Looking Like People; Feeling Like People: The Black Body, Dress and Aesthetic Therapy in the Caribbean

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Abstract
In the Caribbean, the practice of getting dressed matters because it is a practice of attending to the body. Under a colonial regime, black bodies were ill-treated and selves were negated. Clothing played an instrumental role in the abuse of bodies and the stripping of a sense of wellbeing. Attire was one key way of demarcating master and slave and rendering some members of society null and void. Enslaved Africans, who were forcibly brought across the Atlantic to the New World, were considered chattel or commodities rather than people and clothes functioned in a way that reinforced that notion. Yet, dress became a strategy of subversion – of making chattel, property or 'non-people' look like people. The enslaved recognised that, through clothes, it was possible to look and feel free. Today that legacy remains. Clothing is seen not only as that which can make a people 'look like people' but also feel like people – clothing sets up a specific structure of feeling. This paper pivots on notions of looking and feeling like people while deploying Joanne Entwistle's conceptual framework of dress as situated bodily practice. The article locates its investigation in the Caribbean, examining the philosophy and practice of Trinidadian clothing designer Robert Young. The article establishes him as a source of aesthetic therapeutic solutions in the Caribbean. It argues that his clothing designs produce a therapeutic discourse on the Black Caribbean body – a discourse, which facilitates a practice of getting dressed that gives a sense of agency, self-empowerment and psychic security even if that sense is embodied temporarily; lasting perhaps only as long as the garment is worn.

Keywords: Dress, clothing, Caribbean, black body, therapy

Introduction

> The planters… distributed minimal European-style clothing and cheap cloth…to differentiate themselves from their slaves… Planters sought to civilize their African slaves but only to a point: the slaves had to remain controllable, and their clothing could not be above their status (Buckridge 2004).

> Besides its unparalleled magnitude, the other particularly shameful aspect of the [Atlantic slave] trade… is that plantation slavery turned people into chattels (Lee 2002).

Getting dressed is a practice of attending to the body. It is a practice that matters in the Caribbean, a region with a colonial past characterised by the ill treatment of bodies. Under a colonial regime – which spanned the mid-17th century to the 19th century – the corporeal punishment visited upon enslaved Africans was brutal. Bodies were flogged, branded, raped and mutilated. Physical violence was routine. In writing about the cruelty of enslavement Brereton notes that a 'heavy cartwhip was routinely carried by the slave drivers in the field, to be casually applied to the bodies of the workers (male and female) as a spur to labour' (2010: 4). Clothing also played a role in the abuse of the body. Higman describes how clothes fit into the life of the enslaved in the former British Caribbean and, in doing so, he reveals a link between attire and bodily trauma: According to him:

> The standard allowance of clothing was unlikely to survive the long hours worked by slaves in all weathers. It rotted rapidly. Thus, field slaves frequently wore only 'a mere rag round their loins' while at work, keeping what clothing they had for other occasions… Very often slaves wore their daily clothes to bed, even when wet (Higman 1995: 224-225).

Clothing was used to distinguish between master and slave (Buckridge 2004; Miller 2009). Garments were an instrumental part in a system of plantation slavery that, in Debbie Lee's words, 'turned people into chattels' (2002: 18). Black bodies were deemed property. Yet, as Orlando Patterson argues, it is not enough to say that bodies were property because anyone can be the object of a power and property relation (1982: 21). Patterson notes, for example, that:

> … an American husband is part of the property of his wife. We never express it this way of course, for it sounds quite ghastly. Nevertheless, in actual and sociological terms a wife has all sorts of claims, privileges, and powers in the person, labor power and earnings of her husband (1982: 22).

Patterson insists that the property concept in slavery must be invoked with specificity, that is, with the understanding that the enslaved were a 'subcategory' of owned objects (1982: 21). Therefore, when Lee observes that the Atlantic slave trade turned people into chattel or property, she actually pinpoints a turning of people into a subcategory where the prefix 'sub' suggests a relegation to a state of inferiority – to a position that is lower or less than people.

