods” (Huggan 2001). For consumers, possession of items such as these signifies a cultural capital that not only speaks of the owner’s style, awareness of current fashions and ability to afford these, but also of an appreciation of the African cultural and historical context, however sincere or superficial. Transformed into decorative motifs adorning costly soft furnishings, the black bodies and faces indicate recognition of colonial history, yet both history and difference are carefully contained and gentrified within the antique frame and the parameters of the commodity covered in the fabric.

## 5.5 Conclusion

It becomes clear that, in their postcolonial afterlives, the portraits of women in *Cameo* become productive as signifiers of the historical, while at the same time they are emptied of historical specificity. The resultant patina of historicity functions as an apt vehicle for varied, shifting, and even contradictory readings. I acknowledge that my reading of *Cameo* – a critique of the postcolonial marketplace’s fixing of racial signifier to referent – might curtail other interpretative possibilities. It is indeed imperative to decolonial projects of emancipation to recognise that colonial photographic portraits produced with the explicit aims of racial categorisation can and should be read for interpretations that differ from the purposes and ideologies of their creation. This is the wish expressed by the editors of *Surviving the lens*, who urge revisiting the photographs as evidence of individuality, resistance, pride and dignity (Stevenson & Graham-Stewart 2001:24). In contemplating the potential repetition of trauma in contemporary artists’ appropriation and use of colonial images of African bodies, Colin Richards (1999:185) argues that it is untenable to assume “that the figurative repetition (reproduction) of violence is always and everywhere a structurally entailed ossification of existing power relations”.

In their appraisal of nineteenth-century anthropologist Gustav Fritsch’s photographic portraits of Southern Africans, taken with the explicit aim of indexing racial types, Andrew Bank (2008) and Lize van Robbroeck (2008) emphasise the excess of signification in Fritsch’s portraits. Despite his painstaking, instrumentalist efforts to control, quantify and generalise, his portraits in fact testify to the human individuality and hybridity he encountered in the colony. The same can be said of the photographic portraits selected for *Cameo*: the dignity, self-respect and fortitude expressed in upright postures; the individuality and style communicated in fashionable arrangements of hair or headscarf; a gaze that interrogates and holds the eye of the lens and the viewer. Furthermore, like colonial photographers and sitters, contemporary consumers are aware of the

camera's ability to thwart the efforts of the photographer or to serve as an instrument for invention and affectation. In the form of homeware, and therefore more readily available to the middle-class than the original photographs, these images may provide consumers with important reminders of "lives lived" (Stevenson and Graham-Stewart 2001:31,33).

It is, however, important to keep in mind that such alternative readings and potential recognition happen through the consumption of radically de-contextualised images of blackness as racial signifiers now recodified and domesticated through and for fashionable commodification. The transformation of signifiers of black colonial experience into nostalgic, colonial chic accessories produces "experiences of duration, passage, and loss that rewrite the lived histories of individuals, families, ethnic groups, and classes" (Appadurai 1996:78). This process may deny the significance of the Other's history, also when foregrounding it (hooks 1992:31). Furthermore, the obscuring of both colonial history and the processes of production occurs in fashion's elegant subsuming of the critical and counter-hegemonic aims of historians, artists and curators.

Clues as to whether the women's faces on the fabric are little more than "tins on a supermarket shelf" (Polhemus 1996) and their value subject to the longevity of a trend, are most likely found in individual consumers' relationships with the commodity. The consumption and display of *Cameo* products might subvert colonial aims of racial typecasting and address the historical decontextualizing of the pictures as they appear in postcolonial commodities. A magazine feature of Didi Mogashoa's Johannesburg home, where *Cameo* wallpaper decorates a guest bedroom, presents one example (Fig 5.21).



Fig. 5.21 *Family and friends*, 2016. Magazine décor feature (*Imagine* 2016:12).

Here colour photographs of Mogashoa's relatives have been sized and framed to fit into the ornate frames printed on the wallpaper (Fig. 5.22). According to the article, the wallpaper "creates a canvas against which to display treasured photographs of the women of her family" (Leib 2016:12).



Fig. 5.22. *Family and friends*. (detail). 2016. Magazine décor feature (*Imagine* 2016:12).

These colour portraits of black woman and children are clearly modern family snapshots that contrast with the formal black and white studio photographs. It may present an example where a nostalgic commodity produced by cultural outsiders is claimed through affiliative ownership. The photographs fit into *and* stand out from the larger pattern, and the arrangement links the home-owner's recent maternal heritage with that of an historical black femaleness.

## Chapter six: Retro, Afro-chic and historical blackness

### 6.1 Introduction

Cultural appropriation, achieved through bricolage and syncretism, has emerged as a central feature of post-apartheid design. After decades of cultural isolation, and enthusiastic to embrace a new creative freedom and reinvigorate South African design, creatives borrowed images, styles and motifs from official and popular archives, from township vernacular expressions, local craft traditions and art expressions from the greater continent. Postmodern irreverence, pastiche and irony, manifested in designs that were frequently retro and playful. Visual design was embraced as an instrument for positive change and to foster social cohesion and promote sustainability. Creative practitioners further explored the potential of design to conscientise the public about current issues, address past injustices, or to foreground the narratives omitted from official historical records. This chapter examines retro Afro-chic adaptations of historical images within the broader context of South African design at the turn of the century.

First, in ‘A new design idiom: appropriation in post-apartheid fabric design’, I give a broad overview of post-apartheid design and I indicate the primacy of appropriation to the emergence of a contemporary South African expressive idiom. Due to the dearth of scholarship on interior and fabric design, I draw extensively on literature about South African graphic design. Although materially very different, the avant-garde in graphics and advertising has had enduring influence on interior and fabric design. The goal is not to present a survey of design history from the 1990s to the present, but to sketch the broader context of visual design within which retro and Afro-chic trends occur.

In the following section, I discuss the trend known as retro Afro-chic. In their translation or recoding of signifiers from South Africa’s modern history into fashionable designs and onto commodities, several fabric designers produce what Lewis (2012) calls Afro-chic, which often has a strong retro feel. Designer Richard Hart (2012b:6,7) confirms this by listing eight trends of post-apartheid design. These all include in some way practices of appropriation, bricolage, the recycling of historical styles, materials and images, in a mixing of high art, international trends and local vernacular. These appropriations result in the “stylistic promiscuity” characteristic of postmodernism (Featherstone 2007:64), and tend to further incorporate discourses of democracy and the freedom struggle by rerouting signifiers and icons to serve commodity discourse (Bertelsen 1998).

Subject appropriation in retro Afro-chic presents historical images of black figures re-contextualised, often shown enjoying the freedoms offered by mid-twentieth century cities and consumer culture. These images

are frequently altered to achieve a pop art aesthetic, and several designs are kitsch and ironic while sweetly nostalgic. The black body, particularly in trendy vintage fashions, is constructed as a cipher, a term Kent Ono and Derek Buescher (2001:25) use to describe the mechanism by which commodity culture thematises concepts and experiences for circulation as images. A selected person or object has a history that is put through a process of “encipherment”, which renders it a floating signifier to be inscribed with new meanings, that is, as a “basic figure and form for a variety of products and discourses within a much larger commodity field” (Ono & Buescher 2001:24,25). Encipherment is a cyclical signification process, where a cipher circulates within a world of products, its meaning constituted by, and constituting, the products derived from it. Through recreation in mainstream popular culture, the cipher (operating as so many simulacra) eventually encompasses all references to the figure, and ultimately becomes historical sense (Ono & Buescher 2001:28). What is the significance of the black body as cipher in retro Afro-chic, or Africa-lite? How does this encipherment deploy a screen of historical blackness in home fashions that casually sport records of black life under apartheid? These questions are grappled with across the chapter.

Most of the textile collections and décor promotions featuring archival images include designs for scatter cushions. Their prominence may be attributed to a comparative affordability, often being the cheapest items in a décor collection. Such accessories offer relatively cheap ways of altering, updating or adding to the décor of a room, and owning them shows awareness and appreciation of new trends without the consumer making large financial commitment to design trends. The Weylandts website suggests that scatter cushions enable consumers to give a “sofa or bed an instant trend update with cushions that double up as conversation starter” (Scatters and cushions [s.a.]). According to Amanda du Plessis (cited in Thatcher 2017), “cushions that communicate your interests” are one of three homeware products essential to every home. These accessories thus offer the owner a focus for socialising, a vehicle for expressing aspects of her or his identity, and an affordable way to satisfy the desire to take part in the latest fashion trend. I investigate the potential of such ‘conversation starters’ to re-activate histories, to politicise, or to become micro-subversions within the home.

Following this, I focus on the ostensibly liberal commemoration and critical invocation of black servitude and slavery in the Afro-chic designs of Maid in Africa. The fabric and décor designers repurpose images of black servants and slaves for supposedly commemorative or critical purposes, which can be read as a highly problematic move: in the design items of *Maidonna* and *Slave to Fashion* the screen of race is enmeshed with the legacy of black exploitation, conflating blackness with servitude. I read the appropriation of abolitionist propaganda through the lens of black critical theory and Mbembe’s notion of superfluity. The points raised in Chapter three inform this investigation of efforts at critical design. Can commodity design subvert processes that dehumanised black persons under racial capitalism, and conscientise consumers without reproducing in symbolic forms those historically determined relations of exploitation?

## 6.2 A new design idiom: appropriation in post-apartheid fabric design

According to graphic designer Garth Walker (2008:21) the 1994 elections heralded a new way of looking at South African society and the nation, marked by the freedom and agency to redefine self and nation. Design was envisaged as a catalyst for social transformation and reconciliation and Ravi Naidoo (2012:3), founder of Design Indaba, regards design as vital to South Africa's "restorative journey"<sup>250</sup>. Industry leaders and design innovators called for an overhaul of South African design so that it may be brought in line with democracy, multiculturalism and inclusivity, to forge an aesthetic and a design language reflective of the country's historical legacy, its cultural diversity and African contemporaneity<sup>251</sup>. Designers were tasked with the creative definition of the new nation, with shaping the symbols of the new political order, and with meeting the corporate sector's desire to be visible participants in building the 'new' South Africa (Sauthoff 2004:36)<sup>252</sup>.

Following decades of isolation, repression of free expression and the use of design to denounce and expose government abuses, designers saw new potential for individual experimentation, creative expression, social commentary and self-promotion<sup>253</sup>. The liberalisation of South Africa's broadcast sector, arrival of tabloids, growth of the internet and new technology had significant impact on the work, the international exposure and connectivity of creatives<sup>254</sup>. Local design was tasked to give brand South Africa competitive edge, achieve international design standards and assist in developing local and international markets.

The early 1990s was a "double moment" of change and continuity, where shifts in notions of citizenship, nationhood, cultural and personal identity took place at the intersection of the local and global (Hadland *et al* 2008:1-2). The focus on fostering an indigenous design aesthetic against a backdrop of state and private enterprise interest in a new national image, meant that South African identity emerged as a significant theme (Sauthoff 2004:34-35). According to Sandra Klopper (2000:216), new visions and expressions of fashionableness "have played a central role in [...] attempts to develop a post-Apartheid identity". Post-apartheid design industries, marketing and sales, writes Lewis (2012:76), have "drawn on myths about

<sup>250</sup> Design Indaba, according to Ravi Naidoo (2012:3), "was borne from an upsurge in confidence in South Africa's democratic future, with a vision that the creative shall inherit the earth".

<sup>251</sup> For an overview of this quest in post-apartheid graphic design, see Sauthoff (2004). It is important to note that the preoccupations of artists, industry and government to forge a clear national identity, brand and design language, is not inevitably shared by the population at large, or that one can take the successes of their strategies for granted (Thomas 1999:98).

<sup>252</sup> The concept of forging a new South African design idiom is not unprecedented in the country's history: white artists and designers in the 1930s worked to the same goal, albeit under aegis and for purpose of white nationalism (Sauthof 2004:36). See Jacques Lange and Jeanne van Eeden's (2016) discussion of the important role of visual design to nation-building efforts between 1910 and 2013.

<sup>253</sup> Design conventions and exhibitions such Design Indaba (established 1995), South African Fashion Week (1997), national and regional arts festivals, glossy publications covering fine arts, graphics, fashion, architecture and interiors, self-published magazines, zines and comic books, provided platforms for new work.

<sup>254</sup> Global technological advances further transformed South African design: Apple computer was re-established (after its withdrawal due to sanctions beginning in the 1980s); the internet enabled designers to work from anywhere and outside of corporate structures; the rise in online communications promoted research; designers more readily gained international exposure and connectivity with creatives and business internationally (*Design Indaba conference 1995-2015*).

nationhood, social cohesion and freedom in ways that echo the desires and fantasies of many consumers". Appeals to consumers frequently invoked the motto 'unity in diversity' and the metaphor of a 'cultural melting-pot' in the simultaneous promotion of brands and a new national ethos. The rhetoric of the 'Rainbow Nation', promoted by archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, evolved as a primary post-apartheid myth, with South Africa's image upheld as an example of peaceful historical transformation (Lange & Van Eeden 2016:68). Mandela's image, as an icon of victory through struggle, soon became ubiquitous in post-apartheid South African design<sup>255</sup>.

Under President Thabo Mbeki the notion of *ubuntu* (a term registering mutuality and interdependency as fundamental to individual and collective well-being) was foregrounded, with the country being positioned within a broader pan-Africanism through Mbeki's notion of the African Renaissance, which emphasised continental pride. Concentrating on the strategic marketing of the country's image, the Mbeki government created Brand South Africa in 2001 to promote a positive and compelling national brand (Lange & Van Eeden 2016:70). Along with business, labour and civic organisations, the state also launched Proudly South African, which promoted consumption of locally-produced goods to support domestic industries and job creation.

Apart from its commercial impetus, the notion of 'home-grown' in design, marketing and consumption may reflect commercial and subjective responses to national shifts (Lewis 2012:74). Designs and brands promoted as 'proudly South African' or 'home-grown' may appeal to consumers' desire to express belonging and national pride through consuming fashionable goods that support local industries<sup>256</sup>. Design Team's brand and motto exemplifies this trend. Its motto reads: "Design Team creates feel-good printed fabrics, inspired by nature and everyday life on the African continent" (About us 2017). Here 'feel good' refers both to the tactile (the texture of fabric against the skin) and the meaningful (that it is inspired by local context and is produced domestically and creates employment). The brand capitalises on the kind of positive civic objectives urged upon consumers by national media and cultural intermediaries, while reflecting these values in its operations and manufacturing.

### New trends

As was the case for graphic and fashion design, prior to the 1990s fabric designers predominantly followed European trends, and drew on historical European textile and design sources (Levin 2006:17). The latter part

<sup>255</sup> Although the fashionable commodification of Mandela's image is not treated as a case study, I consider it in relation to the *Novelty* and *Maidonna* collections.

<sup>256</sup> The campaign was an outcome of the 1998 Presidential Jobs Summit. "The Proudly South African Campaign will encourage the nation to make personal and organisational contributions to economic growth and prosperity in South Africa, thereby increasing employment opportunities and reinforcing national pride" (About Proudly South African 2015).

of the twentieth century saw geometric and Op art influences, with the browns and oranges typical of the 1960s and 1970s, psychedelics, the revival of hand-crafts such as weaving, batik and hand-dyeing, and the bright colours and floral motifs of the American hippie movement (Esterhuizen 2018). From the late 1980s on, designers endeavoured to find a visual idiom rooted in a changing South Africa and its historical and cultural diversity and complexity. A new generation criticised the emulation of international trends, and a waiving of local cultural expressions and traditions, as deterrents to the development of a design aesthetic rooted meaningfully in South African contexts and experiences (Sauthoff 2004:36). Cultural appropriation from indigenous sources began to emerge in the work of white designers, many of whom were curious to explore the arts, history and design of black cultures, both at home and across the continent.

The fabric designs of the pioneering collective Jane and Jann (Jane Solomon and Jann Cheifitz), produced between 1986 and 1989, are quintessentially postmodern in the amalgamation of high and popular culture, local and international influences (Fig. 6.1)<sup>257</sup>. A similar approach was seen in the fabrics designs of Beezy Bailey, who used his own paintings for fabric and homeware design. The work of these designers is eclectic in its appropriation from sources ranging from local sport and political icons to indigenous dress, Catholic iconography, and classic art.



Fig. 6.1. Jane Solomon and Jan Cheifitz, *Retro Jane and Jann Icon prints*, 1986-1989. (Retro 'Jane-and-Jann' gallery 2018).

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<sup>257</sup> From 1986 until the early 1990s, Jane Solomon and Jann Cheifitz produced handprinted and hand-painted T-shirts, clothing and home accessories. In 2007, they launched Fabric Nation, a fabric design studio.

Sauthoff (2004:38) notes three conspicuous attributes (rather than discrete categories) of graphic design emerging from the late 1990s, each contributing to the emergence of contemporary South African design. The first is seen in the overt appropriation of vernacular images and styles, with design experiments marked by the aura of congeniality and optimism characteristic of the early years of the ‘Rainbow Nation’. A similar approach is found in fabric design. Here retro emerges in attempts to foster a shared heritage, and many designers turned to the consumer culture of their youth<sup>258</sup>. Lion matches, Zambuck, Sunlight soap and Ouma Rusks were claimed as shared South African heritage, not bound to ethnic or racial group and suitably apolitical to allow for light-hearted, retro design<sup>259</sup>. Logos of such brands were frequently combined with generic signifiers of black townships. Artistic expression from the rest of the continent also proved popular in offering fresh visual resources that were suitably local and African without overt political connotations.

Rovine (2015:192) writes that contemporary designs evoking the South African locality do so through appropriation and re-use, making direct or indirect allusions to history and place. This is not unlike the cultural producers of settler societies who “frequently turned to what was locally distinctive” to foster a sense of indigeneity (Thomas 1999:12)<sup>260</sup>. The natural environment or native cultures presented popular visual resources. According to Gina Esterhuizen (2018), a former textile design lecturer at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, a truly South African identity in textile design can be identified only in the late twentieth century work of young textile designers referencing indigenous motifs. Post-apartheid appropriations of indigenous textiles highlight the current hybridising of motifs valued and claimed as authentic and traditional. This is exemplified in interior and fashion designs that incorporate *isishweshwe* to imbue products with a generic South African and African authenticity<sup>261</sup>. Today generally regarded as part of traditional Xhosa dress, *isishweshwe* has its origins in Dutch industrialisation, colonial trade and missionary endeavour. It was exported to Africa in the nineteenth century and used for dressmaking by settler women (who called it *bloudruk* or *sis*), and Xhosa women (Leeb-du Toit 2012:27; Rovine 2009:198). The wax-resist cloth evokes diverse memories and heritage, making it amenable to contemporary fashionable expressions through appropriation and re-interpretation (Rovine 2009:199)<sup>262</sup>. As with other traditional textiles, strong

<sup>258</sup> Designer and artist Peet Pienaar of President Studio influenced many young South African creatives. Pienaar’s work draws in ironic, satirical fashion on his white, Afrikaner heritage and modern history under apartheid. Although Pienaar’s work is retro, it has a critical edge in its use of satire and is innovative in its execution, unusual juxtapositions and technical sophistication. It would therefore be inaccurate to suggest that South African designers only appropriated from the cultural heritage and vernacular of black communities.

<sup>259</sup> Some designers, as seen in the pages of *I-jusi* or the designs of Laugh Out Loud, use pastiche to satirise these brands and the middle-class milieu of their use.

<sup>260</sup> To colonial cultures seeking to define and assert their indigeneity, a “deep association between indigenous culture and the land presented powerful and condensed reference points”, notes Thomas (1999:12).

<sup>261</sup> A recent example is Hertex’s *Mama Africa* collection, described as the company’s “very own take on the tribal print trend... [I]nspired by traditional *shweshwe* prints, this collection will add authentic African flair to any space” (*Mama Africa* 2011).

<sup>262</sup> Leeb-du Toit (2012) recounts how South African white women wore recognisable African cloth to express oppositional political views during apartheid.

ethnic associations are frequently undercut by the hybridising effects of new acts of commodity translation (Coombes 2003:25).

Other popular motifs include indigenous fauna and flora, landscapes and rural architecture (Fig. 6.2). Familiar signs and objects – such as windmills, three-legged cast-iron pots, iconic buildings or monuments, antelope horns, barber and traffic signs, and well-known commodity labels – are transformed into design symbols, motifs and patterns (Fig. 6.3). In interior magazines and promotions from the 1990s, such designs and repurposed motifs are frequently accompanied by references to the new democracy and emerge as new local cultural icons<sup>263</sup>. In its use of contrasting colours, images of township spaces and subcultures, appropriations from African cultural expression, popular and consumer culture, the textile designs by Design Team, Inyezane, Shine Shine, Fabric Nation, Ed Suter and various designers for Mr Price Home exemplify the first design strand noted by Sauthoff.



Fig. 6.2. Fabric Nation, *Old Postcards*, [s.a.]. Wallpaper (*Old Postcards colour* 2018).

<sup>263</sup> Although such designs are still consumed and produced, these have disappeared from the pages and websites of style-leaders. Even as they are no longer considered trendy by style-leaders, such designs remain popular with a significant body of consumers.



Fig. 6.3. Design Team fabric collections, 2014. Screen shot (Fabric collection 2014).

According to Sauthoff (2004:38), this first tendency developed over time into a more sophisticated and suggestive incorporation of local contexts. Similar shifts emerge in fashion design, where many designers initially presented rather obvious declarations of patriotism in their celebration of the local (Levin 2006:18,19)<sup>264</sup>. Closer to the twenty-first century, designers translated the inspiration with more sophistication and “forged a more subtle identity in cloth” (Levin 2006:17). Levin (2006:18-19) suggests that the post-apartheid fashion revolution resulted in “a fresh new, urban-Afro aesthetic that truly reflects the flavour of this country”. Stoned Cherrie’s 2001 *Drum* Collection is widely noted for its bold referencing of a political, rather than cultural heritage (see Chang 2009). In this collection, Stoned Cherrie produced T-shirts with *Drum* magazine photographs of black celebrities, models and struggle icons. Sarah Rhodes (2014:98) regards the exploration of local symbols and historical images in post-apartheid fabric design as expressions of new national pride, and symptomatic of interrogations of personal and collective cultural identities.

A second strand in post-apartheid design, according to Sauthoff (2004:38), is an amalgamation of indigenous and international motifs and styles, thus drawing on particularly Euro-American trends without direct imitation

<sup>264</sup> While designers were ecstatic to “be free and flexing some creative muscle” [and] a “broad African nationalism and pride emerged slowly”, trend analyst Dion Chang (2006) writes that designs were sometimes derivative in its appropriation of traditional regalia or Central African design.

(Sauthoff 2004:38). The third strand is marked by the deployment of design for social and political commentary and change, focused on immediate contextual issues and populations (Sauthoff 2004:38).

Apart from foregrounding the local, South African design increasingly featured contemporary global design developments. Chief among these was so-called 'green design' that prioritises environmental and social sustainability, ethical design and production. Another related movement centred around social engagement, with designers and corporations initiating collaborations with artists and craftspeople previously disadvantaged and socially or geographically marginalised or isolated. Commodities with a story specific to locality or to producers became popular. Relayed through marketing, the product's story may be that of the designer, the historical, cultural or environmental origins of the design, of the company and/or the story of the people who made or inspired the design. Production was foregrounded, allowing consumers a sense of philanthropic connection with producers.

### **Postmodernism and the "i-jusi phenomenon"**

Working within a predominantly postmodernist framework, what became known as a new South African aesthetic is notable for irreverent cultural mixing, pastiche, eclecticism and a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach<sup>265</sup>. For Levin (2006:18), bricolage has been characteristic of post-apartheid design, with the avant-garde borrowing with ingenuity and wit to challenge established notions of fashion and identity and the boundaries of political correctness, thus giving diverse reflections of the country's heritage. An "aesthetics of 'cultural mixing'" (Sauthoff 2004:37) can be seen in the work of influential publications, collectives and studios such as Orange Juice Design, Tin Temple, Jane and Jann, Creative Disturbance and Laugh it Off. From the late 1980s, *Art Design Architecture (ADA)* magazine became a notable early platform for formal experimentation and innovation (Fig. 6.4). Under Jennifer Sorrell's editorship, it reconceived design in a fresh, innovative way, working in a critical leftist idiom.

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<sup>265</sup> In his survey of the South African "creative scene", Richard Hart (2012b:6-7) of Durban-based Disturbance design studio, lists eight strands or interconnected trends. Their titles and characteristics reflect the spirit of the new idiom that relies heavily on appropriation, bricolage and retro. These include: 1) Urban tribal: a new conceptualising of Africa inspired by street style, urban youth cultures, irreverent Do-it-yourself. 2) Banana Republic: ironic and satirical engagement with colonial legacy and contemporary politics. 3) Afro Chic: luxury and opulent African sophistication. 4) Substance Abuse: bricolage, recycling and reimagining of materials and icons. 5) New Mod: drawing on modernist, international design trends. 6) Recessionism: Nordic-inspired, restrained and resourceful. 7) Adopt and Adapt: retro and nostalgic in appropriation of past styles and concepts. 8) Vernacular: referencing the local with focus on the amateurish and readymade (Hart 2012b: 6,7).

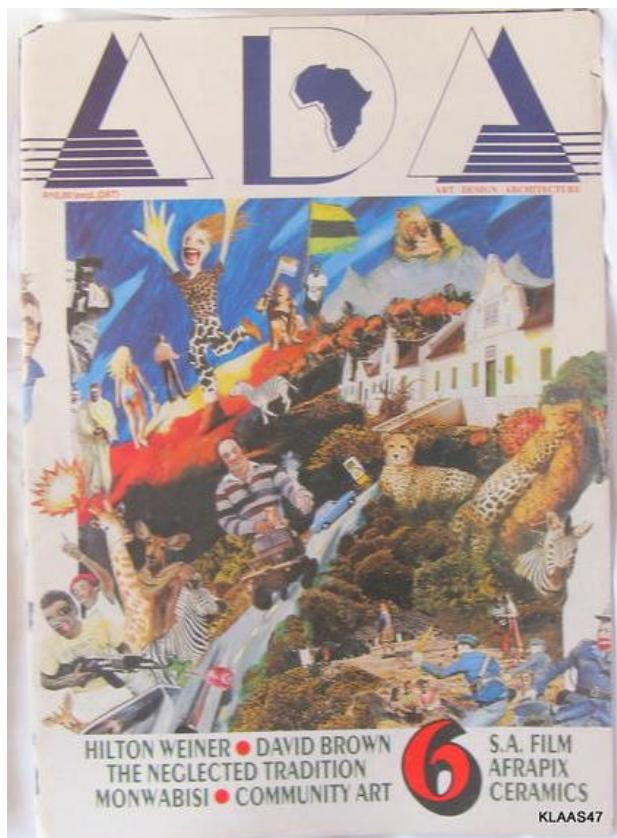


Fig. 6.4. Front cover of *ADA Art Design Architecture* magazine, 1988.  
(*ADA Art Design Architecture* magazine 6<sup>th</sup> Issue 2018).

Designers and artists such as Conrad Botes, Richard Hart, Anton Kannemeyer, Brett Murray, Justin Nurse, Peet Pienaar, Cameron Platter and Garth Walker had significant influence on post-apartheid graphic design and consequently influenced other disciplines (Sauthoff 2004:37)<sup>266</sup>. An influential platform for avant-garde experimentation and personal expression was *i-jusi* magazine, conceptualised in 1994 by Garth Walker of Orange Juice Design. The motivation for the magazine, says Walker (cited in Viviers 2014), was “to develop a new language that was based on the South African experience [that is] to say, this is not a new visual language, this is heading towards a new visual language”.

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<sup>266</sup> The work of artists such as Botes, Kannemeyer and Murray shows an eager departure from and rejection of apartheid's Calvinism, patriotism, white supremacy and isolation from the rest of the continent. They frequently appropriate from the vernacular of their own white middle-class background and their work is sardonic and satirical.

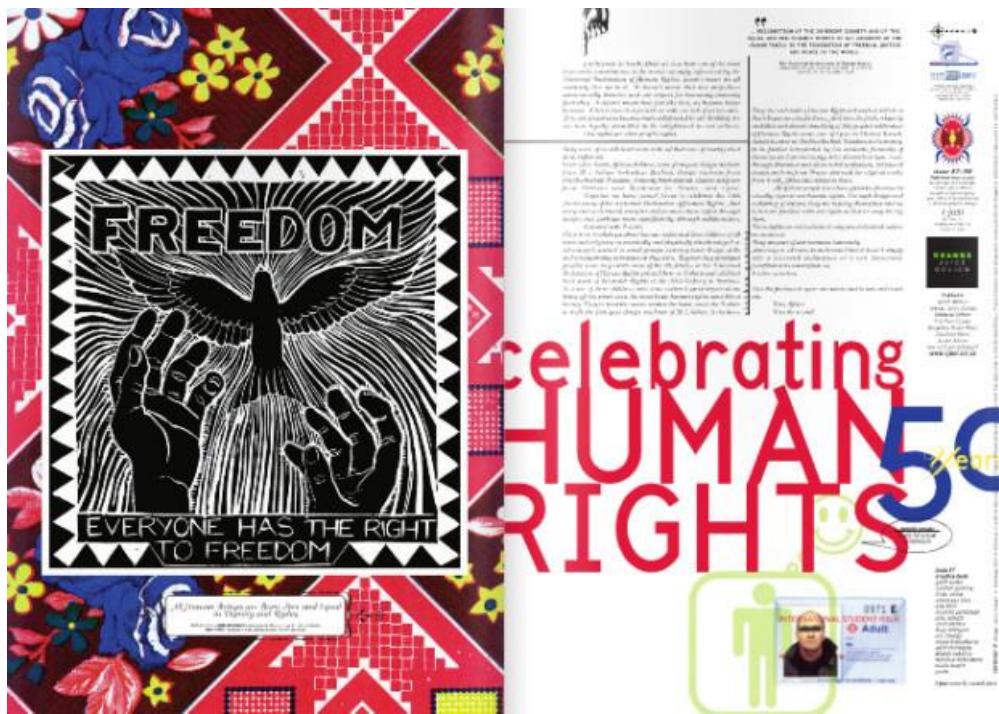


Fig. 6.5. *I-jusi* magazine, The human rights issue, 1998.  
(*I-Jusi* magazines 2017)

Lange and Van Eeden (2016:71) proffer that the "*i-jusi* phenomenon" occasioned the development of an African-born design process based on documentary, creative enquiry and bricolage (Figures 6.5 and 6.6). These features are seen in designs bringing together hand-painted or hand-drawn typography and illustrations, vintage and contemporary photography and lettering, and imagery from eclectic sources, such as Africana, mid-century packaging and apartheid-era textbooks. Modernist design and classical or religious iconography would be combined with typography referencing corrugated iron, barbed wire or ceremonial masks.

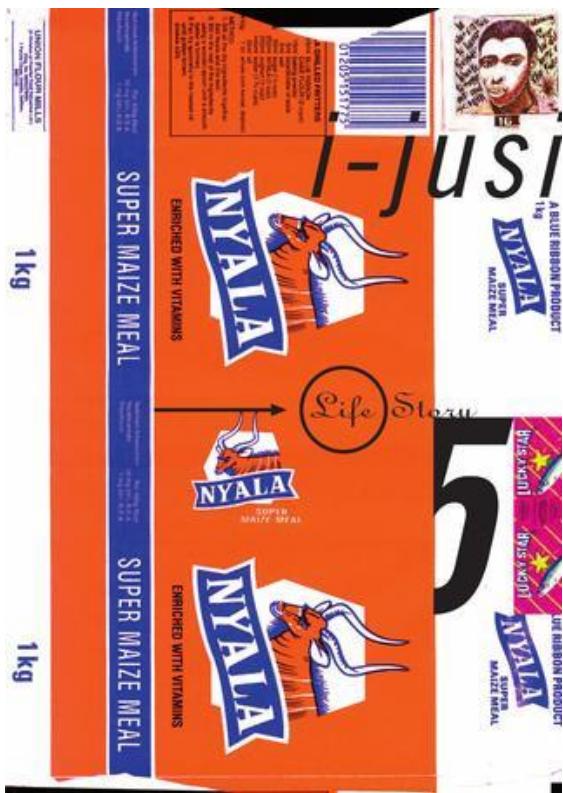


Fig. 6.6. Front cover of *I-jusi* magazine, Life story issue, 1997.  
(*I-Jusi* magazines 2017).

In this manner designers were addressing the challenges of design in and for a diverse, multicultural society which also hoped to re-integrate with the wider continent, striving to achieve a delicate balance between validating and transcending cultural traditions and developing “cross-cultural identities” (Sauthoff 2004:37)<sup>267</sup>. They also aimed to produce inclusive designs that would appeal to a wide audience. To facilitate this, “culturally specific elements of iconography, typography, symbolism, and style are mixed, melded, and transformed by means of quotation, mimicry, and appropriation” (Sauthoff 2004:37).

While drawing on international design history and trends, designers esteemed what they regarded as spontaneity, rawness and imperfection occurring in visual expression from black townships and rural communities. According to Lange and Van Eeden (2016:71), their design work often contrasts the urban vernacular to the restraint, balance and perfection associated with Western design<sup>268</sup>. Juxtapositions of the West and Africa and refined/raw and high tech/handmade, frequently emerged as designers and scholars seek

<sup>267</sup> According to Sauthoff (2004:37), *I-jusi* aimed to contribute a local idiom to an “African stew” of culture and cultures. The term, popularised in South Africa by Garth Walker, originated with Kenyan academic and designer Odoch Pido (Sauthoff 2004:37).

<sup>268</sup> According to Lange and Van Eeden (2016:71), this urban culture is not that considered “backward” or ‘uncivilized’ in the old parlance of colonial discourse”, but rather presents an innovative merger of “the geometric forms of African decorative art [and] imagery derived from high-tech information technology”.

to delineate the ‘new’ South African design idiom. It is often those traits stereotypically associated with Africa and African indigeneity that are appropriated to invigorate and set apart South African design. Richard Hart (2012a:3) for example, suggests that the international creative community is attracted to South Africa as source of inspiration, “for something real and untainted, something raw and unmediated”. Hart’s (2012a) choice of adjectives to describe the country’s distinguishing attributes, remind of older notions of African authenticity, in those celebrated by modernists adherents of *l’art négre*.

At the start of the twenty first century, interior designers’ commodification of a generic township vernacular was bolstered by Craig Fraser’s photo book, *Shack Chic: Art and Innovation in South African Shack-Lands* (2002) (Fig. 6.7). This popular publication focused attention on interior decoration in informal settlements (also called squatter camps) as a commendable vernacular cultural expression. The book hails the innovation and tenacity of the home owners, while its promotion proclaims the photographer’s capture of the “true beauty” he discovered in “some of the poorest dwellings in the world” (*Shack Chic* 2018).



Fig. 6.7. Craig Fraser, *A home without a mother is not a home*. 2018. Promotional image. (Shack chic 2018)

When it first appeared, the book offered an inspiring resource to local interior designers, and fabric and décor designers have liberally emulated the innovative ways in which the featured shack-dwellers decorate their homes. For those who had never been to informal settlements, it opened other cultural, social and aesthetic worlds.

#### **The local vernacular, the handmade and postcolonial exoticism**

In his discussion of Walker’s typeface design for the Constitutional Court, Ryan Honeyball (2014:52) interrogates the discursive construction of the ‘handmade’. Hoping to produce design originating from and

resonating with its local context and audience, Walker drew inspiration from apartheid-era prison graffiti. Much like that of his peers, Walker's work foregrounds and celebrates cultural difference. This 'difference' is, however, frequently construed through appropriation of informal, vernacular expressions connoting Third World economies or an absence of formal art or design training.

Contemporary visual designs branded as postcolonial often favour these visual expressions as symbols of authentic African contemporaneity. For Honeyball (2016:55), however, foregrounding the handmade, the crude and naïve risks evoking essentialist stereotypes about Africa and Africans as lacking technological sophistication, academic training and functioning formal economies.

The 'cultural difference' acclaimed and appropriated by the post-apartheid avant-garde resembles the conception of postmodern Otherness showcased in the much-disputed *Magiciennes de la Terre* (Magicians of the Earth). Held at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1989, *Magiciennes* was the first truly international exhibition of contemporary art and launched the international careers of many artists from outside North America and Europe. Curators Jean Hubert-Martin and André Magnin bore vociferous criticism for the blanket framing of these artists in the ambiguous terms of spiritualism and myth. For Coombes (1998:495) the exhibition construed the postcolonial by its "symptoms" of hybridity and racial and cultural difference to the West. According to Huggan (2001:viii), recognition and marketing of postcolonial arts in the metropolis are entangled with and informed by a system that operates under the sign of the exotic. It constructs the cultural capital of postcolonial artistic practices according to exotic registers. Even as postcolonialism denotes anticolonial struggle and the critique of colonial and neocolonial exploitation, for Huggan (2001:ix) "the term also circulates as a token of cultural value; it functions as a sales-tag in the context of today's globalised commodity culture". In the process, subversive postcolonial re-evaluation of colonial stereotypes is depoliticised in mainstream emulation, mass marketing and manufacture.

*Magiciennes* had significant impact on shaping Western perceptions of and markets for contemporary African art, and its enduring influence recently manifested in Design Indaba showcases of contemporary (South) African design. The first example is trend-forecaster Li Edelkoort's curated exhibition *Totemism: Memphis meets Africa* at the 2013 Design Indaba Exposition (Fig. 6.8). Through stacking objects in manner reminiscent of Native American totem poles, Edelkoort perpetuates neo-primitivist associations of spiritualism, community and non-materialism with a universal indigenous Other. Africa and South Africa – as symbolised in the bright, handmade objects selected by Edelkoort – presumably belong to this global 'tribe'.



Fig. 6.8. *Totemism: Memphis meets Africa*, curated by Li Edelkoort. 2013. Design Indaba Exposition, Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town. (Totemism: Memphis meets Africa 2013).



Fig. 6.9. *Africa is now*, 2014. Design Indaba Exposition, Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town. (Why is Africa now? 2014).

The second example is the 2014 *Africa is Now* Design Indaba Exposition (Fig. 6.9). The branding and official exhibition of *Africa is Now* portrayed postcolonial contemporaneity with crafts and fashions that included handmade and/or recycled elements, suggesting a make-do and DIY approach. The installations of the exposition's featured designers, Mr Somebody and Mr Nobody, presented ironic translations of the informal expression and popular vernacular that were prevalent in *Magiciennes* (Fig. 6.10)

Altogether, the 2014 Exposition conveyed an optimistic, harmonious and guileless multiculturalism. For Torgovnick (1990:40), consumerist manifestations of multiculturalism are often marked by "sprezzatura and a carnivalesque rejoicing". She is nevertheless cautious of "celebrating the crossing of things, of believing that contact and polyphony are inherently liberating" (Torgovnick 1990:40). As in *Magiciennes*, the spectacular festivity of the two expositions obscured the historical and current socio-economic factors contributing to vernacular cultural expression.



Fig. 1.10. Sharon Lombard and Heidi Chrisholm, *Cape Town Kanga*, installation by Mr Somebody and Mr Nobody, 2014. Design Indaba Exposition, Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town. (Photograph by author).

Designers arguably walk a tightrope when they use signifiers that resonate with local audiences while possibly eliciting a colonial gaze and perpetuating tropes of exoticism. Regarding Walker's typeface design, Honeyball (2016:55) writes:

Walker's observations of a lack of technology in South Africa are not due to Western ideas of a static nation that is primitive and reluctant to change, but are instead reflective of the reality of the digital divide in the developing world.

Here the specificity of local contexts determines design for local audiences, also where it may connote the primitive and exotic for some viewers. Thomas (1999:110-111) reminds readers that the hybrid forms that emerge from processes of incorporation and appropriation are open to varied interpretations, including acknowledgement of indigenous populations, affirmation of their past and present existence, and appreciation of indigenous vernacular expression. It is also important to remember that consumers of the postcolonial exotic include indigenous people, whose own re-appropriations may hybridise and subvert mass-produced iterations of their vernacular expressions.

The post-apartheid avant-garde's appropriation of vernacular culture, archival images and political icons was often done with socio-political impetus. Designers sought to investigate personal and national identities and to push formal boundaries. Avant-garde and critical designers with decolonial agendas would use appropriation to re-politicise exoticism to challenge metropolitan expectations of otherness and critique neocolonial power imbalances (Huggan 2001:ix-x). However, contextualised, grounded critiques of power are mostly relinquished in mainstream mass-production. In subsequent years, avant-garde and critical designs were translated according to an exotic register, with 'post-apartheid' functioning as a token or sales-tag within a broader postcolonial market for retro Afro-chic. This trend's prime commodity signs included Mandela's face, a raised black fist and the new nation's flag. In consumer and national discourse, these convey the narrative of triumphant struggle and the miracle of the 'Rainbow Nation'. In this manner, mainstream corporate and commodity design translate avant-garde innovation into Africa-lite: accessible, aesthetically pleasing styles, icons and motifs that discard any socio-political impulse. Formal innovation is further standardised into a novel, short-lived 'look', as seen in designs by Ed Suter for Mr Price Home (Fig. 6.11) and Inyezane's *Zulu Blonde* collection (Fig. 6.12).



Fig. 6.11. Ed Suter, *The good times* range for the Mr Price Home Co-lab project, 2012.  
(Co-lab collection 2012)



Fig. 6.12. Inyezane collection - since 1985, pattern repeat sheets Inyezane #13, #14 and #15, [s.a.].  
(Afro chic [s.a.]).

With this general overview of post-apartheid design, I've sought to highlight the source material and archives and the cultural and aesthetic resources favoured by designers wishing to renew design after apartheid. The themes and discourses that emerge – particularly that of the vernacular, handmade and postcolonial indigenous – frequently evoke older primitivist tropes. I deepen this discussion in the rest of the chapter. What emerges from this overview is that the avant-garde designers whose work has made enduring and noted impact on South African design were predominantly white men who came of age in the last decades of apartheid. This is indicative of the apartheid state's raced and gendered hierarchies of power and access, but apart from race and gender, factors of geographic position, economic context and artistic-professional

networks further contribute to developments in post-apartheid design<sup>269</sup>. I do not suggest that innovation in post-apartheid visual design only happened in white-run studios. However, with the very slow transformation of design industries, only a small number of black designers had direct involvement in the shaping of what was regarded as the ‘new’ design idiom. Hence the near-absence of black designers in the scholarship on design of the 1990s.

Two decades later, most South Africans are still unable to access the technologies, education and support needed for production in the formal creative industries (Honeyball 2014:55-56)<sup>270</sup>. Furthermore, to be part of this field of cultural production relies on possessing the cultural capital and habitus deemed appropriate (Honeyball 2014:55-56). Although cultural expression that emerges from the contexts of those who are marginalised may be selectively appropriated for commodification, those same contexts and ensuing habitus frequently inhibit participation in formal creative industries<sup>271</sup>. While this reality is continually addressed at educational, corporate and government level, the playing-field has by no means been levelled.

### **6.3 Retro, Afro-chic and “life behind the veil”**

This section focuses on the appropriation, through bricolage and modification of archival images, in the design trends Afro-chic and retro. I examine in particular the ways in which icons and symbols of anti-colonial struggle are domesticated by commodity re-inscription. In the discussion of Design Team’s appropriation of *Drum* magazine covers in their *Novelty* collection, I focus specifically on the appropriation of Steve Biko’s portrait. I ask whether apartheid-era images and political icons are necessarily undermined or denuded of subversive power once rendered and consumed as fashionable retro accessories. I also evaluate the potential of retro design to produce “alternative histories” (Samuel 2012:114), while considering such appropriation as the commodification of “life behind the veil” produced by institutionalised racism (Du Bois 1903).

#### **Afro-chic and retro in post-apartheid design**

For Lewis (2012:81), Afro-chic is a trend that represents mid-twentieth century urban sophistication and African modernity, often doing so through recycling historical images, brands and symbols associated with black urban experiences. Afro-chic designs and brands are frequently retro, and decorators produce this

<sup>269</sup> These factors have also made impact on design scholarship. Published reviews of late twentieth-century design focus predominantly on studios and designers from Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg.

<sup>270</sup> According to Statistics South Africa’s General Household survey (2016), 9.5% of South Africans have internet access at home, 61,6% can gain access using mobile devices, and 53,9% of households had at least one member who could access the internet either at home, work, place of study or Internet cafés.

<sup>271</sup> New technologies have presented an unprecedented array of tools and platforms for creatives to launch careers, but entrepreneurs need to be technologically-savvy, in-the-know about trends and adept at self-promotion, all of which relates to habitus and cultural capital. Furthermore, working-class and black subjects struggle to compete with better resourced artists who appropriate working-class culture in ironic ways (see Haupt 2012:120).

aesthetic through eclectic assemblage of elements signifying twentieth-century African popular and consumer culture. Designs by Maid in Africa, Inyezane, Shine Shine, and Ed Suter for Mr Price Home, exemplify retro Afro-chic (Fig. 6.13). These rely prominently on symbols appropriated from recent history and consumer culture, while contemporary images are digitally altered to produce a retro, Pop art aesthetic. These designers frequently borrow from apartheid-era visual culture, through ironic and humorous reworking of old uniquely South African brands, styles and motifs. This usually creates an upbeat, celebratory mood, through quirky juxtapositions, crowded designs and saturated hues in vivid contrasts. Maid in Africa's publicity frames their work as celebratory of contemporary Southern African people, ways of life and consumer society. "We are Afro-pop as opposed to safari-khaki and cape-lacy [and we] aim to market African design as a fusion of tradition and modern and as unique utility-art[sic]", writes Micha Weir (2014).



Fig. 6.13. *Mr Price Home Co-lab collection promotion*, 2013. Magazine décor feature. (*House and Leisure* 2013 Jan/Feb: 155).

The retro Afro-chic designs examined here reference the past for aesthetic affect. The use of pastiche may be ironic and parodic, but is rarely satirical. Designs are less sentimental than colonial chic and are seldom politically motivated. In mainstream post-apartheid design for advertising, fashion and interiors, the references made to familiar brands and historical figures are often unduly nostalgic, conjuring a recent past of shared citizenship through cheerful consumerism (see Van Robbroeck 2008). "Retro is not simply another form

of nostalgia”, states Guffey (2006:19,21), as it is self-reflexive in its blurring of high and low culture, resonating with dominant themes of postmodernism. Following the international popularisation of retro from the 1960s, marketing and advertising firms quickly seized on this trend to appeal to audiences, and retro revivalism increasingly came to “define the modern past in the popular imagination” (Guffey 2006:27).



Fig. 6.14. *Fabric Notes, Afrocentric: make a statement with local designs in bold colours*, 2007. Magazine décor feature.  
(*House and Leisure* 2007:63).