Today a legacy of a dichotomy between people and sub-people remains in the Caribbean and clothes are bound up in that schism. I was born in the 1970s in the Anglophone Caribbean island of Trinidad. I was raised on the island. Whenever I dressed my black body and my mother felt that I had presented myself well she

would declare: ‘You look like people’. And, I would feel – even if only in some small way – validated while simultaneously questioning my personhood. Was I not always a person? Could clothes elevate my being? My mother’s words betray a historical disorder of the self in the Caribbean; they are evidence of the capacity of clothing to remedy sometimes-unconscious feelings of a lack of self-worth and lift a person to the ontological status of ‘somebody’. If clothing can participate in mistreatment – in stripping people status – then clothes can also function in therapeutic ways that refashion people and foster self-empowerment. According to Entwistle, ‘dress in everyday life is always more than a shell, it is an intimate aspect of the experience and presentation of the self’ (2000: 10).

A re-articulation and re-presentation of self can be traced back to colonialism. Clothing became a strategy of subversion in the colonial era – a tactic of making sub-people look like people. Monica Miller writes about how sartorial semiotics was part of the transition process from slavery to freedom. She notes: ‘Slaves stole clothing not only because it was portable or their only material possession, but also because better clothing allowed them to pass more easily for freemen’ (2009: 92). Through clothes it was possible to look and feel free. Clothing therefore is seen not only as that which can make a people ‘look like people’ but it is also that which can give psychic security; clothes can also make a people feel like people – clothing sets up a specific structure of feeling.

This article pivots on notions of looking and feeling like people while deploying Joanne Entwistle’s conceptual framework of dress as situated bodily practice. This framework acknowledges ‘the complex dynamic relationship between the body, dress and culture’ (2000: 11). The article locates its investigation in the Caribbean, examining the philosophy and practice of Trinidadian clothing designer Robert Young.[1] Data is drawn from personal communication with the designer along with responses from some of his clients. What is worthy of note in the discussion is Young’s idea of spirit wear: the notion that in dressing the body we also attend to and treat the psyche or spirit in a certain way. The article posits that his creative work is a kind of bodily practice that is situated in the socio-cultural context of a colonial heritage of disempowerment and feeling bad about self. If, as Nettleford observes, ‘the Caribbean creative artist has long addressed himself to the negation of that negation-of-self which he knows is the essence of colonial domination’ (2003: 169), then I insist that Young situates his designs in that essence and promotes a bodily practice that seeks to remedy or negate the ‘negation-of-self’.

The article asks the question: what are the sources for therapeutic solutions, which can rewrite discourses of self-empowerment? It responds to this enquiry by aiming to establish Robert Young as a source of aesthetic therapeutic solutions in the Caribbean. It argues that his clothing designs produce a therapeutic discourse on the Black Caribbean body – a discourse, which facilitates a practice of getting dressed that gives a sense of agency, self-empowerment and psychic security even

if that sense is embodied temporarily; lasting perhaps only as long as the garment is worn.

The Black Body and Aesthetic Therapy

> The status quo tells us that we are not whole, that we are less than – so we dress up to counteract that. As a designer you cannot ignore how the black body has been perceived. It can't be just about style: give women sex appeal and men status. I am trying to create my own script of what a human is without the trappings of a suit or skimpy dress. My work tackles imperialism; it addreses internalised colonialism. My philosophy is about self-validation through clothes (Robert Young, personal communication, February 2013).

How can clothing literally and figuratively re-dress body and self-perceptions informed by the past? In the *History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave* – first published in 1831 – Prince recounts her own experiences of enslavement in the Caribbean and the savagery inflicted upon black bodies. In her description of the torture and eventual death of a fellow slave named Hetty, she tells of the capacity of somatic trauma to linger in the present. She writes:

> One of the cows had dragged the rope away from the stake to which Hetty had fastened it, and got loose. My master flew into a terrible passion, and ordered the poor creature to be stripped quite naked, notwithstanding her pregnancy, and to be tied up to a tree in the yard. He then flogged her as hard as he could lick, both with the whip and cow-skin, till she was all over streaming with blood. He rested, and then beat her again and again. Her shrieks were terrible. The consequence was that poor Hetty was brought to bed before her time, and was delivered after severe labour of a dead child. She appeared to recover after her confinement, so far that she was repeatedly flogged by both master and mistress afterwards; but her former strength never returned to her. Ere long her body and limbs swelled to a great size; and she lay on a mat in the kitchen, till the water burst out of her body and she died. All the slaves said that death was a good thing for poor Hetty; but I cried very much for her death. The manner of it filled me with horror. I could not bear to think about it; yet it was always present to my mind (2000: 7).