The African-inspired iconography of most retro fabrics is constituted by generalised signifiers such as a map of the continent, indigenous fauna and flora, Afro hairstyles, local brands or representations of black men and women<sup>272</sup>. Several of the designs selected for the magazine piece ‘Fabric notes: Afrocentric’ feature twentieth-century brands or icons familiar to South Africans (Fig. 6.14). The designers’ translation of local commodities and popular culture icons into upholstery fabric transforms common commodity symbols into fashionable

<sup>272</sup> Writing on subversive sartorial expressions in post-war Britain, Dick Hebdige (1979) demonstrated how subcultural expressions of resistance and revolt were immediately subsumed and domesticated by markets and mainstream society. This suggests that possibilities of agency offered by or fashioned within and against hegemonic neoliberal structures are inevitably commodified, activist goals thus subverted, diffused and undermined.

décor and recasts these as popular and shared African heritage. There is mostly nothing self-reflexive or ironic in the appropriation of brands – significantly mostly lower-income necessities, such as candles or canned pilchards – which are transformed into sentimentalised repositories of a supposed national uniqueness. A more ironic stance is assumed in Maid in Africa's *Get Rich* and *Mamight* designs (Fig. 6.15) where familiar brand names (Lucky Star and Marmite) are altered for effect. Single products are multiply copied, recalling Pop artist Andy Warhol's multiples of consumer goods and celebrities. The association with Warhol complements designer Andrew Weir's critical interest in consumer culture, and his designs incorporate brands which have "become part of the African visual identity" (Our portfolio 2015). As symbols are diverted from their original commodity circuits, the fabric's juxtaposition with trendy mid-twentieth century European design speaks of the owners' habitus. Where incorporated into high modernist design, these fabrics connote the moneyed owners' ironic stance toward low-brow culture, and enjoyment of the signifying (rather than use-) value of such products.

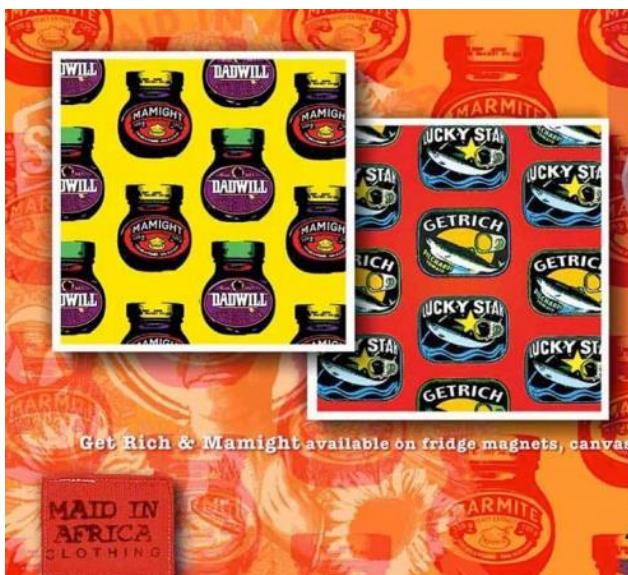


Fig. 6.15. Maid in Africa clothing, *Mamite* & *Getrich*, [s.a.].  
(Our portfolio 2015).

In retro Afro-chic, images and symbols of township life, such as dancing couples, jazz musicians, barber shop signs or slang phrases, are transformed into designs that decorate home accessories. The consumption and display of local Afro-chic products may connote liberation, transformation and identification with a sophisticated African metropolitanism that emerged during the anti-apartheid struggle decades. For Lewis (2012:79), such designs may become "messages about abstract change, innovation and renaissance". Bertelsen (1998:223) notes a discursive shift whereby the logic, context and terms of 'the struggle' (the critique of class, socio-political, gender and racial relations) are erased as the consumer is invited to embrace

these as a “newly assembled currency of commodity signs”. Instead of providing identification with specific parties, ideologies or histories, familiar political icons may prove popular as they celebrate the “amorphous cultural freedom” characteristic of a ‘new’ South African identity and brand (Lewis 2012:79). Furthermore, for white consumers and designers it may signify belonging to the new nation. As in an earlier colonial appropriation of elements of ‘traditional’ African culture to construct a ‘native’ cultural identity, Afro-chic commodities offer symbolic resources to whites wishing to affirm their indigeneity (Skinner 2014:137).

Subject appropriations in Afro-chic design often comprise images of black people enjoying the freedoms of the modern city and consumer culture. In products such as Ed Suter’s *Jive* scatter cushions, historical images of black people are re-inscribed as an attractive ‘vintage’ blackness (Fig. 6.16). What is the function of the black body as cipher within Africa-lite? I argue that it signifies postcolonial freedom as synonymous with urban consumerism, expressed in the chic vintage of ‘the good life after white racial domination’. However, in order for consumers to indulge in this spirit of exuberant, consumerist freedom demands forgetting and erasure. For Bertelsen (1998:222), these are key dynamics in consumer culture’s remembering. In the context of postcolonial pluralism, authenticity is located in the hybrid, the naïve and the retro-styled ‘modern’ present. Cultural difference comes to be figured as exotic or humanising accents in urban design.



Fig. 6.16. Ed Suter, *Jive* scatter cushion, 2013. Scatter cushion, 50 x 100cm. (Co-lab collection 2012) .

The notion of the township features large in Afro-chic. Mr Price Home and Ed Suter produce visual puns through juxtaposing hand-drawn illustrations or hand-coloured photographs of barber signs and taxi minibuses with the national signs of protea, maize and springbok (Fig. 6.17). Colloquial expressions ('bru', 'eish' or 'sharp sharp') in hand-drawn typography invoke a casual and vibrant urbanity. The *Home Bru'd* cushion sports banners reading 'Love RSA', which convey a laid back, unequivocal patriotism for a South Africa redefined as a merry, affable democratic society. The visual pun 'Home Bru'd' connotes both local

brotherhood ('bru' meaning 'brother' is a local moniker for 'friend') and the locally grown (bru'd is pronounced as 'brewed').



Fig. 6.17. Various scatter cushions, from left to right: *Obama* by Shine Shine; *Home Bru'd* and *Taxi* by Mr Price Home, [s.a.]. Scatter cushions.  
(photograph by author).



Fig. 6.18. Design Team, *Jive scatter cover*, [s.a.]. Scatter cushion, screen printed linen, 60 x 60cm.  
(Material life 2017).

In Suter's *Jive*, contemporary photographs of models in 50s fashions are printed in black and white to give a vintage feel reminiscent of *Drum* photographs of Sophiatown revellers. Legendary *Drum* photographer Peter

Magubane's 1957 photograph of teenagers dancing is reproduced on Design Team's *Jive* pillowcase (Fig. 6.18). The titles of both cushion designs evoke the past as 'the good old days' of merrymaking as connoted by the black dancer. In further abstraction this dancer-cipher is produced in two fabric designs by Faye George and Rosemary Harman of So Kiff (Fig. 6.19)<sup>273</sup>. The designs *Pata Pata* and *Gumboot dancer* are diagram-like, with stylised figures of dancers in serial poses illustrating dance moves performed by gumboot dancers, in a style that originated on South African mines, and those of the Phata-Phata<sup>274</sup>.



Fig. 6.19 So Kiff, *Pata Pata* (top) and *Gumboot dancer* textile designs (bottom), 2011.  
(So Kiff textile range 2011).

Cape Town-based studio Shine Shine produces visually saturated fabrics that suggest an exhilarating African metropolitanism<sup>275</sup>. These fabrics frequently depict fashions and commodities that connote an urban life that is sexy, romantic, fast and glamorous (Fig. 6.20). Designs draw stylistically on African commemorative cloth, wax and fancy prints, and marry contemporary icons with modern fashions. Designs like *Obama* (Fig. 6.17) and

<sup>273</sup> So Kiff is a Johannesburg-based textiles and soft furnishings design company. 'Kiff' is a vernacular expression meaning 'cool'.

<sup>274</sup> *Pata Pata* was a song popularised by singer Miriam Makeba in the late 1960s, and *Phata Phata* the name of a dance style popular in Johannesburg townships in the late 1950s.

<sup>275</sup> Shine Shine was founded by Tracy Rushmere in collaboration with graphic designer Heidi Chisholm. Fabrics are used to upholster furniture and to make cushions, shoulder bags, hats, aprons, placemats and more.

Jackie So (Fig. 6.20) quote African commemorative cloth, with ironic undertones. Like contemporary appropriations of *isishweshwe*, designers “transform the cloth”, distancing it from its roots yet “preserving its comforting familiarity” Rovine (2009:199).



Fig. 6.20. Shine Shine, *Jackie So*, [s.a.]. Printed cotton, 145cm wide.  
(Shine Shine fabrics 2018).

As with many retro Afro-chic designs, Shine Shine incorporates kitsch iconography and the brand itself becomes what Celeste Olalquiaga (2009:395-396) calls second-degree or neo-kitsch<sup>276</sup>. Unlike first-degree kitsch, neo-kitsch is self-referential and “capitalises on an acquired taste for tackiness”, distinguishing the owner’s cool aesthetic disposition and ironic attitude (Olalquiaga 2009:397). *Jackie So* copies a portrait by Malian photographer Seydou Keïta, who operated a commercial photographic studio in Bamako between 1948

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<sup>276</sup> For Olalquiaga (2006:396-397), owners of first-degree kitsch usually maintain an emotional relationship with the object or the representation which connotes for them an abstract quality. Owners of second-degree kitsch most likely regard the object with irony and its value lies in signifying the owner’s disposition.

and 1977 (Fig. 6.21). Keïta's portraits were commissioned for the home display or private correspondence of his sitters.

The image used by Shine Shine is one of over one hundred negatives acquired in the 1990s by Andre Magnin, curator of Jean Pigozzi's Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC) (Rips 2006)<sup>277</sup>. Magnin and Pigozzi printed these on larger scale, enlarging some to as many as ten times the original size. Following high-profile exhibitions in Paris and Zurich, and sales to eminent galleries, dealers and museums, Keïta became known as one of Africa's most important photographers, and large-scale portraits are sold for up to \$22 000 (Rips 2006)<sup>278</sup>. Not unlike the photographs exhibited by Stevenson and used in *Cameo*, the CAAC effectively produced these small, private mementoes as fine art through diversion from the original socio-economic and archival context. In *Jackie So*, Keïta's portrait is cropped, its form simplified and rendered cartoon-like in saturated colour: African modernity becomes retro, and the dandy's sentiment can be enjoyed as romantic kitsch (Fig. 6.22).

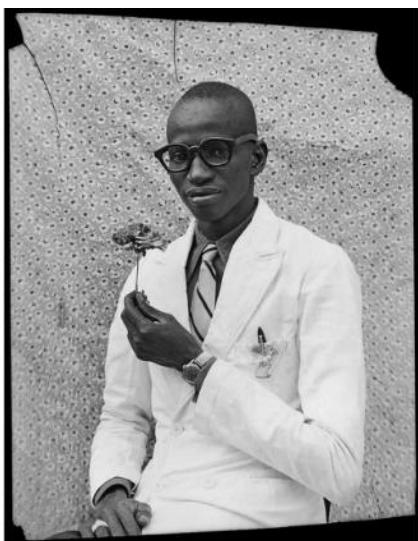


Fig. 6.21. Seydou Keïta. *Untitled*. 1952/1955. Gelatin silver print, Jean Pigozzi collection, Geneva. (Seydou Keïta 2018).

<sup>277</sup> Jean Pigozzi is a businessman, art collector, philanthropist, artist and heir of the Simca automobile brand. The CAAC is purportedly the world's largest collection of contemporary African art and through exhibitions like *African Art Now* and *Arts of Africa* (both 2005) introduced Westerners to contemporary African art, raised the profiles of many African artists and bolstered the market for contemporary African art. Curated by Magnin, the CAAC has favoured work by creative practitioners who are self-taught or work outside institutions of Fine Art. Through its exhibitions and publications, the CAAC has had great impact on shaping Western tastes in contemporary African art, a much-debated development (see Picton 1999).

<sup>278</sup> According to Michael Rips (2006), Keïta became increasingly displeased about Pigozzi and Magnin's printing, authentication and sales of his work. To retrieve the original negatives and address the dispute over the authentication of prints, Keïta's heirs and the Association Seydou Keïta filed a lawsuit against Pigozzi and Magnin.



Fig. 6.22. Shine Shine, *Jackie So* (detail), [s.a.].  
(Shine Shine fabrics 2018).

Ironic enjoyment of kitsch, according to Olalquiaga (2009:396-397), “allows a safe release into sentimentality”, where nostalgia and reverence might be experienced vicariously. For Olalquiaga (2009:395), vicarious nostalgia is not necessarily inauthentic: in sprawling contemporary urban centres where vicariousness, artifice and façade prevail, such simulacra present vital dimensions of the embodied real, of the “personal lived as a pastiche of fragmented images”. Furthermore, where the mass-produced gaudiness of kitsch is often presumed to be unpretentious, neo-kitsch objects may connote a “rawness [which] reflects their ‘honesty’” (Olalquiaga 2009:393).

Mass-produced retro and Afro-chic may offer redefined cultural resources to consumers creating new and innovative subject positions (Lewis 2012:82). Through a syncretic jumble Shine Shine produces an Afro-chic that blends Catholicism, African modernity and traditionalism, digital devices and gang tattoos. It captures contemporary African urbanity even as the retro expression casts it as distant and cool. In its amalgamation of the temporally and geographically disparate, sacred and profane, modern and traditional, the designs reflect postmodern conceptions of hybrid identity joined to subjective experiences of postcolonial urbanity.

### **Irony, exoticism and colonial stereotype**

In its eclectic appropriations of historical visual texts, Afro-chic frequently amalgamates conflicting discourses, beliefs and desires. Numerous scholars have noted the ambiguity inherent to European colonial representations of Africa and Africans, the simultaneous dread and desire, admiration and repugnance, which reflect the colonists’ conscious and unconscious relations to the colonised. With the contemporary recycling of colonial and apartheid images, and the commodification and disarming of subversive avant-garde strategies,

older primitivist phantasies assume neocolonial shape and articulate colonial ambivalence. While the postcolonial exotic may repurpose colonial primitivist tropes, it also incorporates and cultivates the hybrid postmodern.

Huggan's (2001:12) term "alterity industry" describes a globalised culture industry which facilitates the representation and consumption of postcolonial exoticism and "culturally 'Othered' goods". In this context exoticism is

a particular mode of aesthetic perception – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures Otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery (Huggan 2001:13).

Prominent to this idea is that exoticism functions dialectically, as a semiotic circuit that fluctuates between the opposing poles of the familiar and the strange, with relationships and fluctuations determined by the political and economic requirements of hegemonic groups (Huggan 2001:13). This ambivalence manifests in Maid in Africa's designs, which rely on visual puns and irony to entertain, commemorate and critique. Weir's designs are bricolages of iconic local brands, Victorian advertisements, Renaissance paintings, Disney figures, township signage and architecture. Designs also incorporate digitally-altered photographs of contemporary Africans. Brand names are often altered for comic or ironic effect, creating visual puns through juxtaposition<sup>279</sup>. In Weir's *Mermaid*, the text 'Dark and Loverly' puns on Dark and Lovely, an international brand of beauty products for black women (Fig. 6.23). The altered brand name is juxtaposed with an image of a black woman standing in a scallop shell, producing a pastiche of Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (c.1485).

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<sup>279</sup> In South Africa this strategy was popularised from 1999 by designer Justin Nurse, whose company Laugh it Off produces T-shirts that subvert and satirise familiar brand labels and slogans.



Fig. 6.23. Maid in Africa, *Mermaid* scatter cushion in yellow, [s.a.]. Scatter cushion, screen printed cotton. (Namibian collection 2018).

Hutcheon (1994:11-13) defines irony as the intentional transmission of information in a manner other than explicitly presented, with said and unsaid interacting to create an ironic meaning. Hutcheon (1994) highlights that irony always has a target, always has a sting. Although often typified as a “mode of intellectual detachment”, irony is more about conveying a feeling or attitude and involves a symbolic act inviting inference or judgement (Hutcheon 1994:11,39).

In *Mermaid* the black model, indigenous flora and backdrop of Table Mountain, clearly suggest an African Venus. In proximity with the model, historically familiar labels for cocoa and motor oil (commodities dark in colour), along with the brand Dark and Lovely, produce an ambiguous play of darkness as either hue and/or race. Blackness is associated with eroticism as the phrase ‘Dark & Loverly’ overlays the woman’s body and pelvis, functioning as a label. ‘Lovely’ is transformed to suggest ‘Lover’, connoting the sensual and erotic to further sexualise the Venus. Through juxtaposition, familiar elements render exotic the image of a contemporary African woman. On one level, *Mermaid: Dark and Loverly* might simply be read as a celebration of the black woman’s beauty through classical art and mythology. However, the pleasure *and* ambivalence of this text lie in decoding the visual puns, a hybrid textual code with tropes rooted in colonial discourse and commodity racism, the discourse of black pride, indigenous/African beauty, and new national symbols. The trans-ideological character of irony is highlighted in Weir’s designs; no definitive meaning can be inferred or

guaranteed: its humour may disarm or harm, the same text may subvert or entrench hegemony, it may both affirm and negate (Hutcheon 1994:15,28).

While irony may appropriate the language and the power of dominant authority to relativise and displace, it is not necessarily oppositional or subversive, and may appear to be so while confirming a dominant discourse (Hutcheon 1994:28). The provisionality and indeterminacy of meaning in irony – which vacillates between said and unsaid – frees both ironist and interpreter from assuming conclusive positions (Hutcheon 1994:51), and Weirs' design might be enjoyed as humorously disarming colonial stereotypes and racialised sexual innuendo through a positive celebration of black beauty. However, the insertion of cocoa and motor oil brands evokes colonial mockery of Africans through suggesting the equivalence of dark skin colour with these commodities. In nineteenth-century visual culture, cocoa was often used as a synonym for racial blackness, to connote the white sexual consumption of black bodies, or simply to brand black bodies as inherently erotic (see Pieterse 1992). For this viewer, not enough is done to unsettle these deeply ingrained tropes: as such a critical reading becomes necessary.

Two designs by Inyezane appropriate a colonial postcard of two women in traditional dress, posing with guitar and banjo (Figures 6.24 & 6.25). To European consumers, the juxtaposition of familiar 'European' instruments with the foreign, semi-naked women would have heightened the difference of the latter. As black women in colonial Africa were unlikely to have been players of these instruments, the original postcard was probably thought humorous. Traces of this quirkiness and humour arguably remain in Inyezane's design. Though postcards are by now commonly regarded as familiar Imperial kitsch, Inyezane's fabric designs render the postcard's subjects strange. In *Inyezane#11* and *#12* this is done through digitally altering the colours and removing the contextualising backdrop, and adding the heading *Le Zoulou Rocking* (The rocking Zulu). In *Inyezane #20*, the postcard is collaged with the word 'Zulu' in fringed beading<sup>280</sup>, a British stamp featuring the queen, and a bottlecap of Zulu Blonde, the flagship beer of Zululand breweries (Fig. 6.25)<sup>281</sup>. All three designs use visual incongruity for comedic effect: the nervous-looking women are neither blonde nor 'rocking' guitarists. *Inyezane#20* thus also capitalises on 'blonde jokes', infamous for sexist stereotyping of fair-haired women as dumb and licentious, associating the women shown here with a supposed African version of this stereotype.

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<sup>280</sup> Beadwork is part of Zulu cultural tradition and is predominantly produced by women. In beaded body jewellery, dress items and ceremonial objects, colours, patterns and geometric shapes have symbolic and communicative functions. Whereas historically made for use by Zulu people, production has since the colonial era catered to the demands and tastes of settler and tourist buyers.

<sup>281</sup> This family-run company was founded in 1997 and is owned by master brewer Richard Chennels. Zulu Blonde was launched internationally in 2010 and is sold in the UK, USA and Europe. It is unclear whether the company still produces textiles.



Fig. 6.24. Inyezane, *Le Zoulou rocking*, pattern repeat sheets for *Inyezane#11* and *Inyezane#12* [s.a.].  
(Afro chic [s.a.]).

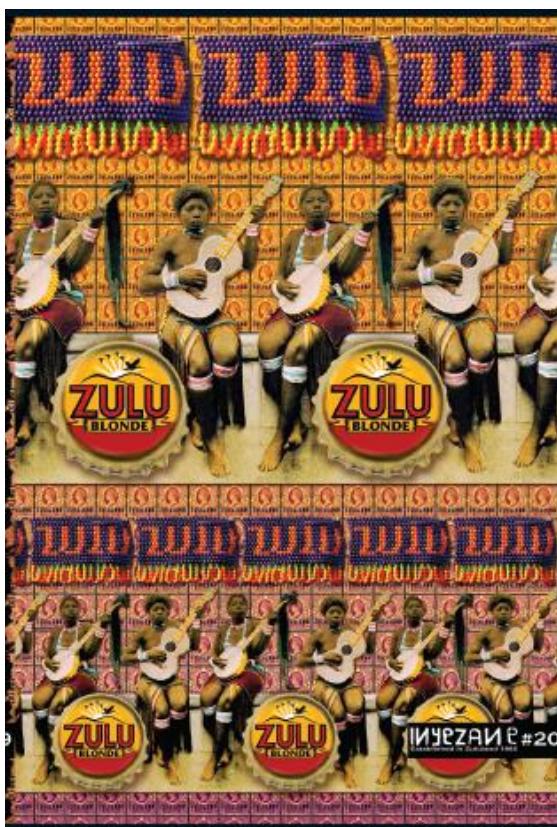


Fig. 6.25. Inyezane, pattern repeat sheet for Inyezane #20. [s.a.].  
(Afro chic [s.a.]).

As irony always has an edge and a target, the said and the unsaid bestow symbolic power onto a selected group or collective within a particular discursive community (Hutcheon 1994:97)<sup>282</sup>. In *Mermaid* and in Inyezane's designs, it is familiarity with the overlay of racial and sexual stereotype in colonial discourse that allows addressees to 'get' the ironist's statement. Both exploit, not subvert, contexts and historical power relations that underscore and enable the visual puns to signify.

Irony is culturally-shaped, and formed between people and between meanings (Hutcheon 1994:18). While irony does reference and depend on communities and ingroups, Hutcheon (1994:89-91) stresses that irony happens because discursive communities – people sharing beliefs, values, assumptions and ideological norms – already exist. The creation and comprehension of irony occurs as the social practice of agents whose participation and affective response are inseparable from their interpellation by multiple and diverse discourses. As a performative act, irony sets up relationships between ironist and addressees, hearers and targets<sup>283</sup> (Hutcheon 1994:17). Irony also creates hierarchies or confirms existing ones, with its addressees and those who 'get it' emerging as superior to those who don't, or to the targets of irony's 'sting' (Hutcheon 1994:17,18). In the above designs, irony is combined with two other distancing devices, kitsch and retro. Retro provides a "seductive anaesthetic" as it plunders the past still within living memory (Guffey 2006:158). According to Guffey (2006:159), retro, in distinguishing contemporary consumers and culture from forebears, may turn to mockery and instigate cultural narcissism (Guffey 2006:159). Retro and kitsch fashions that deploy irony thus usually allow consumers a derisive and conceited stance toward irony's target, while the object consumed may testify to the owner's distinguishing good taste.

While foregrounding attitude and affect, irony also engages a mode of intellectual detachment (Hutcheon 1994:12). While its distancing effect can suggest indifference or a new perspective, the suppleness of irony "refus[es] the tyranny of explicit judgements", especially when such judgements are inappropriate or unwelcome (Hutcheon 1994:49,50). Consumers sharing the designer's intimacy with, and detachment from, their references, may delight in the ironic citations of colonial racial stereotypes and the precarity of postcolonial subjects. For some these may present tongue-in-cheek affirmations of an achieved post-racialism. The trendiness of its manifestations may offer proof that derogatory stereotypes have been reclaimed and disarmed.

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<sup>282</sup> According to Hutcheon (1994), a discursive community comprises members who are culturally interpellated to comprehend the various nuances of the specific visual and textual signs that circulate their cultural frames of reference.

<sup>283</sup> Where community precedes and makes possible the comprehension of irony, the in-group contains two kinds of audiences who participate and interpret differently: addressees (who 'get' it) and hearers (who may 'get it', misunderstand and/or may not care, but are not necessarily the targets).