With this brutality still 'present' in the minds – even if unconsciously so – of those living in the contemporary space of the Caribbean, Robert Young deploys his clothing designs as a therapeutic solution. He attempts to make an aesthetic intervention by stitching up wounds that still burden body and psyche.

To understand Young's reparative endeavour and the way in which I am using the term aesthetic therapy requires attention to the notion of aesthetics. The word aesthetics comes from the Greek 'aisethetikos' meaning perceptible things. This definition can be sharpened by looking at what Levinson (2003) sees as the foci of aesthetics. According to Levinson, aesthetics focuses on a perceptible quality or what he calls 'a certain kind of *property*, *feature*, or *aspect* of things' (2003: 3; emphasis in original). The concept of aesthetics also revolves around the perception of 'a certain kind of…*experience*' (ibid; emphasis in original). These two focal points are important for making sense of how Young attends to the Black Caribbean body through his creative practice, but they require further unpacking.

A Certain Kind of Quality

I will first consider the idea of 'a certain kind of property, feature or aspect'. The aesthetic qualities, properties or features of creative objects, like clothing, can be distinguished from non-aesthetic qualities. Emily Brady understands this distinction as the difference between response-dependent qualities and primary physical qualities (2003: 18). The primary physical or non-aesthetic qualities are those of the object's form, like line, shape and volume. Aesthetic qualities are response-dependent and they supervene on or are determined in part by non-aesthetic qualities. For example, the paintings by North American visual artist Jackson Pollock have the aesthetic qualities of power, dynamism and lyricism by virtue of his treatment of form, that is, his arrangement of spattered lines and dripped paint on canvas. We perceive an aesthetic quality of ornateness in the work of Austrian artist Gustav Klimt because of his concentrated use of shapes in the form of swirls, curlicues and arabesques. Objects come to have aesthetic or response-dependent qualities because of non-aesthetic or primary physical qualities.

The response-dependency of aesthetic qualities may suggest that those qualities are highly subjective but Brady insists that we should not be dissuaded 'from ascribing objectivity, if limited, to [aesthetic qualities], since it is possible to identify a shared basis for judgements within many cultures, and in some cases a cross-cultural shared basis' (2003: 19). There can be agreement on what is regarded as an aesthetic quality. In his overview of the topic of aesthetics, Levinson identifies an open-ended list of aesthetic qualities generated from a consensus view:

> … there is substantial convergence in intuitions as to what perceivable properties of things *are* aesthetic…beauty, ugliness, sublimity, grace, elegance, delicacy, harmony, balance, unity, power, drive, elan, ebullience, wittiness, vehemence, garishness, gaudiness, acerbity, anguish, sadness, tranquility, cheerfulness, crudity, serenity, wiriness, comicality, flamboyance, languor, melancholy, sentimentality' (2003: 6; emphasis in original).

Therefore, in addition to a dependency on non-aesthetic qualities, aesthetic qualities are determined by – or they are responses to – culture. If an aesthetic quality can have a shared cultural basis; if 'aesthetic qualities draw on the conditions and situation of both the subject and object' (Brady 2003: 19), then what aesthetic quality might be perceptible in the clothing designs of a designer operating within a context or situation characterised by a legacy of colonialism and the attendant breaking down and abasement of the black body? What might black Caribbeans, as subjects of Young's work, who share a history marked by a culture of violence, perceive?

Some of Robert Young's clients offer answers. In talking about Young's garments, Gillian Moor, a Trinidadian journalist, singer and songwriter, shares the aesthetic qualities that are perceptible to her. In doing so, she not only illustrates her response to the non-aesthetic/physical qualities of his work, she also articulates how a cultural situation informs the way she reads and interprets his clothes.