## **Drum magazine, retro and ‘life behind the veil’**

### **Retro Drum**

As established above, the uniqueness of South African design is frequently located in its amalgamation of local and global, foregrounding evocations of an exuberant, hybrid (South) African modernity rather than replication of so-called traditional design (Levin 2006). Rovine (2015:228) suggests that a greater “political playfulness” characterises design and consumer choices after apartheid. This is evident in translations of the *Drum* magazine covers and its political icons into retro accessories and fashion trends that are recognised as distinctly post-apartheid.

Launched in 1951, *Drum* magazine reflected the distinctive urban political and cultural expression of black South Africans following labour migration and urban settlement. The magazine became a “symbol of urbanised Africa, a publication reflecting ‘infinite hope and possibilities’” (Lewis Nkosi quoted in Lewis 2012:76-79)<sup>284</sup>. *Drum* was founded as a magazine for black readers and evolved into a platform for black writers and photographers. While it showcased music, fashion, theatre, fiction, news, and celebrity gossip, its rhetoric was distinctly anti-apartheid and anti-racist. This is confirmed by reportage and critique of apartheid human rights abuses and the devastating effects of ‘whites-only’ legislation on black lives. Photographs from *Drum*’s mid-century publications reflect the influence of African-American jazz music and dress styles on metropolitan black identities. These images have been most readily appropriated by fashion, fabric and interior designers<sup>285</sup>.

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<sup>284</sup> Launched in 1951 as *African Drum*, the publication was relaunched as *Drum* magazine the same year. It shifted its focus from rural traditionalism to the urban context, lives and aspirations of black consumers.

<sup>285</sup> The music video for Janet Jackson’s 1997 song *Got ‘til it’s gone* uses images from 1950s *Drum* to recreate a mid-twentieth century township and nightclub. The video features black actors reading *Drum* and holding up pass books. Security police with batons and khaki uniforms suggest the apartheid South African context.

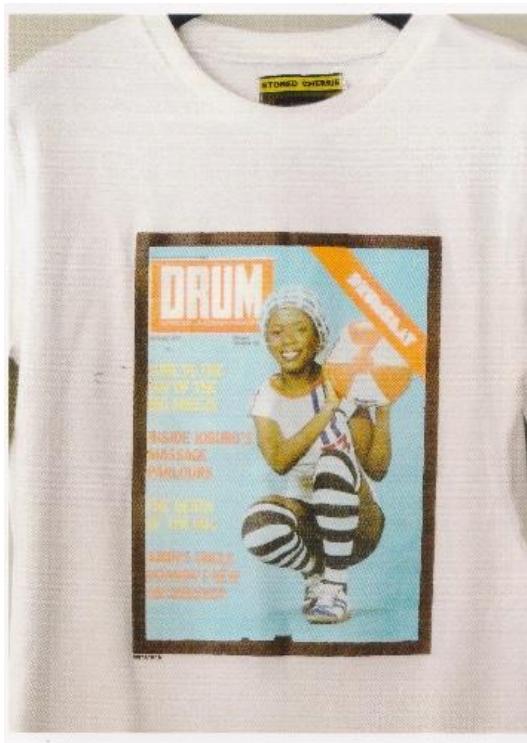


Fig. 6.26. Stoned Cherrie, *Drum* T-Shirt, c.2006.  
(Rovine 2015:225).

South African fashion brand Stoned Cherrie's highly successful *Drum* collection was developed in partnership with Bailey's Historical Archives (BAHA) (Fig. 6.26). When launched in 2001, company director Nkhensani Nkosi articulated a clear socio-political vision for the designs. For her, the collection was an attempt to "rewrite our history", to "transform the way Africans feel about themselves in the twenty-first century" and a way to "learn from clothes about the country's history" (Nkosi cited in Rovine 2015:220). For Lewis (2012:77), these vintage images celebrate both "a [black] South African narrative of attaining urban sophistication and belonging", and the country's new consolidation within an urban modernity marked by progress and creative innovation. The appropriated images importantly point to creative, expressive and dynamic life during and despite apartheid, offering alternative images of black life under racial oppression.



**Fig. 6.27.** Design Team, *Drum* covers wallpaper, [s.a.].  
(*Drum* covers 2017).

Design Team's appropriation of *Drum* images emerges more from aesthetic than strictly socio-political motives, and the products are for private, domestic use and display<sup>286</sup>. *Drum* covers appear in *Novelty*, *BAHA* and *Swim girl* collections, and the fabric is sold by the metre, or made up as cushion covers and wallpaper (Figures 6.27). *Novelty* features images of glamorous cover girls, music icons and Black Consciousness thinker and activist Steve Biko<sup>287</sup>.

Stoned Cherrie and Design Team's appropriations of historical *Drum* covers speak in multiple registers, the diverting of archival material from historical archives publicising black history while cashing in on global retro trends. Through selective appropriation, these retro products invoke a vicarious nostalgia for the imagined time and culture of chic 1950s township life, reproducing this in celebratory tones not at odds with post-

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<sup>286</sup> Design Team obtained permission from Bailey's Historical Archives to use the *Drum* images.

<sup>287</sup> *Novelty* has been discontinued, while cushion covers featuring Dolly Rathebe (*Dolly* and *Swim Girl*) and Biko are (at the time of writing) still sold online.

apartheid ideologues' mythologising of struggle icons and township cultural history. To give edginess and novelty to fashions, designers repurpose images of political icons and African urban experience under apartheid. For Lewis (2012:78), vintage renditions of struggle-icons are sufficiently polysemic to suggest fashionableness and black pride, along with a more abstract and depoliticised sense of vibrant African cultural expression. Through their re-construction as markers of Afro-chic, the erstwhile political signifiers connote optimism and an African South African identity associated with an exuberant, retro past (Lewis 2012:78).

For Bertelsen (1998:223), advertising and consumer visual culture feed parasitically on local agendas, values and discourses. Following the transition to democracy, notions and signifiers of liberation, unity and non-racialism are uncoupled from political discourse and rerouted into the marketplace, in order to increase commodity appeal and the potential in commodity acquisition for personal distinction (Bertelsen 1999:235). Lacking its own discourse, Bertelsen (1998:227) writes, promotional media (and design) redefine the historical achievements of the struggle (for civil liberties and constitutional equality) against white rule, as the individual freedom to consume. Bertelsen's (1998:224-225) critique assists in analysing post-apartheid retro designs, as here too signifiers of heritage and history are freed from their meanings and references in political discourse and historical explanation to become attached to new processes of meaning and signification. For Rovine (2015: 221,226-227), the use of *Drum* images may bring history into the fabric of popular culture, but only as "fodder for creative expressions". The re-purposing of *Drum* images exemplifies subject appropriation that both foregrounds and obscures, and celebrates and mitigates black history.

The profitable diversion of *Drum* images from historical archives, and their widespread consumption and promotion as trendy by local cultural intermediaries, stimulated further production of retro designs citing *Drum* icons. Mainstream and late mainstream<sup>288</sup> uses of *Drum*, and contemporary trend setters' encipherment of Miriam Makeba or jazz dancers, exemplify a hermeneutic cycling where the cipher constitutes its copies and is itself reconstituted through tenuous visual references. A promotion for Maid in Africa's *Maidonna* collection, references the 1974 *Drum* cover featuring Miriam Makeba, photographed in 1955 by Jürgen Schadeberg (Figures 6.28 & 6.29).

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<sup>288</sup> According to Raymond (2010) late mainstreaming occurs once innovations by trend-creators have trickled into and then through mainstream consumption. Late mainstreamers are those who consume and reproduce trends considered out of date by trend-setters.

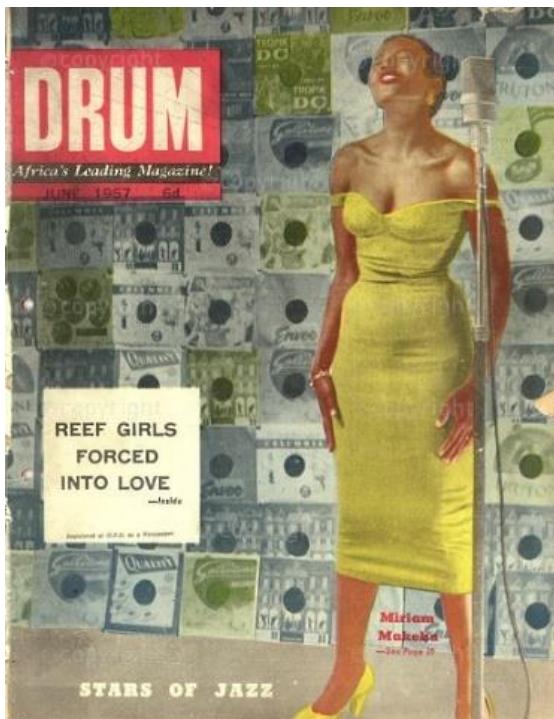


Fig. 6.28. Front cover of *Drum* magazine featuring Miriam Makeba, 1974. Magazine cover page. Bailey's African Historical Archive, Johannesburg. (Bailey's African Historical Archive [s.a.]).



Fig. 6.29. Maid in Africa, *Our portfolio: Maidonna*, 2015. Screenshot. (Our portfolio 2015).

The contemporary evocation of Makeba reflects a period style while amplifying the mid-century inscription of her as sexy black songstress. The *Maidonna* dress is photoshopped onto a smouldering young singer who is

imbued with a sensuality at odds with the older, angelic ‘Maidonna’ of the design (see Chapter 6.5). With retro being unconcerned with authenticity, the Makeba simulacrum of this turns the contemporary spin-off into a piece of sexy Afro-chic. It shows how, through playful and performative pastiche, contemporary re-appropriations refashion black cultural history to offer new scope for self-fashioning. For Frow (1991:126,127):

The world we inhabit is one in which identity is simulated in the play of difference and repetition, but this simulation carries no sense of loss. The priority of the original over the copy is denied as every ‘original’ is always already a copy and thus, the reign of simulacra is glorified.

What becomes visible through critical investigation, then, is that seemingly innocuous retro fashions at times reproduce – without historical awareness or conscience – fraught historical inscriptions of racialised and gendered bodies. Dorothy Driver (1996) notes contradicting discourses around gender roles and sexuality espoused in *Drum* magazine, on the pages of which appear, alongside each other, fashion shoots, advice columns adopting stances from Western feminism, political stories, patriarchal traditionalism, and sexist celebrity features. *Drum*’s discursive construction of the ideal modern black woman presented an ambiguous picture of good-time girls who are irresistibly attractive and flirtatious, yet cool-minded and discerning<sup>289</sup>. *Drum* promoted aspirational anti-patriarchal gender positions alongside images rooted in ideals of beauty according to Western configurations. ‘Modern’ black fashion models, beauty competitions and promotions for skin lightening creams, set up the ideal as but a darker copy of a European standard (Driver 1996:234).

### **Retro and “life behind the veil”.**

In the face of accusations that retro is self-indulgent, a matter of mere empty representational forms, or vacant stylistic gestures and cultural amnesia, rather than reflecting issues of history as such, Guffey and Samuel remain optimistic about the potential of retro to engage people with the past<sup>290</sup>. Although retro is criticised for commodifying the past and for instrumentalising history for profit, Samuel (2012:113) suggests that it may animate history in new ways, awakening interest in yesteryear’s artefacts and their past lives. Samuel (2012:114) suggests that retro-chic may “have prepared the way for a whole new family of alternative histories”, which depart not from historical scholarship but the material culture of everyday life. Rather than traditional and academic modes of research, retro’s creative revivalists synthesise and source eclectically and irreverently, through browsing, appropriating, buying objects and replicating images, styles and motifs from historical archives, popular and high culture (Guffey 2006:26). Formal qualifications, access to higher learning

<sup>289</sup>This reveals an ideological stance dismissive of the gender roles and moral values associated with rural traditionalism, a stance *Drum* embraced in its promotion of modern urban blackness.

<sup>290</sup>Samuel (2012:114) argues that historians likewise deal in the currency of retro, that all history is selection and reinterpretation, ultimately presenting imaginative reconstructions, rather than mirrors, of the past.

and professional credibility are no longer needed to produce historical texts. Retro histories (be it blogs, zines or fashions) are accessible to wide audiences and offer new opportunities for showcasing creative endeavour or publicising omitted or subversive voices.

Frow (1991:134) similarly sees value in commercial retrievals of ordinary histories and “the past as it connects to a present sense of loss”. While assuming commodity form, these designs may offer challenge and amendment to official histories, writes Frow (1991:134). This was the impetus for Stoned Cherrie’s *Drum* collection: “By wearing Stoned Cherrie clothing, black South Africans can feel they are taking back the censored past of their parents and grandparents” (Irwin cited in Vincent 2007:83).

In an anachronistic manner, retro frames township life to reference the ‘good old days’ of an emerging black modernity and political resistance, *and as* embodying the spirit of the new ‘deracialised’ democratic era. History and heritage are invoked as a resource for nation building, a rhetoric readily seized on by entrepreneurs responding to consumer desire for an optimistic new self-image distanced from apartheid and fundamentally different (Lewis 2012:81). National discourse of this kind shows itself as ambivalent and Janus-faced, as reconstructing past and present in a continual process of becoming (Bhabha 1990:3). Bhabha (1990:3) further describes the idea of the nation as involving an “ambivalent narration that holds culture as its most productive position”. Like the ‘nation’, race is produced through a “system of cultural signification” (Bhabha 1990:3) and the production of racial blackness is intertwined with that of white nationalism. Attempts at “retroaction” re-inscribe, re-signify and re-locate the past. Retroaction “commits our understanding of the past, and our reinterpretation of the future, to an ethics of ‘survival’ that allows us to work through the present” (Bhabha, 1990:60). Retro recall “marks the past as truly past”, writes Guffey (2006:27,9), which may present ways for some to come to terms with the recent past by putting distance between then and now. Following Guffey’s suggestion, the light-hearted and ironic reworking of the recent past may aid some in working through apartheid’s painful legacy. For some consumers, buying items that connote non-racialism and freedom from racial domination may “resolve the fragmentation associated with social upheaval in South Africa”, writes Lewis (2012:81,82).

However, this hypothesis is challenged by retro’s clear indifference to historical accuracy, its “grab-bag approach to history” and the “selective memory” of its fashionable articulations (Guffey 2006:11,14,131). Retro fashions mostly obscure the violence and pain of recent histories, omitting exactly that which is most in need of address. Retro can be a seductive anaesthetic, which facilitates consumption of troubled histories (Guffey 2006:158). For Samuel (2012:96), retro-chic’s nonchalant piracy suggests that “only when history has ceased to matter can it be treated as a sport”. While highlighting history, retro proclaims a finality about history or the past. The mitigation of difficult historical situations as now safely past, and evocations of ‘the

'good old days' resonate with my notion of Africa-lite. Where historical denial presents obstacles to redress, retro mythologies proffer insidious alibis. Since 1994, the notion that colonialism and apartheid are over and done with, that it's 'all in the past', has become a major ideological barrier to historical redress, particularly where used by whites to evade accountability for their accumulation of wealth at the expense of black dispossession, subjugation and impoverishment.

Signifiers of mid-twentieth century township life feature large in Afro-chic, enabling some consumers of retro to indulge fantasy associations with a past they never experienced. For Vincent (2007:87), the popularity among black consumers of vintage *Drum* fashions may suggest vicarious nostalgia for townships like Sophiatown, in a reimagining of place and time. That popularity also suggests a nostalgia, in the more politically amorphous and seemingly confused present, for the anti-apartheid struggle's distinct political goals and clear demarcation between good and evil, and the desire for return to the sense and values imagined as defining communities of decades ago (Vincent 2007:87). Through marketing and branding, retro advertising may evoke brands and a past shared by a generation of consumers, where the personal memories and nostalgia that the product evokes in the individual are intertwined with that of the community. According to Altaf Merchant and Gregory Rose (2013:2621), consumer propensity to experience and indulge in nostalgia may be heightened by feelings of alienation, which marked the experience of apartheid-supporting and some anti-apartheid white South Africans following 1994. The vicarious nostalgia offered by old or classic brands presents to the alienated consumer a passage to an imagined era of honest and authentic community. Much like colonial chic, retro Afro-chic suggests a world both more intelligible and more innocent than the present.

Discussions of the vintage *Drum* fashions sometimes casually connect the *Drum* era with the notion of the "fabulous fifties" (Lewis 2008:28). The term designates a revisionist packaging of post-World War II North American consumer culture. The term also signifies the creative vitality of black urban life and culture despite the constraints of apartheid. That being said, life for black people in South Africa during the fifties was by no means the one conjured up by the retro montage of post-apartheid designers. The fifties saw the passing of apartheid legislation that increasingly divided South Africans according to white-generated notions of ethnicity and 'group-identity', stripping blacks of human agency and dignity and consolidating the 'homelands' system which sealed their economic and political disenfranchisement for the next 40 years<sup>291</sup>. In Africa-lite décor, this brutal and dehumanising historical process becomes little more than a fairy tale played out under a supposedly universal commercial banner, one which in actuality eclipses core experiences of domination in order to highlight aspects that suit the mood and interests of a neoliberal post-apartheid world. Furthermore, a point

<sup>291</sup> These include the Immorality Amendment Act, Group Areas Act, Population Registration Act, Bantu Education Act and various acts banning political opposition and assembly.

seldom considered is that vintage images will remind some citizens of traumatic experiences they cannot forget, or, that others, by affiliation with those times and people, very legitimately find inappropriate as décor items. Signifiers evoking the apartheid-era township may also connote a difficult, even shameful, socio-economic legacy from which some black consumers wish to distance themselves. We see that through selective appropriation, Afro-chic's retro trend commodifies the records of black South Africans living behind 'the veil' during apartheid. For Du Bois (1903:2), black Americans lived "shut out from their world by a vast veil", which precluded them from full and equal participation in society. "Born with a veil", black subjects in anti-black societies acquire what Du Bois (1903:3) calls double consciousness, which involves seeing oneself or one's group through the often-hostile eyes of those who construct one as subordinate<sup>292</sup>.

As I showed in Chapter two, the lived realities and cultural heritages of black people offer resources for claiming existential authenticity and freedom. This significance and the complexity of culture is, however, "lost to presuppositions of popular representations of mores and folkways, where groups seem to 'have culture', as one has style or fashion" (Gordon 2012:102). In other words, popular and commodity translation of symbols of black culture as retro trend or 'look', potentially subsumes black efforts at asserting a belonging into a zone of market-related imaging that lacks historical understanding. In retro Afro-chic designs, the primary criteria for selection seem to be the blackness of the appropriated subjects along with their cultural practices. That such practices held together and sustained the humanity of oppressed communities is hardly of interest in this appropriation. Racialised blackness and black cultural expressions were the apartheid state's primary reasons for ghettoising, exploiting and destroying people and communities of colour. In its commodity-form, memorialising of the past as retro, 'Rainbowist' rhetoric obscures and all but erases the violence of racial domination. In retro advertising, writes Samuel (2012:93) "the past is there to humanise the present, and substitute the past for a corporate image". Similarly, in retro design, the records of those treated inhumanely are today mined for signs of community and true humanity which, once branded, give the apartheid past market-related exchange-value. From the heterogeneous archives of "life behind the veil", select snapshots are encoded by designers as signs of 'African vitality' and 'the human spirit', giving contemporary shape to age-old tropes.

For Bertelsen (1998:222) the "cultural power of South-Africa's democratic struggle" and its "respected signifiers" are appropriated and rerouted to the intertwined discourses of nation, consumerism, and free market. Rather than belonging to a narrative of struggle against racial oppression, the historical imagery is

<sup>292</sup> Double-consciousness, writes Du Bois (1903:3) is the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body..."(Du Bois 1903:3). This notion of internal dissonance links to Fanon's (2008) analysis, in *Black Skins White Masks*, of the internalisation of anti-black racism by black people.

transformed into Afro-chic to connote an urban progress, which feeds into depoliticised notions of the African Renaissance as a metropolitan ethos of self-realisation (Lewis 2012:81). The music, dancing and fashions of Africa-lite commodities come from archives of black cultural power that were integral to the liberation struggle, as practices of subversion, communion, solidarity, artistic expression and the manifestation of human dignity and being at home in the world. For example, Rovine (2015:221-222) stresses the use of a “style as defiance” by urban blacks adopting African-American fashions. Furthermore, Sophiatown was a site of political struggle, and not only one of fashion, music halls and artistic self-celebration. Africa-lite uncouples freedom from the long and difficult fight to attain it: jazz music and American fashions that signified embodied and performative freedom come to connote not black agency, but a commodity-transferable black cool. Here the ‘black’ associated with an affirmative African personhood becomes a transferable ‘black’ surface and tint. The polysemic nature of fashion easily obscures designers’ goals of using commodity design to inform or impart deeper knowledge, particularly where other sources of historical knowledge are scarce. As commodities and historical images travel in and between spaces, times and institutions, “knowledge about them tends to become partial, contradictory, and differentiated” (Appadurai 1986:56).

#### 6.4 Biko and retro commodification

'Biko', four letters rich in signification, gathering the labour of a generation in struggle – a veritable treasure chest bringing out the usual looters (Veriava & Naidoo 2008:233).

While given some respect in the liberal press (Biko's *Frank Talk* pieces were published in the Port Elizabeth-based *Herald* newspaper), at the time of Biko's death in 1977 it would have been unthinkable to most white suburbanites to decorate their homes with accessories embellished with the face of a man banned by the state and vilified in the white right-wing and state-supporting press as a terrorist and embodiment of *swart gevaar* (black menace). In subsequent years, national and consumer discourse and their intermediaries and platforms have transfigured and domesticated the Black Consciousness icon – so much so that three decades after his death, scatter cushions with his portrait injected a political ‘edge’ into a playful, feminine display of textile and wallpaper designs at a Sandton décor exposition (Fig. 6.30). Has subject appropriation of Biko by post-apartheid designers domesticated the revolutionary icon, subsuming his biography and ideological position in a manner comparable to that of Ché Guevara or Mandela?



Fig. 6.30. Design Team display at Rooms on View exhibition in Sandton, Johannesburg 2011. Screenshot. (DT\_Design Team 2015).

In this analysis I consider some readings of Design Team's *Biko* scatter cushion in the domestic contexts of its use and display<sup>293</sup>. Most bourgeois homes in South Africa's suburbs are located in neighbourhoods once reserved for whites under apartheid, spaces where historically blacks were only admitted as workers – if they had the correct documentation. The harmony, beauty and comfort of these exclusive neighbourhoods – many of which today remain predominantly white enclaves – owed their secure existence to apartheid's ruinous toll on black lives, labour and dignity.

The denial of black people's humanity in the interest of securing social and economic benefits for whites was central to Stephen (Steve) Bantu Biko's (1946-1977) politics. The activist, writer and philosopher became a central figure within the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), and emerged as a highly articulate and inspiring opponent of apartheid<sup>294</sup>. As critical of paternalistic white liberalism as he was of outright white

<sup>293</sup> Scholarship on the commodification of Biko's image in retro fashion is predominantly focused on urban youth culture where appropriation of the political icon presents new modes of self-fashioning (Nuttall 2004, Lewis 2012, Vincent 2007). Wearing a garment with the icon's portrait differs from displaying the same image on soft furnishing in a domestic space, where the owner controls who sees it. Design Team's products are aimed at predominantly middle-to high-income earners, suburbanites and professionals. Images of Biko were consumed, customised and displayed in black working-class and activist (including white activist) homes for decades before appropriation by Design Team. Analysis of this phenomenon is outside the scope of this study.

<sup>294</sup> From his days as a university student Biko was involved in activism against apartheid and racism, launching the South African Students Association (SASA). He became president and publications director of SASA, publishing articles on white domination and black experience, some in *The Herald* newspaper under the pseudonym Frank Talk. Biko was instrumental in developing Black

racism, Biko articulated existential strategies for black self-determination to counter the destructive effects of racial dispossession and white domination. For Biko, liberation required that black people take pride in their blackness and shed the interiorised psychological burden of inferiority resulting from centuries of racist dehumanisation.

During his lifetime Biko's portrait appeared on Black Consciousness activist T-shirts and after his death such T-shirts were regularly worn at political rallies and the funerals of activists killed by the state (Vincent 2007:82). With image and text inexpensively printed on mass-produced garments, these were not a fashion statement but signified defiance of apartheid and affiliation with Black Consciousness as a political stance within the broader mass democratic movement (Vincent 2007:82). Here the aims, values and identity of the group takes precedence over that of the individual (Vincent 2007:82). On 12 September 1977, Biko was murdered in police custody. His death from injuries and torture, "a gross human rights violation", was widely publicised and he became an international symbol of resistance to apartheid (Vincent 2007:81). *Drum* magazine dedicated its November 1977 issue to Biko. The cover features a close-up colour photograph showing him in three-quarter profile, looking pensively to his right (Fig. 6.31). The heading, in white capitals running across his chest, reads: "Steve Biko: a special report in words and pictures". This is the cover used by both Stoned Cherrie and Design Team for reproduction on T-shirts and scatter cushions.

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Consciousness as an investigation into black experience under white domination, and as the philosophical basis of a stance affirming black agency in the bitter struggle against apartheid. The Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) took the name Frank Talk for their journal, republishing many of Biko's writings alongside those of a new generation of Black Consciousness activists.

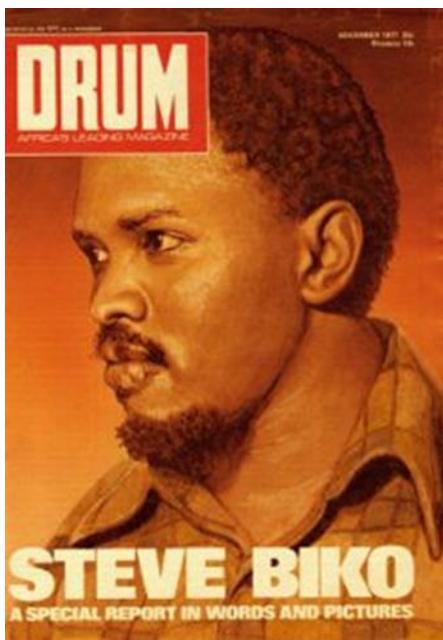


Fig. 6.31. Cover of *Drum* magazine, special *Biko* issue, 1977. Bailey's African Historical Archive, Johannesburg. (Bailey's African Historical Archive [s.a.]).

Fashion and décor are frequently associated with frivolity, consumerism, femininity and individualism – traits typically antithetical to mass political struggle. To lend edginess to their products, designers and entrepreneurs have for decades decorated fashionable clothes with portraits of political icons, also when the appropriated icon's ideological position has contradicted or criticised the very system using that person's image.

A prime example is the global circulation of South American revolutionary Ché Guevara's portrait on fashion and décor accessories<sup>295</sup>. Connotations of socialism, disruption and militancy have given way to a safe edginess, suggesting only vague rebelliousness. Lewis (2012:78) argues that, having been an explicit and widely-recognised signifier of revolution or rebellion, Guevara's anti-capitalist politics are either unknown to, or sufficiently remote from, most who market or consume these goods for them to care about ideological contradictions. Unlike those of Guevara, Biko's story and politics are not remote from South African consumers: he is a widely known and celebrated opponent of apartheid, his name also being associated with his brutal killing by state security agents for his role in the anti-apartheid struggle. Nonetheless, while

<sup>295</sup> Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, known as Ché Guevara (1928 -1967), was an Argentine-Cuban physician, tactician of guerrilla warfare, communist revolutionary, politician and writer (Sinclair 2018). Between 1956 and 1959 he played a central role in the Cuban Revolution, and from 1959 to 1961 he served in the Cuban ministry where he worked to implement communist reform. Guevara was a fierce opponent of imperialism, neo-colonialism and the USA, and spent his final years in Bolivia engaged in guerrilla warfare (Sinclair 2018). Guevara was adopted as an icon of revolution by young leftist radicals in North America and Western Europe from the 1960s (Sinclair 2018). The much-produced portrait of Guevara with long hair and beret was taken in 1960 by Cuban photographer Alberto Korda.

Mandela's image is widely consumed through mainstream dress and décor items, Biko's is not<sup>296</sup>. His political legacy is unlike Mandela's, whose image in the country's national history, and in mainstream commodification, is of the globally-acknowledged peacemaker and benign father of democratic South Africa. Connotations of militancy, violence and conflict have been evacuated from the iconic portrait of the smiling, elderly statesman. By contrast, Biko has remained an "irreducibly political figure" whose defiance of apartheid was marked by confrontation, conflict and his violent death (Vincent 2007:83). Currently, Biko's political and philosophical legacy of black radicalism challenges, if not threatens, the neoliberalism underpinning South Africa's brokered democracy.

### An icon's transfiguration



Fig. 6.32. Stoned Cherrie, *Biko T-Shirt*, c.2006.  
(Stoned Cherrie brand women's shirt 2018).

The transition of Biko's portrait from political to fashion statement was powerfully mediated by Stoned Cherrie and its owner Nkhensani Nkosi, as well as by South African Fashion Week, and by fashion critics and magazines that enthused about Nkosi's collection and the Biko shirts (Fig. 6.32). Nkosi's celebrity status and business acumen added to the wide propagation of her vision of the collection as fostering pride in black heritage. It quickly became the latest must-have for urban youngsters and fashionistas. The context in which the collection was launched also made for unprecedented inventiveness and playfulness, with consumers finding a new

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<sup>296</sup> One may posit that the ubiquity of Mandela's portrait in décor and fabric design may have reconciled suburban consumers to the idea of a black politician's face appearing on trendy décor items.

sense of self amid the prevailing rhetoric of ‘Rainbowism’ and the notion of an African Renaissance. When Stoned Cherrie began collaborating with major clothing franchise Woolworths in 2003, the collection assumed mainstream connotations (Lewis 2012:76). The up-market franchise introduced a wider demographic (in terms of age and class) to Stoned Cherrie’s collection and the acceptance of *Drum* magazine as a desirable reference for fashionable consumption.

When Design Team launched *Novelty*, the *Drum* cover with Biko’s portrait had already made fashion headlines. It had been de-territorialised from the media platforms and bodies of political activists and transcribed into a commodity sign in the social and corporeal homes of fashionistas. *Novelty* further shifted the political icon from sartorial, and predominantly urban and youth consumption, to the private domestic realm of wealthier suburban consumers. The collection’s presence on commercial platforms such as décor boutiques, magazines and respected design expositions, bestowed additional status on the collection. *Novelty*, the collection’s title, may be viewed as ironic as the appropriated images are clearly neither new or novel. What is novel is the presence of Biko’s portrait, or *Drum* magazine, in the socio-economic milieu of white suburban homes. The anti-apartheid struggle and its black martyrs were to most white South Africans mainly processes and events that played out in townships on the outskirts of white towns. Whilst today celebrated locally and internationally, anti-apartheid icons may still connote the new, strange or dangerous to some consumers, but as décor it can distinguish the owner as ‘politically aware’ and ‘open-minded’.

The successful transfiguration of the anti-apartheid icon into fashion is also due to *Drum*’s commodification of Biko’s portrait. Though *Drum* magazine had strong political inclinations, it was a profit-driven enterprise that spoke to its readers’ social, political *and* consumerist desires. On the 1977 cover, the magazine’s white on red title and well-known brand partially covers Biko’s forehead, so that brand icon and political icon converge. Printed on the paper cover of the magazine, the portrait is physically part of the magazine and cannot but accrue some of the brand’s popular connotations. This is reinforced when the duplicated cover is read according to the familiar code by which image and text are structured on magazine covers. Read from top to bottom, left to right, the title (*Drum*) and promotional by-line (“South Africa’s Leading Magazine”) precede the man’s name and descriptive sub-heading<sup>297</sup>. In its duplication on décor items, both Biko and *Drum*, alongside the connotations of retro trendiness established by designers’ appropriation of those *Drum* covers, are denoted to suggest the ‘fabulous fifties’.

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<sup>297</sup> The sub-heading is included in the *Biko* T-shirts, but it is cropped from Design Team’s reproduction of the image onto cushion covers, making the design pithy and poster-like.

The copying of the magazine onto a cushion cover involves numerous processes of duplication, covering and disjunction. Care was taken to retain or communicate the authenticity and materiality of the actual magazine cover used. The high-quality print reproduced on the *Drum* cushion cover relays the creases, tears and subtle modulations of tone (Fig. 6.33). These bear testimony to the form and texture of the aged, fingered paper cover. The very object-ness of the cover is highlighted while the simulacra is a near-imperceptible film printed onto and into the fabric cover of the object and commodity. In the play between object and simulacra, historical authenticity is endlessly deferred and the only attainable authentic is that of the branded commodity.



Fig. 6.33. Design team, *Biko scatter cushion*, [s.a.]. Scatter cushion, screen printed linen, 60x60cm. (Material Life 2017).

The materiality of Design Team's scatter cushions makes for an intimate and highly tactile consumer experience. In photographic objects, writes Edwards (2009:331), the photograph and its materiality, image and object cannot be separated. Photographs are objects of memory, and in dialogic existence image and object create the focus for making meaning, evocating memories, for remembering and forgetting (Edwards 2008:331). "Materiality constitutes the presentational forms which themselves structure visual knowledge", writes Edwards (2009:333). Such meaning-making occurs in relation to the human body when photo-objects (such as the *Biko* cushion) are held, caressed, scrutinised with finger tips, hugged, sat or slept on. When visually consumed through physical engagement, the image is re-temporalised, re-spatialised and viewers invest the

object with narrative and memory (Edwards 2009:336-337). Decoding therefore occurs through activation: each viewer will activate and structure meaning by linking *Drum* and/or Biko with narratives and memories situated within the temporal, spatial realm of personal experience.

The intimacy of visually consuming the cushion printed with Biko's portrait further stems from what Edwards (2009:334) calls photography's "lamination of image and referent", the ambiguity between signifier and signified which is the result of established conventions of viewing and speaking. Looking at the portrait reproduced on the cushion cover, a viewer might well state: "That is Biko". She or he is of course not confusing or conflating the photo-object and the human but affirming a link between the man photographed and the reproduced image. This equivalence might be further secured during the viewer's intimate, embodied consumption of the photo-object. For some, the correspondence between signified and signifier may attribute something of the political icon's aura to the cushion, making it an apt vehicle for commemorating and memorialising Biko. This attribution to the object-image may raise objections to its domestic use: people leaning against, cleaning and 'scattering' – never mind sitting on them – the object could be perceived as insulting or harming the legacy and dignity of the icon<sup>298</sup>. I elaborate on this in the next section where I discuss objections to the *Slave to Fashion* ironing board.

Some consider the fashionable production and consumption of Biko's image to be a desecration of Biko's values and legacy. To invoke the name Biko, write Ahmed Veriava and Prishani Naidoo (2008:234), is to evoke the unity of a seditious life, of death as a "politicising thing" and "the many ways he helps us learn to live in the here and now". Observing Biko's image in suburban boutiques and coffee shops, Veriava and Naidoo (2008:234) note that "Biko is 'big' in Rosebank"<sup>299</sup>. As a symbol reproduced on fashionable accessories, Biko is both hyper-visible and invisible. Where consumers are ignorant of Biko's values and ideology, the man is supplanted by the fashionable sign. Particularly so as his stance on racial capitalism contradicts the high-end commodification of his image. In the suburban homes of affluent consumers, the black icon with a reputation for subversion becomes hyper-visible as décor accent.

For Vincent (2007:87), Stoned Cherrie's *Drum* collection represents healthy and active resistance in the context of the omission from the public historical record of the travails and achievements of black life under

<sup>298</sup> The nature of the object may add to this reading: a scatter cushion is an inessential object to be arranged, strewn or tossed about at will. Its value is in its appearance and the comfortable support it offers those sitting on or leaning into it. Scatter cushions and their covers are the cheapest way of updating home décor with the latest trends and are frequently discarded once the collection or trend has gone out of style.

<sup>299</sup> The authors are referring to a shopping mall in Rosebank, an upper-middle class suburb in Johannesburg. They also observe that Biko's legacy is turned into strategies for black self-advancement in an economy still exploiting the black majority (Veriava & Naidoo 2008:234).

apartheid. The post-apartheid availability of this collection offered exciting new possibilities for (black) self-fashioning. According to Nuttal (2004:437), through “remixing and recoding of [the] icon”, wearers engage in ongoing processes of “self-stylisation”, whether by affiliation to a political ideology or a fleeting trend, or both. Might the work of liberation (also) occur through refashioning the icon within private, domestic space?

While the product is most likely beyond the means of most domestic consumers, one might argue that Biko’s philosophical legacy should have a place in the homes of those with the economic and social capital to affect change<sup>300</sup>. As a ‘conversation piece’, it is not unthinkable that the *Biko* cushion will not only elicit discussion about retro or Design Team, but also about the person pictured. It may present opportunities to disrupt stereotypes of the domestic as an unpolitical space, where it may serve simultaneously as fashion statement and micro-rebellion against the wider socio-political context or dominant hegemony. This accessory can offer its owner a powerful reminder of the unfinished decolonising project demanding her or his contribution. It can also send a clear message of the owner/inhabitant’s values to others entering her/his space. While noting the importance of such gestures, Vincent (2007:90) concedes that these might also be "strateg[ies] of middle-classness [...] which affirm the constitution of the self through consumption".

### An image resisting domestication

Two decades after the first democratic elections, to what degree have Biko and Mandela become symbols of a successful transition to democracy? Writing on Disney’s de-territorialising of Pocahontas from Native American history, Ono and Buescher (2001:35) suggest that “Pocahontas promises to satisfy the need to end colonial history, racism and sexism. Through images, this conjures up utopic hopes and desires, diverting attention away from the materiality of daily life, hence away from contemporary social problems”. As a commodity cipher, Mandela performs much the same function in post-apartheid publicity<sup>301</sup>. The same has not, however, happened with Biko. Lewis (2012:28) notes that Stoned Cherrie T-shirts featuring Biko’s portrait proved less popular than those with vintage icons evoking the ‘fabulous fifties’. As I write, *Novelty* has been discontinued and the *Biko* cushion is only available at online stores. For some the image is no longer trendy, while for others it has proved too blatantly political. Two decades into non-racial democracy, Biko’s portrait, writings and legacy are inspiring a new generation of student activists and black revolutionaries demanding radical transformation and nationalisation. For many disillusioned with the “Rainbow Nation” and feeling

<sup>300</sup> At R450 each, the Biko scatters might be too expensive for most South Africans, but as shown in Chapter four, financial disadvantage does not always inhibit self-fashioning through consumption. No longer trendy, cushions may be bought cheaply on sale, or those discarded may again assume commodity status in second-hand or charity shops. They may also be given as gifts or become heirlooms. Popular new trends always stimulate imitations, whether mass produced or handmade by crafters or an enthusiast’s once-off DIY-project.

<sup>301</sup> According to Vincent (2007:88), to celebrate past heroes already sanctified by history and not active in the conflicted political landscape represents a “safe bet” that is also “politically emasculating in its implications”.

deceived by the ANC's negotiated settlement, Mandela's image symbolises unfulfilled promises. In recent years, student activists and the EFF have foregrounded black consciousness ideology. Public citing of Biko's ideas and the publishing of his image have given the icon new currency. The image's platforms of circulation are public and its discourse that of a mass political movement rather than individualism, consumerism and style. While the vintage *Drum* trend may have run its course, Biko has become a 'household' name with a younger generation who are reading, interpreting and debating Biko's ideas. The image of the man – his youth a reminder of his premature death – is increasingly synonymous with the unfulfilled task of liberation. It may be that Biko's image, particularly with domestic political shifts, has, in some important ways, resisted domestication and a subsuming of social agitation against neoliberalism, anti-black racism and capitalist exploitation. This appears to be the deeper sense in the re-activation of Biko's image by those asserting affiliation to the man and his political ideology.

What is the social and moral tax on the privileged white suburbanite whose house guest asks "why Biko"? Perhaps the recent radical charge has given the object increased edginess in the eyes of its owner, thus augmenting its potential for distinction. Or for others it may cause discomfort, particularly as a burgeoning programme of decolonisation demands the return of land to black people. This poses a direct threat to the domestic security and harmony of bourgeois, white enclaves, in many cases unchanged and fortified following 1994.

## **6.5 Commemoration or critical invocation of black servitude and slavery.**

You and your company are a shining example of the new racism that Africans and their descendants have to fight against. You have no place to speak of slavery 'ironically'. Its historical and current affects on Africans is not something to joke about. The loss of human life, culture, and identity is never a joke, or appropriate for a sales' campaign. Your metaphors cause continued psychological pain and you should be ashamed [sic] (Andrade 2014).

When the award-winning design studio, Maid in Africa, exhibited *Slave to Fashion* and *Maidonna* at the 2014 Cape Town Design Indaba Exposition, responses like that of Anita Andrade stunned the designers. For the first time since the company's launch eight years before, their award-winning designs received impassioned public criticism and – as Andrade's comment shows – they were accused of perpetuating the very racial and economic abuses they sought to criticise<sup>302</sup>. The outcry about the brand and its designs highlighted an acute disconnect

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<sup>302</sup> Within days of its opening, an online petition was established to have Maid in Africa removed from the Exposition (Remove 'Slave to fashion' 2014).

between designers, the design establishment and diverse discursive communities who consume and interpret the design in the post-apartheid context.



Fig. 6.34. Maid in Africa: Andrew Weir (*Slave to fashion*), 2010. Exhibition catalogue. (Handmade Cape CCDI handmade exhibition collection for 2010 2010:13).

This section focuses on Maid in Africa's *Maidonna* and *Slave to Fashion* designs, and my analysis flows from the social media debate generated around their exhibition at the Design Indaba Exposition. The first work I discuss is *Maidonna*, which features Priscilla, formerly employed as a domestic worker and crafter by the company's owner-designers<sup>303</sup>. According to the company's owners, the design was produced to commemorate the deceased woman. I ask the question: what are the reasons, according to critics, for the failure of this design to elevate the black domestic worker as saint? How and why is this commemorative design different to contemporary African commemorative cloths that are – like *Maidonna* – used as dress or décor? To explore this question and the disgruntlement with Maid in Africa's design, I compare it to commemoration cloths featuring Nelson Mandela, Albertina Sisulu and Josina Machel.

The second work, *Slave to Fashion*, appropriates the well-known engraving (or broadside) of the lay-out of slaves stowed aboard the *Brooks* slave ship, produced by British abolitionists in 1788, which the designers used

<sup>303</sup> As seen below, the company publicises the first name, but not the surname of Priscilla, the woman featured in *Maidonna*.

on an ironing board cover (Fig. 6.34). The ironing board cover was initially conceived as critique of contemporary labour exploitation and consumer culture, and between 2010 and 2014 was variously lauded and condemned. I consider public readings and media features of the design within the semantic contexts of its consumption. I investigate how postcolonial socio-economic contexts – where descendants of slaves continually battle the legacies of slavery – may inform readings that differ from those of cultural intermediaries who laud the designs. Since irony allegedly drives these designs, I explore the effectiveness of irony in such critical and commemorative design products. To frame this discussion, I need to sketch my own encounter with these products, since I too became involved in the controversy that erupted around these products in 2014. My initial response to online images of the designs was strongly condemnatory, and I launched a heated public attack on the designers. This occurred before I commenced my doctoral research on their designs. I include reference to my response to declare my taking of a public position that I came to regret. To de-centre my own biased position, I draw on other respondents' comments to formulate my critique in this thesis. Following Thomas's (1999:144) critique of settler appropriations, I attempt to shift my focus from judgement to examination of motivations, and to assess whether these designs succeed in realising the designer's stated aims. Mostly, however, I am interested in accounting for the affective power of the work, which undermines the intentions of the creators (Thomas 1999:158). The unanticipated effects of outsider appropriations may be negative and/or positive, and sometimes the effects or impact of appropriations exceed the intentions of the appropriating creators (Thomas 1999:143)<sup>304</sup>. This is exemplified in the wide condemnation – in which I participated – of Maid in Africa's avowed humanitarian efforts.

### Commemorating 'Maidonna'

Maid in Africa was established in 2005 in Namibia as the initiative of designer Andrew Weir and his partner Micha Weir who has a background in non-profit social development. Maid in Africa produces hand-printed and hand-painted fabrics that are made into cushion and ironing board covers, aprons, fashions and upholstery fabric (Fig. 6.35). In Andrew's characteristically bright and crowded designs, text is juxtaposed with images sampled from popular culture, African proverbs, historical advertisements, local brands, and the designers' own photographs. Andrew has won, and been nominated for, numerous awards, and his work is marketed on

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<sup>304</sup> Outsider appropriations may conversely deflect attention from neglected and unacknowledged indigenous art traditions and the presence of the source communities (Thomas 1999:143). Unanticipated effects may include the focus of attention on indigenous culture or peoples and increasing appreciation of the appropriated art form and its source (Thomas 1999:143). This may in turn stimulate new markets for indigenous art forms. A prime example is the international fame of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, achieved after their collaboration with Paul Simon in producing the album *Graceland* in 1986. The group was created in the early 1960s by Joseph Shabalala. Its choral music borrows heavily from *isicathamiya*, a musical tradition developed on the mines of South Africa. Outsider appropriations may conversely deflect attention from neglected and unacknowledged indigenous art traditions and the presence of the source communities (Thomas 1999:143).

various online-boutiques and has been featured on such local and international platforms as *Visi*, *House & Leisure*, Design Indaba, *The Observer* (UK) and *Telegraph Magazine*.



Fig. 6.35. Chair covered in Maid in Africa designs. 2014. Design Indaba Exposition, Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town.  
(Photograph by author).

Since the inception of their company, the Weirs' initiative was focused on imparting skills, such as sewing, screen printing and painting, collaborating with and giving part-time employment to students, street vendors and domestic workers. In a pun on the slogan 'Made in Africa', the word 'maid' in the company name signifies the title historically used for female domestic workers. According to the company website, the business was started to

generate extra work and income for our Maid and friend Priscilla, who lost her other work when diagnosed HIV positive. [...] With our trademark *Maidonna* print and the playful use of 'Maid' with its strong association with a southern African way of life we celebrate Priscilla and those that are often overlooked (About us 2015).

While the "southern African way of life" may denote the pervasiveness of domestic black servants in South African homes, it remains unclear whether it refers to the servant or the master's 'way of life'. For centuries the term 'maid' described and hailed the black women servants of settler households, and recently South Africans saw the term formally replaced with "domestic worker". The affordability of domestic labour in South Africa is the contemporary legacy of a colonial labour economy. In this context, it may be deduced that domestic servitude is a 'way of life' for those with few or no other options. For their employers, freedom from labour affords the time to manifest distinction through stylising and aestheticising their lives (Bourdieu 1984:55-56). This includes, for some, expressing their humanitarian principles by consuming products like those of Maid in Africa.

The *Maidonna* design is a collage of a photograph of Priscilla taken by the Weirs. The portrait is framed by photographs and hand-drawn illustrations of flowers and leaves, copies of contemporary South African and Victorian advertisements and logos for soap and laundry detergent (Fig. 6.36). It incorporates two vintage drawings of steam irons. The composition suggests Catholic icons of the Virgin Mary. Such representations are also referred to as Madonnas, after the iconographic tradition of 'Madonna and child' depictions.



Fig. 6.36. Maid in Africa. *Maidonna* scatter cushion in lime green, [s.a.]. Scatter cushion, screen printed cotton. (Namibian collection 2018).