She states: 'Robert Young's clothing makes me feel happy and confident. The bold designs and colours make a loud statement that contradicts the imposed meekness we've been taught as colonial people' (personal communication, August 2013). Moor pinpoints aesthetic qualities of elation and self-assurance. Ruth Osman Rose, a Guyanese-born performing artist based in Trinidad, echoes Moor's sentiments: 'Young's use of bright colours and the playful ways in which he combines them, as well as his use of interesting textures and shapes, make me feel vibrant, unique, confident and good about myself' (personal communication, January 2014).

Answers from Moor and Osman Rose suggest that Young's clothes carry out a function. Nick Zangwill (2001) uses the term aesthetic functionalism to argue that creative objects serve the function of manifesting and sustaining aesthetic qualities – cheerfulness, boldness and so on. Creative objects, with their aesthetic properties, can touch our spirit. In other words, they can function beyond their own physical materiality with metaphysical consequences, which he insists can be beneficial to us. Zangwill notes: 'We care about art and the survival of particular works because we care about the role that works of art are charged to perform. We care about works of art and their survival because we care about their aesthetic properties' (2001: 127). He proposes that creative works can elicit aesthetic qualities that matter to our wellness. He asserts: "Aesthetic Functionalism is metaphysically healthy' (2001: 147). I invoke his idea here and I deploy it in the sense that creative objects – clothing in the case of this article – can stir aesthetic qualities, which can perform the function of therapy, that is, aesthetic properties can do work that is antidotal and salutary. Clothing can function as a therapeutic solution that goes beyond the materialities of cotton, lace and satin, for example, to impact the health of both the body and an inner sense of being. Wendell Manwarren, a Trinidadian actor and musician, speaks about the way Young's garments function for him: 'Young's clothing fits my spirit and sits well on my self and affords me to express myself as myself time and again' (personal communication, January 2014). Manwarren's use of the words 'sits well on my self' summons ideas of well-being.

Of note, is the particular recuperative function that Robert Young's clothing designs enact. His work is distinguishable by the technique of appliqué, which has specific primary, physical or non-aesthetic qualities. In his clothes, bits and pieces of fabric are sutured together to make a composite of strong needlework lines and areas of vivid shapes (see figures 1 & 2). These non-aesthetic/physical qualities along with a context in which black bodies were broken, and in many instances disintegrated, make it possible to perceive in his clothing designs, an aesthetic quality of restoration or recuperation. Manwarren's views help elucidate the capacity for recovery that is connected to Young's work. According to him: 'Out of bits and pieces and scraps of cloth, [Robert Young] creates great works of beauty. Out of seeming nothing [Young] makes something' (personal communication,

January 2014). The idea of nothing becoming something signals a key point of engagement in this article: that of 'a no*body'* becoming 'some*body.'* I give deliberate emphasis to 'body' here as a means of maintaining a linkage between the somatic dimension, clothing and acts of dressing. Young's designs reflect an effort to bring together fragments and restore shattered bodies like that of Hetty as well as the splintered psyches of those living in the Caribbean today. Young's work is a literal and metaphoric reassembling of parts to make a whole. Yet he does not seek to conceal the scars. Instead, he reframes them as rows of stitching, which emphasise ideas of repair and mending.

Figure 1. Robert Young's designs. Images courtesy Arnaldo James.

Figure 2. Appliqué details by Robert Young. Photographs by author.

With his clothes he treats the body. His clothing and the aesthetic quality of restoration perform the task of building structures in which black bodies can feel a sense of wellbeing for, as Entwistle writes: 'Dress is the way in which individuals learn to live in their bodies and feel at home in them…dress in everyday life cannot be separated from the living, breathing, moving body it adorns' (2000: 7 & 9). If dress and body are inseparable, then by sewing together bits and pieces Young also stitches together a fractured sense of self and sews up corporeal pain. In reflecting on his context and work, Young describes the situation in which he practices and recalls feedback from clients:

> We have a terrible history of darker bodies. Dress in a postcolonial place carries so much messages with the different bodies that wear clothes – who the person is and so on. People talk about how good they feel when they are wearing the clothes I have designed. It is affirmation of self. My work is about restoring our relationship to ourselves (personal communication, February 2013).