In Weir's design, Priscilla's face and neck are joined to a stock-appropriated illustration of the Virgin Mary's shoulders and chest. Plump, soft hands flank the flaming iron that replaces the Madonna's (Maidonna's) immaculate or sacred heart. Multiple haloes frame her face: hair curlers, several black rings, the array of flowers and adverts, the banner-like company name above and beneath Priscilla's face. These haloes further invoke icons of saints. Beneath Priscilla's portrait are the company name and logo. In these the word 'maid' appears twice, simultaneously connoting this (unnamed) woman and black domestic workers in general.

The design is also a pastiche of African commemorative cloth traditions. Since the nineteenth century, these printed cloths have served as visual commemoration of people, events, places or institutions. The subject of commemoration is mostly represented in a photographic portrait, with her or his name printed on the fabric. Conflated European and African iconographic traditions, and their connotations of commemoration, sanctification and devotion, are here deployed to honour the late Priscilla and domestic workers in general. As criticism was mounting against their company, the Weirs (Maid in Africa 2014) explained the motivation for this design:

When designing our icon fabric we chose Priscilla as the true African ‘Ma(i)donna’. Our intention was to celebrate the true force behind African human resource development and to honour a underpaid and undervalued profession [sic]<sup>305</sup>.

In this sense, Maid in Africa’s vision can be said to constitute critical design practice, which emerged in the late 1990s as a conceptual practice. Critical design hopes to provoke reflection in viewers or users, particularly of consumerism and capitalist models of production and consumption (Cadle & Khun 2013:23)<sup>306</sup>. Critical Design aims to uncover the fundamental role of design in propagating neoliberal ideology, which resonates with Žižek’s (2009) notion of design as Ideological State Apparatus. In both *Maidonna* and *Slave to Fashion*, black labour is not obscured, but highlighted to elevate (*Maidonna*) and critique its exploitation (*Slave to Fashion*). For respondent Kelly Epiphany Kowalski (2014), the campaign should be lauded: “Thank goodness there are artists out there shocking us with reality. Maid in Africa is an attempt to make us aware, not further entrench in denial [sic]”. Most respondents, however, denounced the design as perpetuating the exploitation of black female workers, and many pointed out that the appellation ‘Maid’ was derogatory and dehumanising. This was stressed by those whose relatives were or are domestic workers. Athi-Patra Ruga (2014) wrote,

[b]oth my grandmothers worked their whole lives as maids ... left my parents to raise other grown ass peoples CHILDREN. [...] The DEAL is that a] I don't call people's mothers maids b] 'The Aunt that helps us out' will suffice. It validates and humanises *abantu* [sic].

Sharing his family’s experience and highlighting black women’s status as mothers, Ruga challenges the symbolic power of white hegemony to name and define people (*abantu*) as ‘maids’. He stresses the cost of domestic servitude to the worker’s own families. Black domestic workers in colonial societies experienced gross exploitation, occupying a precarious position within racial, patriarchal economies<sup>307</sup>. Although legal reform and unionisation have significantly transformed this labour sector since the mid-1990s, domestic workers are some of post-apartheid society’s worst-paid workers. They often work alone in the private homes of their employers and are vulnerable to physical, verbal and sexual abuse.

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<sup>305</sup> According to the website of the Namibia Craft Centre (Maid in Africa 2018): “Andrew and Micha Weir started Maid in Africa in 2006 after their domestic worker, Priscilla, was diagnosed with HIV. They were forced to watch helplessly as her condition worsened even though Priscilla expressed a desire to continue being productive. Micha Weir showed Priscilla how to silk-screen, paint and produce hand-painted fabrics. Tragically, Priscilla succumbed to AIDS in 2007 but her passing inspired the Weirs to spread a wonderful, celebratory message, including immortalising Priscilla’s smiling image as ‘Maidonna’ on a variety of surfaces and a range of beautiful, highly sought-after cushion covers.”

<sup>306</sup> Critical Design Practice emerged in late 1990s from the publications and projects of designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby. They define it as the use of “speculative design proposals to challenge narrow assumptions, preconceptions and givens” about the role of design and products, and its aims include “raising awareness, exposing assumptions, provoking action, sparking debate, even entertaining in an intellectual sort of way” (Dunne & Raby 2007).

<sup>307</sup> Today there are over one million domestic workers in South Africa, most doing ‘piece-work’, either on a part-time basis or many without formal contracts. In current legislation, the title also applies to a gardener, driver or person who looks after children, the aged, sick, frail or disabled in a private household, but not on farms. With wages ranging from R11.89 to R15.25 per hour (depending on contract and geographic area), minimum wages for domestic workers are below national minimum wage (R20 or US\$1.40 per hour).

The essential, often undervalued work of domestic servants, is precisely the condition the Weirs hoped to highlight. However, the design to commemorate and elevate Priscilla as an ‘African Madonna’ becomes ambiguous when the wordplay on ‘Madonna’ is given an ironic edge. The ‘maid’ is ostensibly elevated to sainthood when her title is coupled with *donna*, an Italian title for a lady or mistress. She is not, however, relieved of the title ‘maid’, and therefore “the true African ‘Ma(i)donna’” is unlike the European Madonna in both race and class. It is not unusual for saints to be depicted with characterising symbols. In Maidonna the symbols of domestic labour (irons and detergent) and repetition of the word ‘maid’ underscore the centrality of her servant-status to her sainthood. The black Madonna is thus produced as both saint and servant.

Referring to the iconic American ‘Aunt Jemima’ brand and logo for pancake mixes, golden syrup and breakfast foods, Maurice Manring writes that “[Aunt Jemima] could not have been white”. Launched as a brand name in 1889, the name Aunt Jemima was taken from a song and stock figure of nineteenth-century minstrel shows<sup>308</sup>. In both the minstrel shows and the food brand, Aunt Jemima embodies the ‘mammy’ archetype, a loyal and compliant servant, often depicted as a mature, heavy-set black woman. For Manring (2009:38), “Aunt Jemima was persuasive [as a brand] because she was a black servant, in an age when perpetual human bondage existed, in a place legendary for its good food and white leisure”. Consumption of Aunt Jemima’s products is tied up with the personal memories and nostalgia of generations of consumers, many of whom are unaware of the brand’s genesis. Though increasingly contested, this brand’s long-standing popularity may reveal an enduring appeal (for some) for the nostalgic myth of Southern, antebellum comfort. In this commodity manifestation of colonial nostalgia, it is the mistress and her family’s comfort and not the servant’s life of labour that is mythologised. The signifier of a smiling servant connotes the absent mistress’s comfort and the content servant’s pride in her work, thus obscuring the inequality underlying their relationship.

Much like Aunt Jemima, Maidonna could not have been white because her blackness signifies the service she renders. “[B]y a labour of identification and decoding”, consumers contribute to the products they consume, writes Bourdieu (1984:100). The concept and design of Maidonna can resonate with postcolonial addressees because her blackness is tied up with her servitude, a familiar code to consumers. The design highlights Maidonna’s blackness through several intertextual references and juxtapositions. Light and warmth are suggested in the sunflowers, the flaming iron and label for Sunlight washing powder. This label also connotes washing and cleanliness. Contrasted with the themes of lightness and cleanliness is that of darkness as conflation of blackness with dirt and racial blackness. As discussed in Chapter four, this was a common

<sup>308</sup> Numerous writings have examined the development of the Aunt Jemima logo in 1889 by Chris L. Rutt and Charles G. Underwood for their ready-made pancake flour mix at the Pearl Milling Company. The logo was inspired by African-American entertainer Billy Kersands’ minstrel song *Old Aunt Jemima*, and was eventually purchased and established as a trademark by the Quaker Oats Company in 1925, and it remains one of the longest continually running logos and trademarks in the history of American advertising (Richardson 2015).

promotional theme in Victorian soap advertisements. In *Maidonna*, a vintage advertisement for Cuticura soap promising “soft white hands” shows one slightly lighter hand stroking another, suggesting the skin-lightening effect of the product (Fig. 6.37). Beneath, another historic illustration shows two semi-naked black children playing with a wash basin.



Fig. 6.37. Maid in Africa. *Maidonna* scatter cushion in orange (detail), [s.a.]. Scatter cushion, screen printed cotton.  
(Namibian collection 2018).

For McClintock (1995:208,213), such advertisements reveal the political, ideological and economic role of soap’s marketing in the propagation of imperialism as civilising mission, and of racial difference and Victorian notions of hygiene. Cleanliness was promoted, through advertising, as synonymous with civilisation, purity and whiteness. The juxtaposition of white and black, European and African bodies, cleanliness and dirt, underscored a colonial discourse of Africans as uncivilised and unclean. This fed into the trope of ‘the white man’s burden’, which served to legitimate colonisation in public discourse as benevolent extension of civilisation, Christianity, industry and capitalism to Africans. The ironist’s amused acquaintance with consumer racism and colonial stereotype, and the understanding of its persistent purchase among some post-apartheid audiences, is evidenced in the configuration of signifiers. The designer presumes that his addressees will create ironic meaning through reading the juxtapositions as humorous. This suggests an assumption of shared symbolic capital and shared values. The comical stance may also suggest a post-racial, post-apartheid perspective deeming colonialism and racism acceptable topics of amusement or tools of ironic criticism. This

demands a subjective distance from the object of ironic humour, a demand evidently too great for many black critics of *Maid in Africa*. For many, Weir's irony suggested not ironic subversion, but complicity in hegemonic whiteness and racial exploitation.

For many respondents the ironic edge overshadowed the intertextual reference to commemorative cloth, a cultural mode of signification diverted from its typical contexts of use. *Maidonna* was consequently read as mocking denigration instead of veneration. In explanatory retort the Weirs (2014) wrote:

Thousands of South African people proudly wearing a Mandela T-shirt are NOT 'mocking' our former president, as some of our critics claim! African culture is full of fabrics celebrating African leaders – and who says only a president is good enough to be celebrated and remembered [sic]?

Comparing *Maidonna* to African commemorative cloths reveals significant differences that challenge this response. Those honoured through representation on commemorative cloth are generally public figures of power and influence (such as Mandela), or relations of those who commission custom-designed, small-scale productions for funerals, birthdays or weddings.

As a memorial to a woman, *Maidonna* can also be compared to the Machel commemorative cloth (Fig. i) and Da Gama's Albertina Sisulu commemorative skirt panel (Fig. 6.38). Commemorative cloths function as visual communication about those depicted within a socio-temporal context where the figure and event are presumably recognised. Unlike Machel and Sisulu, Priscilla is not identified in *Maidonna*: her image is heavily modified, and the fabric is intended for purposes of domestic use and decoration, targeting a predominantly white and relatively affluent market. *Maidonna* is therefore not consumed and used within the economies, semantic contexts and the discursive communities who consume the Machel and Sisulu commemorative cloths. Machel and Sisulu are celebrated political figures and the women's portraits and biographies form part of the respective postcolonial nations' heritage<sup>309</sup>. Furthermore, unlike the jocular, ironic representation of Priscilla as Maidonna, these commemorative cloths communicate in clear terms to consumers who belong to discursive communities versed in the semantics of the designs and their respective traditions<sup>310</sup>.

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<sup>309</sup> The Josina Machel commemorative cloth was printed for the celebration of Women's Day in Mozambique on 7 April, the day of Machel's death. Josina Machel was an activist, freedom fighter and leading figure in the Women's Branch of the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO). She was the wife of Samora Machel, first president of independent Mozambique. The Albertina Sisulu (affectionately known as Ma Sisulu) skirt panel was launched to commemorate the anti-apartheid activist and late wife of Walter Sisulu, activist and former Secretary-General and Deputy President of the ANC.

<sup>310</sup> My home display of the Machel cloth illustrates an outsider's appropriation and diversion of this functional design for aesthetic purposes. The fabric is mounted in an ornate frame and hangs in the lounge I share with my housemates. Here I can see the cloth whenever I look up from my desk. The object is a reminder of Machel's fortitude and her dedication to the liberation of others, as signified by the red and blue emblem of the Organisation of Mozambican Women (OMM).



Fig. 6.38. Da Gama textiles, *Limited edition Albertina Sisulu commemorative skirt panel*. Fabric designed by Lizo Somhlahlo and dress by Nokxolo Dyobiso, 2012.  
(Da Gama Textiles launches limited-edition Albertina Sisulu Shweshwe design 2012).

To memorialise using irony, defined by Hutcheon as rhetorical strategy with a victim or target, seems contradictory and itself ironic. What or who is the target in/of the *Maidonna* design? If the ironist is taken in good faith, the appropriative aim of his irony is a critique of racial capitalism and inequality. Though the Weirs are part of this system, they attempt a critique from within, using its language, symbols and tropes (Hutcheon 1994:17). Depending on the interpreter, the irony's target or victim might become the “product of that *system* [...] negatively ironised” (italics in original, Hutcheon 1994:17). Irony's trans-ideological duality makes either or both possible, while the ironist's intentions are impossible to pin down. Apart from vintage illustrations connoting Victorian consumerism, the *Maidonna* offers no signifiers or ironic wordplay pointing to the *system* of racial capitalism. The appropriated elements focus attention on the outcomes of racial capitalism and the subject appropriated: black domestic workers or ‘maids’, and tragically, Priscilla. If readings of this design result in ‘*Maidonna*’ rather than ‘madam’ being ironised, the Weirs’ purpose of honouring Priscilla is defeated as it perpetuates the exploitation and humiliation of black domestic workers.

### ***Slave to Fashion* and the 2014 Design Indaba**

Maid in Africa was similarly accused of perpetuating rather than critiquing the exploitation of black slaves and their descendants with the infamous ‘slave board’. This came as a surprise to the company, as Maid in Africa’s designs were popular with consumers and received several awards prior to the 2014 debate. I give a brief chronological exposition of the platforms where *Slave to Fashion* was exhibited and consumed. This elucidates links between affective responses and the symbolic and economic capital of different discursive communities. I situate this reading of the design and ensuing debate against the backdrop of global capitalist development, transatlantic slavery and the production of racial blackness.

In 2006 Maid in Africa started trading at the Namibian Craft Centre in Katatura, a township near Windhoek<sup>311</sup>. Consumers at the Centre predominantly comprise international tourists (Our supporters 2018). Until today, the products have been sold by Maid in Africa employees, which allows for personal interaction between consumers and producers of the goods. The Craft Centre promotes Maid in Africa for the “distinctly modern and rural African narrative of its goods” (Maid in Africa 2018). It also lauds Maid in Africa’s critical edge as suited to contemporary tastes:

For the contemporary, urbanised, Afriopolitan (African cosmopolitan), there is no better selection of African ‘pop art’ products, and its ability to merrily hold up a mirror mocking society, in the sound tradition of Warhol’s ‘pop art’ (Maid in Africa 2018).

Consumers are presumably informed of the motivation for Maid in Africa’s designs, either from the explanatory sales tags or interaction with the vendors. Whether foreign consumers are familiar with the complexities of the “society” merrily mocked in the Afro-pop designs is unclear. Furthermore, it is doubtful that many would recognise ‘maid’ as an historically burdened term that many Africans consider derogatory.

A different audience viewed the company’s products when it was showcased at the 2010 Cape Craft and Design Institute’s (CCDI) Hand Made Exhibition, coinciding with the seventh Design Indaba Exposition<sup>312</sup>. CCDI creative director Erica Elk (2010:3) describes the exhibition as a “showcase of innovation and creativity” and “a curated gathering of some of the brightest and best craft products and designer ware from the province”. One can presume that spectators were mostly South African design enthusiasts with an appreciation of the arts. Maid in Africa exhibited *Head Gear (Get Rich)* and *Slave to fashion*. Both are featured in the exhibition catalogue, accompanied by a blurb about the brand’s genesis (Fig. 6.34). Shown at an exhibition of hand-

<sup>311</sup> According to Maid in Africa’s website: “We trade from a small shop in Swakopmund and from the Namibian Craft Centre, where Martha Uusiku is now managing Maid in Africa” (About us 2015).

<sup>312</sup> Over the course of 2010 works shown at the CCDI exhibition travelled to venues and exhibitions across the country. From 2010 to 2014 Maid in Africa exhibited annually at the Design Indaba Expo.

produced, (mostly) functional art, *Slave to fashion* was intended as a conceptual piece critiquing contemporary forms of slavery – the capitalist exploitation of workers and the ‘enslavement’ of consumers<sup>313</sup>. The object comprises a silkscreen reproduction of the historical Brooks print, screen-printed onto cotton ironing-board covers. The printing technique and resizing of the historical print results in the abstraction of the tiny figures, producing a pattern resembling Malian mud-cloth (*bogolan*). The tiny figures are therefore only revealed as human shapes on closer inspection. The catalogue caption informs readers that:

About 15 million African people displaced during the slave trade left a permanent imprint on the continent’s fabric. Transported on ships such as these, many never reached their destination. This item brings the fact a little closer to home (*Handmade Cape* 2010:13).

The title *Slave to Fashion* plays on the idiom for a person unduly concerned with conforming to the latest fashions and styles, often over-spending on inessential items. The signifier ‘slave’ connotes both the consumer as fashion-slave and the humans exploited (enslaved) to produce and supply the fashion industry. The familiar symbol of slavery (the *Brooks*) serves to indicate correspondence between historical chattel slavery and human exploitation in contemporary consumer economies. Taken in good faith, the designer ostensibly aims to ‘bring the war home’ by applying critical design principles to an item commonly kept in the home. It endeavours to highlight the otherwise denied and obscured relations between commodities and relations of production and the causality between design, fashion, capitalism and slavery. Viewed in the semantic context of the CCDI exhibition and among works of art and design, the singular and isolated object was presumably read as ‘conceptual design’ rather than utilitarian object produced for profit.

From 2010 to 2013 the company exhibited at Design Indaba’s curated Exposition. There was never public objection to the brand or its designs. In 2014 Design Indaba featured Maid in Africa on its webpage as a design studio that “celebrates free enterprise and free-range chicken with their Shak prints, and depicts Cape Town’s slave-trade with their Slave to Fashion range [sic]” (no author 2015). The cheerful register of the text captures the general spirit of the annual Exposition (now discontinued) and makes no allusion to the critical motive underscoring Slave to Fashion. Vociferous criticism of Maid in Africa only emerged after photographs of their stall and of Micha Weir wearing a *Slave to fashion* dress were shared on Facebook on the first day of the Exposition (Fig. 6.39)<sup>314</sup>. The post that sparked the debate was shared across social media by eminent South African artist Athi-Patra Ruga (2014), and simply read, “Design Indaba stall...Discuss...Plz”<sup>315</sup>.

<sup>313</sup> Features on the company’s website – now removed – advertised other home and fashion accessories in the same design.

<sup>314</sup> The 2014 exposition took place between 28 February and 2 March at the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CCITC), Cape Town city centre.

<sup>315</sup> My first Facebook comment was made in response to Ruga’s post of Maid in Africa’s designs. On 28 February I wrote.

“Why don’t you just go and make *kak* (shitty) accessories from your own people’s history of suffering? Oh yeah, as whites our people have been dishing that out, so we can actually romanticise and commoditise the enslavement, rape, murder of others. *Goeie fok – is*



Fig. 6.39. Athi-Patra Ruga, *Design Indaba stall...Discuss...Plz*, 2014. Facebook post and photograph by Athi-Patra Ruga.  
(Ruga 2014).

Ruga is a young black artist with a big local and international social media following, and his post broadcast the designs to wider and more diverse public and discursive communities than generally those visiting the showcase. Promotional images of *Maidonna* and *Slave to Fashion* (Fig. 6.40), taken from Maid in Africa's webpage, were soon shared by Facebook users, and many based their responses on these rather than the

*jy te dom om skaam te kry? (For fuck's sake – are you too stupid to be ashamed?)*" (Conradie 2014). Two days later, after visiting the exposition, I posted the following on Facebook: "In a conversation with the owner/designer of this company at the Indaba today, he explained to me that he aims to 'raise awareness' and start conversation/discussion through his work, and that (as I understood it), the 'slave to fashion' pieces are to remind/inform about the continuing exploitation and enslavement of people (sweatshops etc) by the fashion industry. He also sees the ironing board (slave to fashion) as an artwork, or statement piece). The 'maid' in the images printed on fabric (to create accessories such as 'Maidonna' pillow covers) is their former domestic worker, now deceased. "You're taking it too far", was the response to my objections and outrage at the myriad ethical issues raised by the continued use of her face to make profit, the production of accessories and fashion from the slaveship image (and its layers of WTF) [sic] (Conradie, 2014).

actual objects<sup>316</sup>. The Facebook post moved the discussion from the access-controlled exposition to social media, a platform of immediate interaction and global accessibility. The ideological paradigm of the fair as institutional and social space and the dominant tastes and habitus of its regular attendees were radically challenged by objectors who questioned the institutional failure to veto *Slave to Fashion* on moral grounds.

In a Facebook response to their critics, the company (Maid in Africa 2014) noted:

The brand concept and Maidonna ironing board received the Namibian Advertising Awards Grand Prix in 2006 and in 2007 and got a South African Loerie Awards 2007 Finalist recognition. That's why it is such a surprise to us why suddenly – 8 years later – the judgement of international and local design figureheads seems so controversial [sic].

Between 2006 and 2014 no-one among these “design figureheads”, neither the curators of the consecutive Design Indaba expositions, nor other exhibitors and consumers at the expositions, nor the brand’s vendors or its online distributors expressed public criticism of this design. This points to a significant disjunction between these cultural intermediaries and consumers, and the objectors participating in the 2014 debate. Where meaning is made possible within existing discursive or interpretive communities, or those inhabiting overlapping discursive communities, the lack of overlap and resultant disagreement over meaning point to differences in the shared cultural capital, habitus and (naturalised) tastes of the different camps<sup>317</sup>.

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<sup>316</sup> It is important to note the nature of the debate about the designs: it occurred on social media, with most respondents not seeing the designs or products in person, and only in the context of online debate. Most respondents never personally engaged with the designers and were unaware of their intentions and the origins of these designs, about which the designers consequently issued firm and detailed online statements. A significant number of black respondents from the USA and Britain participated, their responses to Weir’s use of the Brooks print informed by transatlantic slavery history, thus responding from a different reference and relationship to slavery than prevalent in South Africa. These factors impact in significant ways on meanings attributed to the products. It is outside the scope of this study to deal with these points.

<sup>317</sup> Here I use the terms group and camp for brevity. I am not suggesting clear delineation of in- and out-groups, between fans and critics of Maid in Africa, or that people had firm and unchanging opinions, or that all who did not openly critique the brand prior to 2014 condoned it. Numerous critics of the brand belong to the country’s arts and design communities and would have visited the expositions where Maid in Africa exhibited. They may not have seen the products and/or felt it unnecessary to comment on public platform, but added their voices to the debate in 2014.



Fig. 6.40. Maid in Africa, *Slave to Fashion*, 2014. Promotional image.  
(Remove 'Slave to Fashion' 2014).

The affectively-charged response of critics emerged from the semantic and syntactic dimensions of Maid in Africa's products within the Exposition, as situated within the social, historical and cultural space of Cape Town. The Exposition is a dynamic social space where dispositions are expressed and reproduced, belonging is confirmed, and identities negotiated contiguously. Through collective experiences of consumption an imaginary community or sense of solidarity emerges among décor enthusiasts, its identity bound up with aesthetic dispositions engendered by the structures and economic bases of local social formations (Bourdieu 1995:8, Appadurai 1996:8).

Although interpretive communities are never strictly defined by race, class, gender or language, and every person belongs to several of the overlapping communities, race powerfully informs the cultural and economic capital of South Africa's various interpretive communities. Within South Africa and Cape Town's historical context, the link between cultural and economic capital is intertwined with race, consumption and consumer space. Not accessible to black South Africans under apartheid, the retail spaces and commodities where fine art and design are consumed remain spaces predominantly frequented by white, middle-class consumers. This pertains particularly to Cape Town, where neighbourhoods still reflect the racial and ethnic segregation of

apartheid<sup>318</sup>. The admission fee further limits access to those able or prepared to spend R80 to R100 to visit a design exposition.

Critics' responses highlighted the overlap of history, race, class and habitus that make the Design Indaba Exposition a white hegemonic space. Francesco Nassimbeni (2014) declared, "By white people, for white people! [...] It's the same vibe every year. The Great Caucasian Caucus". Mbembe (2017:45) speaks of whiteness as habitus, its superiority cultivated, nourished, reproduced and culturally, politically and theologically disseminated as natural and inevitable. In doxic mode, white habitus takes for granted its predispositions and institutions as an objectivity, one that is actually achieved only through "misrecognition of the limits of cognition" (Bourdieu 1995: 163)<sup>319</sup>. Whiteness is transformed into common sense, a belief that involves a form of desire and fascination that assumes autonomous, internalised power (Mbembe 2017:45). This occurs despite, or perhaps due to, observable conditions and contrasting perspectives that continually challenge white habitus. In the South African postcolony, white habitus remains foundational to hegemonic taste and liberal humanist principles, and hence the shocked disbelief that is expressed when well-meaning appropriations receive vehement critique.

Developed within colonialism and through racial capitalism, the habitus and fantasy of bourgeois imperial whiteness are entwined with contemporary postcolonial subjects' notions of (luxury) domesticity, status and comfort. Domestic design and consumption histories reveal direct links between the brands, products and raw materials central to modern and contemporary design and décor industries, and the histories of capitalism, slavery and colonialism. As seen in Chapter four, imperialism further coincided with numerous décor trends deriving from contact and consequent appropriation of foreign cultures. The commodification of black bodies as property, labour resource and aesthetic object is foundational to the industries and economies which established, maintained and beautified bourgeois domestic space. The "fantasy of Whiteness involves a constellation of objects of desire and public signs of privilege that relate to body and image, language and wealth", writes Mbembe (2017:45). This endures in colonial chic décor or nostalgic attachment to brands such as Aunt Jemima. It emerges when designers use historical images of black servitude to signify (white) status, or in decoration doubling as critique of racial exploitation.

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<sup>318</sup> Cape Town is also the capital of the only province controlled by the Democratic Alliance. This historically white opposition party has in recent years tried to diversify its constituency and change its image to that of a black majority party. Its government of the city and province has, however, arguably revealed that it remains ideologically wedded to white hegemony and neoliberal principles.

<sup>319</sup> For Bourdieu (1984:566), misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) "combines subjective non-recognition (blindness) with objective recognition (*legitimation*)".

## The Brooks

The controversy about *Slave to Fashion* revealed that the design's affective charge emerged from the historical origins of the archival material and its symbolic value for different respondents. The appropriated engraving was originally published in December 1788 by the Plymouth Chapter of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade. It was created to document the stowage of slaves aboard the Brooks, a typical British slave ship<sup>320</sup>. The Brooks broadside (hereafter *The Brooks*) is considered an international symbol of slavery, and more specifically, of modern and transatlantic slavery (Fig. 6.41). It is a reminder of suffering and strength, oppression and overcoming for millions who descend from slaves and/or who suffer slavery's continuing legacy<sup>321</sup>.

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<sup>320</sup> The Brooks broadside resulted from a government enquiry into the slave trade. The schematic representation was compiled from data collected by Captain Parrey of the Royal Navy and the original image was drawn by William Elford. Used extensively for the abolitionist cause, it was redrawn and republished numerous times, different versions of it were printed and thousands distributed in the UK, Europe and the USA.

<sup>321</sup> Diaspora black Africans who participated in the debate probably have different relationships to the *Brooks* and slave trade, to black South Africans whose legacies include slavery, indentured labour of various kinds under colonialism, apartheid oppression, and its aftermath. Slavery in South Africa differed from that in the Americas, particularly as it did not centre on plantation economies.

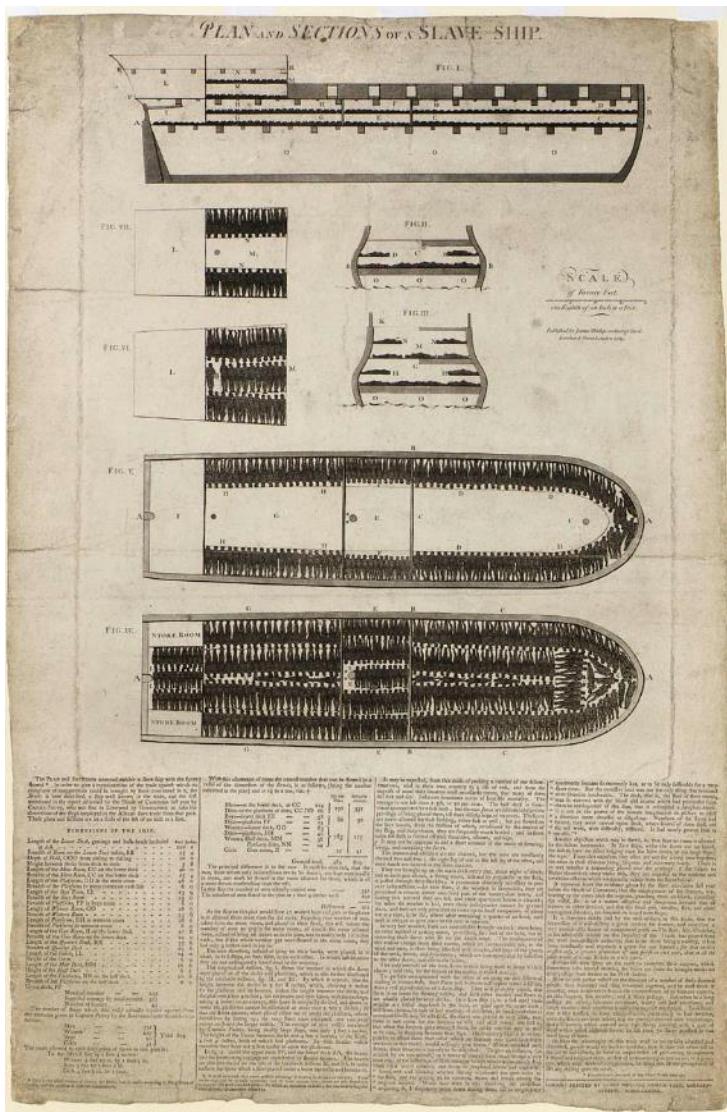


Fig. 6.41. James Phillips, *Plan and sections of a slave ship*, 1789. Printed on paper, 70.6 x 46.7cm. Michael Graham-Stewart Slavery Collection, National Maritime Museum, London.  
(Plan and sections of a slave ship [s.a.]).

Ri'aad Dollie (2014), writing as “the descendant of slaves and political prisoners, lumpens, workers, maids, landowners and merchants[sic]”, backed the Weir’s critique as apposite to its context and target. He argued that:

The ironing board makes us question slavery, and representations of the history and heritage of slavery, in the here and now. And yes, for the middle-class maid-employed majority, yep guilty as charged, of the Indaba’s audience, your relationship with slavery!

In response to online critics, Maid in Africa (2014) wrote,

Transferring a historical print [...] onto a modern, every-day utility item – the ironing board – makes a clear statement against denial. It makes us question slavery in the here and now. It is a statement against any attempt to white-wash a society, where the poor still slave for the rich.

Most respondents did not appreciate the use of a commodity to critique the reification of humans as property and commodities. They denounced it as racist, exploitative and insulting to the memory and descendants of black slaves. Critics such as Naomi Marshak (2014) emphasised the link between historical and contemporary exploitation: “Not only is it a commodification of atrocity but it condones the contemporary perpetuation of inequality.” Stephanie McCarthy (2014) wrote: “This is not art, but a further commodification of the victims – and their descendants – of one of the most vile crimes against humanity.” Leah Celestin (2014) urged on the Weirs:

Be part of a cause [...] but don't dare insult our intelligence with a thin veiled excuse [...]. You and your company are no different than the slavers than stole my ancestors from Africa and sold them at the auction block.

The comments of Marshak, McCarthy and Celestin highlight the ongoing racial oppression and socio-economic marginalisation experienced by descendants of slaves. These comments further point to their intimate affiliation to that connoted by the print: the traumatic history of slavery as crime, African ancestors and their descendants, anti-black racism and its daily realities as experienced by black respondents. As the work demands an aesthetic disinterestedness or ironic distance between its object and ideal addressees, it presupposes a shared “regime of looking” (Enwezor 1997: 34). It does not consider relationships to the image that emerge from conditions of existence different to that of the designer and ironist. To deal with harrowing historical events such as imperialism, racism or slavery by means of irony is an “inappropriate luxury/ those who still suffer its legacy can ill afford or enjoy” writes Hutcheon (1994:192). Turning black history into raw material for décor which simultaneously doubles as socio-political critique, it disregards the ethical implications and affective repercussions of the design for contemporary people of colour.

This was emphasised by Sharon Kinney (2014), who invoked the Jewish holocaust to stress the traumatic impact of the ironic and commercial re-purposing of this fraught symbol. Like respondents to *Exhibit B*, she highlights a difference in the attribution of grievability to black and Jewish lives:

Why don't you create a T-shirt of a pile of skeletal remains from the holocaust and see how the Jewish community responds. I believe it is inappropriate for you to use the most horrific traumatic period in African history, from which my people are still suffering and struggling from and trivialise it by putting a salve ship on an ironing board [sic] (Kinney 2014).

For most, the concept and humanitarian agenda behind *Slave to Fashion* was clearly over-ruled by the ironic use of a powerful icon of subjugation. In framing the work, the ironist was perhaps overly reliant on an ideal addressee to produce a reading apposite to his own (Hutcheon 1994:193). To ‘get’ the ironist’s intended message, his use of the *Brooks* broadside demands that viewers detach themselves from the pain represented or evoked by the work (Hutcheon 1994:193). That this is an unreasonable and injurious request to those still suffering slavery’s legacy was highlighted by respondent Anita Andrade (2014), quoted at the start of this section. The board’s affective impact was exacerbated by the understanding that *The Brooks* was used for commodity production. Furthermore, many respondents were incensed and pained by the perception that the ironing is board mass-produced by a sizeable company - a perception bolstered on social media and online critiques <sup>-322</sup>.

The use of depictions of slaves on commodities was a common strategy of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionists. After its publication in 1788 *The Brooks* was bought and displayed as framed prints in the homes of nineteenth-century consumers (Walker & Ware 1999:66). Unlike the ‘slaving board’, it was the product of a recognised activist organisation’s efforts, an object of socio-political rather than fashionable significance. It also communicated without ironic inflection.

A prime example of humanitarian effort turned fashionable commodity is the Wedgwood medallion or cameo (Fig. 6.42)<sup>323</sup>. Launched in 1789 the medallion depicted a supplicant male slave, with the inscription “Am I not a brother and a man?”. The medallion could be bought as cameo, set in hairpins, bracelets or snuffboxes; it was printed on soup tureens and transformed into embroidery projects. It soon became a fashionable accessory, merging personal style and philanthropy as the vogueish commodity communicated the cause of justice, freedom and humanity (Guyatt 2000:97).

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<sup>322</sup> Many respondents only saw pictures and banners of the design, reposted by commentators and thus divorced from the Exposition and manufacturing context. This promoted the misconception that Maid in Africa was a large-scale producer rather than a small company making modest profits.

<sup>323</sup> Josiah Wedgwood was an eighteenth-century English pottery designer and entrepreneur who is credited with the industrialisation of pottery manufacture. He is also credited with coining the ‘Am I not a man and a brother?’ motto that appears on the cameo.



Fig. 6.42. Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, *Anti-slavery medallion*, c.1787. Ceramic, metal and refined stoneware. Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington D.C. (Anti-slavery medallion [s.a.])

By the end of the eighteenth century, abolitionism was a popular, though divisive cause, and abolitionist objects communicated their owners' politically-mindedness, and their stance on abolitionism (Guyatt 2000:96). The public and domestic display of decorative abolitionist propaganda made a significant contribution to the anti-slavery cause, as it made tangible and visible the abuses of slavery. Abolitionist accessories further politicised the home and proclaimed the feminine interior as a legitimate place for political action. Espousal of the anti-slavery cause was often contingent on personal and socio-economic interest. Davis argues that "anti-slavery was an extension of the noble philanthropic tradition [and] the new ideal of individual responsibility appealed particularly to the merchant elite" (cited in Guyatt 2000:101). The British abolition movement is also critiqued as a "convenient 'emblem of national virtue'", smoothing over British guilt and complicity in the slave trade (Guyatt 2000:100).

Abolitionist depictions of slaves were fraught with contradictions that undercut the core message. The Wedgwood medallion pronounced the African slave 'brother and man', but this brother was geographically and culturally distant<sup>324</sup>. His anatomy resembles classical sculpture and his features are stereotypically African. This image resembles Enlightenment depictions of the noble-savage, and the semi-naked slave is consequently rendered as trope rather than a person. This 'man' is also non-threatening, patiently supplicant before the white liberator, and seemingly powerless to alter his own destiny. For Zoe Trodd (2013:340), "[t]he image

<sup>324</sup> The figure of the supplicant slave was drafted by sculptor Henry Webber, and the design was modelled by William Hackwood (Guyatt 2000:96).

invites not solidarity with the enslaved but paternalistic association with the morally righteous abolitionists who will answer the helpless captive's question by releasing his chains". The implied hierarchy reveals the exclusivity of Western liberal humanism and its seizing of the right to bestow or withhold humanity and freedom.

In contemporary anti-slavery campaigns featuring *The Brooks*, the supplicant slave or photographs of slaves disfigured by torture, are frequently appropriated, replicated and imitated. In a review of British and American examples, Trodd (2013:339) finds that "contemporary artists and activists often repeat the same mistakes as their abolitionist forbears". Over the past decade, writes Trodd (2013:339), such adaptations have frequently

reinforced the paternalism, dehumanisation, depersonalisation and sensationalism that marked the visual culture of the first abolitionist movement. With some exceptions, this is a visual culture that heroises the abolitionist liberator, minimises slave agency, pornifies violence and indulges in voyeurism.

In appropriating abolitionist imagery for activist causes, the burdens, contradictions and histories of the original, are rarely discarded. Contemporary commodification of abolitionist images finds parallels in eighteenth-century philanthropists who profited from capitalist exploitation while denouncing it. For example, though the medallion did not directly earn Wedgwood profits, the popular cameo did internationally promote his brand as philanthropist (Guyatt 2000:97)<sup>325</sup>. The liberal humanist discourse and activist rhetoric found in Maid in Africa's promotional material corresponds to older philanthropists' commodification of enslaved black bodies. "The issue with this so-called philanthropy is the consumption of the black body. It's an act of necrophilia", writes Simmi Dullay (2014)<sup>326</sup>. The entrepreneur-cum-philanthropist's appropriation of the subjugated black body is deemed a pathological symptom of whiteness. This perspective corresponds to critiques of *Exhibit B*, which declared Bailey's production an expression of white power's perverse fascination with black trauma (see chapter 3.3).

### Semantic contexts of interpretation

The context and manner in which the 'slaving board' was exhibited contributed to its interpretation as a utilitarian commodity object, rather than as a singular object produced for aesthetic and conceptual purposes (Fig. 6.43). In the Weirs' booth at the Design Indaba Exposition, one 'slaving board' was exhibited with its sales tag prominently displayed. I encountered and interpreted the board in the syntactic context of the booth and

<sup>325</sup> Wedgwood carried the cost of producing and distributing the medallion. Minutes of the committee for the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade reveal no evidence that the medallion earned Wedgwood any profit (Guyatt 2000:97).

<sup>326</sup> An issue that did not arise in the online debate is the posthumous 'outing' of Priscilla's HIV-status by her employers and its featuring in promotional material. Making public an employee's HIV-status without her written consent constitutes a major transgression of South African common law and the Constitution of South Africa.

among commodities that irreverently ironise issues of race, history and ethnicity through punning bricolage. This reinforced my conclusion that *Slave to fashion* was intended as just another amusing consumer curiosity. To me *The Brooks* is a global symbol of slavery, and index of the specific history of capture, forced migration and enslavement of Africans. Its commodification filled me with disbelief and outrage. My discussion with Andrew Weir at the exposition turned into a heated debate, as I found the ironic commemoration-cum-critique utterly unethical and injurious to the memory and descendants of slaves.



Fig. 6.43. Maid in Africa's exposition stall with 'slaving board' mounted on the wall, 2014. Design Indaba Exposition, Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town.  
(Photograph by author).

The use of irony and extended metaphor found in the sales tag and promotional images only caused further confusion and indignation. Unlike the work's description in the CCDI catalogue, in these the text ends with the line: "Here is a fitting little reminder" (Fig. 6.44). Instead of amplifying the design's purpose of

conscientising consumers, the use of the diminutive and punning wordplay (the cover ‘fits’ over the ironing board) diminishes the significance of the subjects commemorated and the issues critiqued. Printed directly beneath the image of the *Brooks*’ lower deck (“ships like these”) the text reads as an anchoring caption, suggesting the subject of commemoration to be transatlantic slavery. The idiom “SLAVE TO FASHION” runs down the image of the *Brooks*’ upper deck, and its juxtaposition with the image links fashion consumption to human bondage.



Fig. 6.44. Label/sales tag of *Slave to Fashion* ironing board cover, 2014. Design Indaba Exposition, Cape Town International Convention Centre, Cape Town.  
(Photograph by author).

Differences about the object’s meaning also reveal different understandings of *The Brooks* as signifier. Some respondents regarded the image as symbol of slavery as a broad concept, rather than a crime against humanity with lasting repercussions. This perspective did not consider that the signifier functioned as an index of histories embodied by contemporary Africans. For many the reproduction on cotton connoted an historical ship, slave ships and/or slavery, rather than *The Brooks* broadside. Irrespective of its relative distortion, the

black ciphers arranged in rows and patterns were identified as unequivocally representing the bodies of African slaves, for many the ancestors of contemporary black people. Although a slave ship called Brooks existed, the image named thereafter is not a literal copy of the vessel. It is instead an aggregate of measurements collected from nine slave ships, of which the Brooks was one (Webster 2009:320). This “hypothetical projection”, writes Marcus (cited in Webster 2009:318), is an “idealised rendering of an imagined slaving voyage”. The schematic depiction of four hundred and eighty-two figures packed into the ship was meant to induce shock and empathy, and thus spur audiences into action. The ‘Brooks’ immortalised in the print is therefore a simulacrum that has superseded the real to create a ship where there was none. This simulacrum is constantly re-activated and authenticated in its deployment as a global symbol of slavery, including contexts where the local slave trade did not resemble the transatlantic trade denoted in the abolitionist document.

Viewer interpretation of the print reflected in, and was informed by, the object’s materiality and its imagined use within the home. According to Königk (2015:56), interior design exists within a spatial context which “is not read, but inhabited and its connotations are contained in a broad ‘horizon of meaning’” where messages and interpretations are generated and reiterated in unpredictable ways. Although viewers encountered Maid in Africa’s products on social media or in the retail spectacle of the Exposition, responses reveal people imagining domestic settings, how goods might be used and by whom. As many critics pointed out, in well-to-do South African homes the labour of ironing is often performed by black women. The ‘slave board’ tag includes the company logo and by-line “Hand wash in cold water (or ask the maid)”. This creates a link between the ‘slave board’ and the ‘maid’ of Maid in Africa. Imagining the domestic display and use of *Slave to Fashion* and *Maidonna* highlighted the connection between the historical and contemporary exploitation of black labour in white homes. As William Ndatila (2014) writes, “How thoughtful ... it's a beautiful thing to think that your maid will be ironing your slave print dress while gazing at a ship full of her ancestors”. While perceived by some as perpetuating historical exploitation, Ndahepuluka Sarasungu Mbathera (2014) found the disturbing equivalence between slavery and domestic work to be a powerful critical device:

The picture in the ironing board translated to the current slaves many have in their houses. We pay those Ironing ladies peanuts and auction them off to our friends and neighbours as we please. How different are they from the slaves on the board? We hate the truth [sic].

Slave ships were central to the making of both capitalism and racial blackness. Transporting humans, raw materials and consumer products across the Atlantic, such ships were vital to the boom of the globalised system of finance capitalism. The Africans captured and transported were of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds, but aboard and across the Atlantic they became black or ‘negro’ and sold as property. As such, the history of capitalism and the ‘extraction’ of Africans from the continent can be linked to the production of

blackness as race and, according to Mbembe (2017:40,179), of ‘the black’ as “human-merchandise, human-metal, human-money”<sup>327</sup>. Within this economy, black servants were commodities highly prized and easily discarded, both hyper-visible and invisible, shut out and celebrated. This exemplifies what Mbembe (2004:380, 381) terms a “calculus of superfluity”, where black life is both highly prized and “necessary sacrifice”. As pointed out in Chapter four, superfluity remains a reality for many workers, particularly for women of colour. “Racism is an economy that serve to devalue people to the extent that they are easy fodder for the capitalist/patriarchal system[sic]”, Ruga (2014) reminded participants in the debate.

At the height of the debate, the Weirs (Maid in Africa 2014) posted on Facebook,

We believe art and design is not about pretty, decorative pictures and mindless drivel. It should be thought-provoking, make-you-think and initiate human debate. We just opened the debate [sic].

The debate opened by Maid in Africa resulted from an unanticipated critique of the brand, and focused consumers’ attention on the designer and products, rather than on the contemporary corporations and consumption practices it ostensibly targeted. In the action of respondents such as Ruga, postcolonial subjects across the Atlantic stepped into a relationship of affiliative ownership to the historical abolitionist print. Via interpretation and performative responses on social media and at the Design Indaba Exposition, *The Brooks* was claimed as ‘of their own’. In the debate about *Maidonna*, the image of Priscilla was activated as an icon of black domestic workers. This occurred through re-appropriation of Weir’s design. Citing their historical or familial affiliation to black domestic workers, respondents claimed the manipulated portrait as a symbol of the exploitation of black women. A design intended as celebratory and commemorative was thus politicised and claimed as a vehicle for contesting the white habitus of the South African design industry.

Critical ironic appropriations of colonial stereotypes and racial imagery have precedence in anti-colonial, feminist and queer art. However, Weir’s irony undercuts his critical goals when interpreters experienced black Africans, rather than the socio-economic systems exploiting them, to be the ironist’s target. In addition, the company’s spirit of multicultural post-racialism failed to anticipate audiences who experience repurposed colonial stereotypes and racist consumer culture as humiliating and injurious. This was exacerbated by the commercial nature of the endeavour and the fact that profits went to white cultural outsiders who, historically, are beneficiaries, rather than victims, of racial capitalism. Thus, when produced from a position of intimate relation to hegemony, ironic pastiche may signify complicity and endorsement rather than oppositionality, irrespective of its creator’s intentions. Although opposing the historical exploitation of black Africans, the jocular deployment of stable notions of blackness does not subvert the historical production of racial blackness

<sup>327</sup> Ian Baucom (2005:61) argues that slaves aboard slave vessels were not only valued as commodities, but also as objects of insurance, “a type of interest-bearing money”.

as face value. In *Maidonna*, racial distinction is further inflected with hierarchies of race, gender and class that have shifted very little since the end of apartheid. In this sense the Weirs did not realise their critical design goals. They did, however, achieve some of their goals. For over a decade Maid in Africa has given employment and training to black Africans trying to make ends meet in struggling postcolonial economies. Several people were empowered through creative collaboration with the Weirs, be it through skills and knowledge gained, or wages earned. The Weirs' efforts have lessened the precarity of women vulnerable to sexist and racist discrimination. These facts were mostly ignored by critics. For most, it seems, moral and ethical concerns outweighed the material benefits of Maid in Africa's enterprise. I concede, therefore, that my own spontaneous outrage overlooked the potential gains and agency of those I thought I was defending. It is possible that this kind of blanket rejection of the brand also enacts epistemic violence and the further silencing of those represented.

## 6.6 Conclusion

As with colonial chic, one can offer various readings of retro, Afro-chic products or of designs that invoke black histories for critical and commemorative purposes. Neither my readings, nor the readings and intentions of consumers or designers are necessarily conclusive. Relationships to décor items change over time, not least as fashion cycles and commodity chains always demand new collections and cultural intermediaries to pronounce the (un)desirability of existing or older designs<sup>328</sup>. Motivations for appropriating and/or displaying loaded signifiers may shift over time and are open to speculation; they may reveal aspirations to subvert, play with or share in existing power structures (Rovine 2015:192). For South African designers seeking to create a design idiom in line with a democratic dispensation, the country's archives and vernacular expressions were utilised in the spirit of formal and conceptual exploration. Various commercial designers used historical images to create products that tell stories, critique or commemorate, while making a fashion statement.

In this chapter I have explored the potential of such fashionable commodification to achieve these goals without reproducing historical relations of exploitation. The answers may, I believe, be found in the unique and shifting relationships that consumers develop with the material objects that feature these images. While the polysemic nature of fashionable commodities disables efforts at definitive interpretations, it promotes object-personalisation by consumers. As I have shown, recycling, circulation and decoding of historical iconography and styles occur in different contexts and from different perspectives, and while individual designers may use historical material in socially or politically conscious ways, consumers will ultimately

<sup>328</sup> The popularity of Design Team's *Novelty* is a case in point: promoted on trend-setting platforms from about 2000, listed and available for sale on Design Team's website in 2013 when I first gathered images of their collections. By 2016 the collection had been discontinued and was removed from the website.

"negotiate a range of existential needs and fantasy meanings" in consuming, using and displaying products (Lewis 2012:81).

I have asked whether the appropriation of political icons and historical symbols can politicise fashion and the home, or whether their former charge is inevitably domesticated. In contemplating the fashionability of abolitionist objects, Lynne Walker and Vron Ware (1999:70) ask whether images such as *The Brooks* or the supplicant slave were sanitised and depoliticised once displayed in Victorian homes, or whether domestic spaces were "self-consciously politicised by the introduction of propaganda?" The authors conclude that both occurred, in that abolitionist images were sentimentalised and domesticated while simultaneously made "knowable, and their presence was capable of signifying powerfully subversive messages" (Walker & Ware 1999:70). While symbols of apartheid struggle or slavery may be translated into fashionable accessories, the political and ideological connotations of the symbols are seldom wholly subsumed. Particularly so when such products are displayed in contexts where the legacy of these histories continues to adversely affect the daily lives of the majority, and also where they are not intended as target audiences.

## Chapter seven: conclusion

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903:3) asks: "Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?" His question is a lament for erstwhile enslaved people whose lives, bodies and rich cultures are simultaneously denounced and appropriated by white America, while blacks remain dispossessed in the only home they know. A century later Du Bois's lament remains apposite, as, tragically, the full liberty of formerly colonised people remains unrealised, while aspects of their culture are appropriated for commodification.

I have situated my study of post-apartheid cultural appropriation within these global debates about mainstream and/or white appropriation of indigenous people's cultural property or heritage. My approach grounded these debates within ongoing decolonial struggles and within the field of cultural appropriation I arrived at suggesting a black existentialist approach to subject appropriation. Questions of freedom were foregrounded in my analysis of décor and fabric designs that feature historical images of Africans. I argued for 'bringing the war home' to scholarship of interior and fabric design, focusing my analysis on the contemporary trends of colonial chic, retro and Afro-chic. Popular debates about cultural appropriation frequently presume stable notions of culture, identity authenticity, insiders and outsiders, while critical cultural studies tends to view these terms as contextually produced. By contrast, in this dissertation I have attempted to balance a critique of essentialism with a nuanced understanding of the vital importance of strategic essentialism.

In the second chapter I investigated ways in which formerly colonised people may claim custodianship of colonial images of which they are neither the owners nor creators. Following Scafidi, I proposed that individuals or groups may assert custodianship by claiming such representations as 'accidental cultural property' or 'of their own'. The re-appropriation of archival representations may further contribute to a "project of making people and their ideas at home in the world as a fundamental demand of freedom" (Gordon 2012:102-104).

To address questions about the legitimacy of such claims, I suggested that indicators be viewed as arising from two intersecting states: similar or shared experiences of oppression, and the intimacy of groups that are also communities of practice. Significant to this argument is that "communities of practice are practitioners" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2015:2) who participate in and contribute to cultural heritage as a domain of shared interest. I argued that 'accidental cultural property', such as images of colonised and enslaved people, can constitute domains of shared interest and practice. An example is the significance of *The Brooks* to descendants of slaves. More than merely an interest in slavery or African slaves, it is an ongoing commemoration of the persons and their histories which constitutes membership, and authenticates the communities affiliated to those signified by the image. Their membership and claims arise from the experience

of being people of colour in hegemonically white societies. The continuing precarity of black lives in various postcolonial worlds informs and compels care about this legacy, its symbols and the ties that bind the African slaves of historical record and collective memory to the living. The contestation of cultural appropriation – whether expressed in blogs or in court – thus emerges as a practice of vital political, material and spiritual importance. Contestation becomes “political praxis” (Ziff & Rao 1997:11).

My analysis of post-apartheid debates about subject appropriation revealed the complexity and challenges of re-appropriating colonial images. The differing values of historical portraits to diverse interpretive communities emerge as significant in disputes about appropriation. For some, historical representations are simulacra, or signifiers without stable referent. For others there exists direct correspondence between the depicted person(s) and their representation. As icon and index of the deceased or symbol of historical experience, the image is closely linked to the ancestor, their memory, and descendants' sense of self and authentic being. For Cornell (2008:142), “in a deep sense, the dead are allowed to speak to us” when we engage with archival representations. To allow this requires that we keep a passage open between living and dead, Cornell (2008:142) urges. Emphasis on the dynamic relationship between the living and the deceased alerts white critics to the obstinate blind spots of their analytic paradigm.

Where re-appropriated as ‘of their own’, historical portraits become integral to the ongoing reconstruction and performance of a community’s authentic subjectivity. Furthermore, publicly objecting to the appropriation and contextual misrepresentation of depicted subjects joins other acts of creative solidarity, to constitute the claiming of heritage as a series of different exercises of authentication, which mark membership of a community of practice. For many descendants of colonised and enslaved peoples, resistance to cultural appropriation is a means of asserting agency and retaining strength (Shand 2002:58). As minorities, they risk having their cultural heritage subsumed or refigured in consumer culture, or in the nationalist rhetoric of former settlers and new postcolonial hegemonies (Shand 2002:58; Skinner 2014:138-139). Objections to appropriation further arise from the reality that “colonialism is not a historical phase that has passed” (Shand 2002: 58). The continuing precarity of formerly colonised people under conditions of neocolonialism and neoliberalism was highlighted in Chapter four. In this context, seizing affiliative ownership of colonial representations, as belonging to one’s cultural heritage, asserts an affirming sense of belonging and resistance. Gordon (2012:102) writes:

In place of a hostile, unyielding and nihilistic reality [...] without any reason to be concerned with us, the human world of culture stands in its place and offers not only a world meant *for us*, but also resources through which to overcome the frailties of our bodies and our mortality through the continued presence of our spirit as social memory, as well as constraining the freedom and imposing force of others through resources of regulation of human behaviour.

Read superficially in terms of appropriation, Gordon's words may suggest infringement on the freedom of speech and creative expression of cultural outsiders. However, what is at stake may better be seen in terms of "a call to action [against] the absolutely morally unfettered will" (Cornell 2008:141, citing Walter Benjamin) of an elite minority whose apparently limitless freedoms hinge on and amplify the 'unfreedom' of the majority. Gordon's words alert us to the importance of the culture and memory of precarious peoples in their struggle for equal status and provision of the means to enjoy the liberties promised by democratic constitutions. Objections to appropriation are uncomfortable and inconvenient for those whose ability to take and borrow for production, expression and profit, has historically gone unchallenged. Objections to appropriation shatter the illusion of universal consumer freedom and equality allegedly guaranteed by market capitalism. Objections disrupt the celebratory multiculturalism that marks the official rhetoric of many former settler colonies.

Chapter five dealt with the postcolonial trends of colonial chic, retro and Afro-chic.<sup>329</sup> I posited that consumption of Africa-lite goods may contribute to the identity-work of citizens wishing to signify trendiness, notions of freedom, belonging or pan-Africanism. The fluidity of historical signs facilitates numerous uses and interpretations of products featuring colonial images. Furthermore, as nostalgic or retro trends incorporate diverse and contradictory meanings, interpretations defy reading simply in terms of political affiliation, race or cultural identity (Vincent 2007:92). This was explored in my analysis of Design Team's *Cameo* and *Novelty*. Such retro and nostalgic commodification of archival images may produce alternative interpretations of history and re-ignite interest in the past, thus offering scope for self-fashioning in relation to historical figures or epochs. Proponents of this view concede, however, that retro's appropriation of history is irreverent and without regard for contextual accuracy. The nostalgic 'colonial style' reconstructs and mythologises colonialism and the heyday of plantation slavery as times and spaces of luxury, comfort and simplicity. My question 'whose colonial?' built on chapter four's interrogation of domesticity as ideological space and concept, and its historical connection to bourgeois white imperialism and racial capitalism. I posed this question to highlight the colonial violence obscured in this global trend and its widespread signifiers of status and luxury. Its aesthetic is predicated on the reification of black bodies as loyal labour resource and as docile aesthetic objects, so that blackness is (sometimes inadvertently) re-inflected with exploitative class and economic relations.

Fashionable translations of colonialism can thus be seen as obscuring the diverse histories, experiences and memories of the colonised, in favour of idealised depictions of the colonisers – whose violence has no part in

<sup>329</sup> While fashionable appropriations from colonial and apartheid archives are most commonly found in leading décor magazines, the trendiness has waned in recent years. As Sonnekus (2016:151-152, citing Michael) writes: "The capriciousness of consumer culture must be considered, since a variety of symbols, iconographies and historical junctures routinely acquire and forfeit their potential for commodification as a result of the 'increasing speed of fashion cycles'".

these re-figurations. Rosaldo (1989:120-121) stresses the importance of memory to the critique of imperial nostalgia and its ideological underpinnings<sup>330</sup>. "It is in their inconsistent plenitude that memories eventually unravel the ideologies they so vividly animate" (Rosaldo 1989:121). It is the recognition of the incontrollable heterogeneity of memories of all those who experienced, or remember, the object of reminiscence or nostalgia, which points to different perspectives, experiences and histories that converge around the historical object or image.

Ambiguity and heterogeneity of historical memory are certainly lost in commodity translations of the apartheid struggle. In fashion and décor design, this narrative found expression in carefully packaged signifiers of anti-colonial struggle and the arrival of urban black modernity. Figures of black freedom fighters, celebrities and revellers from the mid-twentieth century proved popular with designers, who frequently inflected retro designs with kitsch or ironic overtones. According to Vincent (2007:93), retro commodities "simultaneously [offer] reflection of lived experience, historical memory and memory-making arising from shared expression and shared political aspiration". I suggested that white consumption of Afro-chic may signify identification with democratic, non-racial principles, and in some contexts, protest against enduring white supremacy. For some, the trendiness of political icons newly rendered as retro accessories may suggest that radical politics have become part of the social fabric. The popularity of accessories featuring retro depictions of black bodies could thus be read as evidence of a broad acceptance of Black Consciousness ideals. While "[i]nterpreting race as 'taste' [...] does not necessarily diminish its force" (Dolby cited in Nuttall 2003:238), retro fashions do obscure the historical contexts that sustain the currency of blackness as exotic. Vintage renditions of historical blackness can satisfy tastes for the exotic and culturally Other because they draw from and further layer a familiar palimpsest. Furthermore, fashion's domestication of colonial histories and freedom fighters may meet whites' desire for confirmation of the alibi that 'it's all in the past'.

In his reading of mainstream America's embrace of blackness as beautiful, Taylor (2016:129) shows that despite positive changes, the criteria of black beauty remain informed by Western ideals. Furthermore, this shift "has been accompanied by an *intensification* of the mechanisms of racial violence and dehumanisation" (Taylor 2016:129, italics in the original). As seen in the examples of orientalism and primitivism, the appreciation and appropriation of a people's cultural property, images and bodies, do not guarantee the recognition of their humanity, dignity and liberty. The point is encapsulated in Amandla Stenberg's question:

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<sup>330</sup> Addressing fellow scholars, Rosaldo (1989:121) advocates honest surrender to one's own imperialist nostalgia. In this mode of analysis memory is reflexive, alert to its own complicity in bringing about change or even destruction of that which is reminisced about (Rosaldo 1989:120).

"What if America loved black people as much as it loves black culture?" One may cite other examples: Australia and Australian Aborigines, the USA and Native Americans, South Africa and San and Khoekhoe peoples.

Neither I nor Taylor suggest that white appreciation of black beauty inevitably entails objectification. Like Taylor I distinguish between consuming the Other and an appreciation of the Other that may be rooted in recognition of the Other's full and equal humanity. Such recognition rejects acts of appropriation that function solely as opportunities for the enhancement of one's own experience and status (Taylor 2016:124). For Taylor (2016:125), such admiration or passion for the Other "grants the judgement of beauty, but stifles the experience that might grow out of that judgement".

In the first Biko memorial lecture, Njabulo Ndebele argued that post-apartheid reparations and the dismantling of white hegemony would provide vehicles for liberating both oppressed and oppressor:

This is an essential condition for a shift in white identity, in which 'whiteness' can undergo an experiential transformation by absorbing new cultural experience as an essential condition for achieving a new sense of cultural rootedness (Ndebele 2000:52).

For redress to liberate both oppressed and oppressor, it requires white immersion in and experience of African cultures. Immersion and appreciation may support recognition of the interdependence of subjectivity, the "dependence upon the Other for the subject's being" (López 2005:16)<sup>331</sup>. Citing Tony Morrison, López (2005:16) writes that truly intersubjective encounters between erstwhile coloniser and colonised will "constitute a moment of reckoning and of accountability" for beneficiaries of colonialism. For many whites this moment may herald a new "uneasy state of being-with (*Mitsein*) as it learns to be looked at by its others" (López 2005:15). The potential unease of *Mitsein* is, however, unavoidable should whites wish to attain their own full humanity. Being with others is fundamental to the *Dasein* of self and Other, and emphasises "the interdependence of subjectivities and the indispensability of this intersubjective relation for being" (López 2005: 15). Recognition of the Other's humanity and interrogating white hegemony were certainly among the goals of several artists and designers discussed in this dissertation. Nonetheless, and despite their intentions, their work caused displeasure, anger and pain to some interpretive communities. To indicate the affective power and shifts in interpretations of repurposed images, I analysed the public reception of selected designs.

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<sup>331</sup> White unease at historical debt and its consequences for the present may underlie resistance to appropriation claims. This is seen in European resistance to demands for the return of human remains, artistic heritage and land confiscated during colonialism. White attainment of *Dasein* through recognition of African Others cannot, however, ignore the fact of the historical denial of the Other's humanity.

The reception of Maid in Africa's *Maidonna* and *Slave to Fashion* illuminated how the same products were celebrated and condemned, by different interpretative communities and in different semantic contexts. I argued that the unanticipated criticism of Maid in Africa at Design Indaba revealed unacknowledged divisions in the local design community, and showed the enduring hegemony of white habitus. Dispute about the suitability of images used in Weir's designs pointed to different viewer relationships to signifiers of black history, servitude and trauma. As a de-territorialised image and "text-in-motion", the commoditised trajectory of the *The Brooks* as décor object brought it into the purview of discursive communities who do not subscribe to Western guarantors of creative autonomy, or accept as inevitable the virtual eclipse of ethical concerns (Appadurai 1996:9). Many objections to the commodification of Priscilla's portrait and the *Brooks* were informed by lived experiences of racism and an enduring legacy of slavery. The debate allowed the *Brooks* to function as a central symbol of a trans-national community descendant from, or affiliated to, African slaves. Claiming it as 'of their own' binds, fortifies and confirms the community of practitioners in activating the virtual power of the image.

Rose (2007:11) argues for the agency of images and their potential as sites for unanticipated resistance and subversion, as well as pleasure. In my analysis of Biko's portrait, I suggest that some images may resist domestication by fashionable appropriation, and this becomes possible when those affiliated to the represented re-appropriate the icon and re-activate the represented person's historical specificity. Nonetheless, minority re-appropriations of historical images are by no means untroubled processes, free from power struggles either within or between interest groups. Those affiliated to the image may also attempt to control its potential meanings or restricting its uses. Facebook critic Barbara Willis-Brown (2014) stated that "[t]here are some things that will ALWAYS be '*verboten*', and as far as black people the world over are concerned, this tops the list[sic]". Such declarations emphasise the affective charge and symbolic consequence of the image. While I agree with this emphasis, I don't condone censoring the image's use or extending sanction based on fraught classifications of race or genealogy. Such decrees generally stifle important creative and critical expression. Most respondents who questioned the right of white people to appropriate *The Brooks*, focused on *how* the image was used and to what purpose. Protesting the Weirs' commodification of the image, critics highlighted the couple's status as white Africans privileged through racial capitalism<sup>332</sup>. It seems that emphasis on the Weirs' race was further prompted by their ostensible refusal to accept and respect other relationships to symbols of Black history.

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<sup>332</sup> Kat Seashimmer Vicente (2014) wrote to the Weirs: "As two WHITE PEOPLE you have no right to try and reclaim images of slavery, as you are only African because of colonialism". Stephanie McCarthy wrote: "No Micha Weir, not all opinions are equal: in relation to the enslavement of millions of Africans and their descendants (not to mention apartheid, which Micha Weir and every other white South African benefitted from), the relationship of a white person and that of a Black person to this history is not the same."

Self-reflexivity when appropriating images of cultural others must include recognising that the doxa of our habitus shapes our interactions with, our seeing and representation of the Other. According to Bourdieu (1995:82), even sincere interactions, such as sympathy, love and friendship – “amenable to description in terms of ‘intentional transfer into the Other’” – are “dominated through the harmony of habitus, [...] ethos and tastes [and] by the objective structure of relations between social conditions”. The historical power imbalances and hierarchies of race, class and gender that underscore white habitus thus find unintended expression in liberal efforts at critique and commemoration. Critics of subject appropriation thus throw important, though often unwelcome, light on the fact that liberal creatives are frequently blindsided by habitus predicated on bourgeois imperialism. I suggested that this played out in the commemorative and critical designs of Maid in Africa, who were accused of perpetuating the exploitative relations they hoped to subvert. Further, their ironic configuration of historical signifiers suggested a gratifying intimacy with colonial racism that contradicted their liberal goals and affected accusations of racism.

A marked absence from the 2014 debate were questions about Priscilla’s agency, or what her role was in the commodification of her portrait and personal history. Richards (1999:180) and Spivak (1994) caution that postcolonial critics of subject appropriation may indeed silence colonised voices when projects of retrieval or critique presume the colonised to be mute and powerless. Furthermore, the outsider-critic of appropriation may well commit epistemic violence in the appropriation of causes on behalf of minorities (Nguyen and Strohl 2017). Just as designers are cautioned to do, critics of subject appropriation need to reflect on the ways that habitus, ideological position and epistemic paradigm, shape their assumptions about the colonised and their descendants. My analysis of subject appropriation no doubt reveals my own failure to fully meet this challenge, particularly since, to one degree or another, one’s biases and predispositions always stay contradictory, unconscious and denied.

In Africa-lite, racial blackness operates as trace and screen. Although surface inscriptions may vary as fashions change, the face value of the racial signifier is held fast. The fashionable commodification of blackness both depends on and perpetuates the myth of a legible and stable correspondence between signifier and signified, and between black bodies and racial blackness. All the same, interpretations of Africa-lite and its consumers frequently subvert or reject the tropes deployed by designers and manufacturers. The assumed stability of the sign is repeatedly frustrated by readings that reject commodity fetishising of skin colour. This resonates with the philosophy of Biko (2013:52), who insisted that “blackness is not a matter of pigmentation [but] a reflection of a mental attitude”. Firstly, Biko rejects the colonial and apartheid designations so central to producing blackness under racial capitalism. Secondly, rather than being a passive surface awaiting inscription, blackness is resolute action, a state of positive being and resource for liberation. Following this framing of the situation,

the challenge facing postcolonial consumers and designers is to use colonial images to enact a project of freedom intended to subvert colonial and apartheid descriptors of blackness.

Is this possible within postcolonial cultural economies, where subversive creative expression is so often subsumed into mass commodification? For Huggan (2001:11) the “the ‘only’ option” is to criticise neocolonialism from within, and “to use the existing market forces” to further one’s own ends. Can subject appropriations of colonial images avoid commodification that contradicts the designer’s critical, commemorative or liberation goals? “To design”, argues Bonsiepe (2006:34), “means to deal with paradoxes and contradictions”. Designers, consumers and critics continually negotiate paradox and ambiguity, and paradox also underlies blackness when it is conceived – following Césaire and Ellison – as ‘both/and’. As argued above, the consumption of this floating and recalcitrant sign indicates similar contradictions. Through creative and consumer decisions, agents may both commodify and critique. Consumption of historical blackness may commemorate even as it signals trendiness, and it may politicise the home while affirming the decorator’s style.

To design means, at heart, to appropriate. If all cultural production, including décor and fabric design, is appropriative, how is appropriation to be done in a manner conducive to emancipation? Bonsiepe’s (2006:30) conception of design humanism highlights design’s potential to emancipate, and to reduce human precarity.

To address this challenge it is imperative

to foster a critical consciousness when facing the enormous imbalance between the centres of power and the people submitted to these powers, because the imbalance is deeply undemocratic insofar as it negates participation. It treats human beings as mere instances in the process of objectivisation (*Verdinglighung*) and commodification (Bonsiepe 2006:30).

This call for critical consciousness is pertinent to those who appropriate images of formerly colonised and enslaved persons. Critical consciousness demands research that links the past and the present, the aesthetic with the economic and political. It demands that designers who rely on cultural appropriation invite the input of those affiliated to the desired image or artefact. Democratic and humanist design would further address colonial injustice by sharing acclaim and profit with source communities or custodians<sup>333</sup>.

As established in Chapters two and three, engaging source communities is a difficult and often fraught endeavour. It is, however, precisely the difficulty of engagement that may enlighten appropriators to the

<sup>333</sup> Unlike in Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, South African legislation is not geared to protect minority cultural heritage. Research is needed to establish how source communities may be protected from exploitation and loss of revenue through appropriation and commodification of their cultural property. Legislation, design education and conscientising agents can contribute to equity and equal participation cultural industries.

heterogeneity and complexity of source communities. Recognising heterogeneity within source communities contributes to dispelling both imposed stereotype and myths of authenticity. These are crucial insights for designers. Engagement also facilitates ‘speaking nearby’, a concept and practice articulated by Minh-ha (1989:101;1992), and which offers a strategic solution to whoever enters this challenging and charged domain. This approach calls for a closeness, a familiarity and a solidarity which are not found in positions where artists speak ‘about’ or ‘for’ distant others<sup>334</sup>. Min-ha’s concept or practice connotes “a speaking that does not objectify”, and a “speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it” (Minh-ha cited in Chen 1992:87). No position is beyond critique, and always opens itself to further complexities and challenges, but ‘speaking nearby’ and its implied closeness require communication and the crossing and interrogation of boundaries. Such speaking might open possibilities for cultural outsiders and source communities, appropriators and custodians to recognise the Other’s humanity as inseparable from, and indispensable to, their own.

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<sup>334</sup> In concluding *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (2008:206) writes: “It is through self-consciousness and renunciation, through a permanent tension of his freedom, that man can create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world. Superiority? Inferiority? Why not simply try to touch the other, feel the other, discover each other?”

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