A Certain Kind of Experience

Notions of aesthetics are bound up with certain kinds of qualities or features but they are also concerned with a certain kind of experience. Aesthetic experience can be approached from internalist and externalist viewpoints. An internalist stance considers the features of experience, in other words, it is a perspective, which attempts to find what is common in experiences such that they might be labelled aesthetic. Proponents of internalism ask: what is in an experience that makes it an aesthetic one? Yet, criticism by those like George Dickie (1965) have shaped the debate on aesthetic experience by insisting that an internalist approach fails to distinguish between the features of experiences and the primary physical qualities we perceive in creative objects. Therefore, in contradistinction to the internalist take, an externalist view foregrounds the experience of the primary

physical qualities or the formal elements of creative objects: line, shape, mass, colour and so on.[2] The configuration or form of the creative object, then, feeds our experience. In *The Aesthetic Point of View* Beardsley argues that aesthetic experience is the experience of form. We return once again, then, to non-aesthetic qualities for the realisation of aesthetics. Non-aesthetic qualities not only help determine aesthetic qualities, they can also give rise to aesthetic experiences.

The formal components of Robert Young's clothing: his tendency toward strikingly bright colours and forms with large volume furnish an experience of greatness – the wearer embodies the force of those formal elements and, as Young explains, the clothes can arouse an experience of wanting to exude a radiance that is more intense than the garments themselves: 'While wearing them, my clothes force or push you to be brighter than the clothes' (personal communication, February 2013). With a legacy of the restraint and suppression of black bodies, the reimagining and refashioning of clothing as a means for bodies and people to shine, is significant.

His generous use of fabric to produce clothing silhouettes or forms that are sizable creates an experience of self-awareness or self-notice; an experience of calling attention to self – an experience in which attention is directed at the wearer. His designs give prominence to bodies once regarded as chattel or sub-people; bodies in which the idea of inferiority has been passed on like genetic code. What Young calls his 'attention skirt', is one example of a design that occupies space in a way that draws gazes (see figure 3). Young describes the piece: 'I use plenty fabric – sixteen yards – to make that skirt and it does not pass your knee' (personal communication, February 2013). According to the designer, his clothing creates a 'look meh' experience;[3] one that he insists is not about arrogance but rather, an experience in which the clothes allows the wearer to articulate, as he puts it: 'Look at me. I am a whole human being' (personal communication, February 2013). Young talks about the psychological therapy or remediation that his clothing undertakes:

> My clothing is either something you like or you have a discomfort with it because it shows you up too much and you have to be ready for that. My work lets you be seen in a different kind of way – amazement perhaps. My clothing assumes that bodies need to be celebrated and thought about in a different kind of way. Experiencing my clothes is not like putting on a typical suit. A suit is a different business. A suit is a pretence. You look like a smart man[4] or politician but you don't have to defend that look as much. With my clothes, you have to defend, for example, a Nehru jacket with colourful appliqué on it. When you have to do that you become aware of and appreciate your body and your being. In this way, my clothes have an un-colonising nature (personal communication, February 2013).

Figure 3. Robert Young's Attention Skirt. Image courtesy Arnaldo James.

The matter of creating clothes that can make the wearers have an experience of looking like people and feeling like people is strongly encapsulated in his stained glass window dresses – designs in which the form is composed of vibrantly coloured pieces of fabric (see figure 4). They are conspicuous garments. Young shares that fellow Trinidadian clothing designer Nigel Eastman calls these designs the 'Who-she-feel-she-think-she-is? Dress' (personal communication, February 2013). It is noteworthy that Eastman uses the word 'feel'. Clothes can set up a structure of feeling. These dresses can make the wearer look and feel like 'somebody' and when they clothe a black body they can incite indignation, in other words, they can provoke the viewer to ask – as Eastman's title of the dresses sug-

gests – how dare she transgress a subordinate ontological state established by history and elevate herself to the category of 'people'? Robert Young's creative practice operates within this mentality and languaging where the black body is still understood and spoken about in ways that denigrate it. His work responds to that context by attempting to treat it. He observes: 'Even our language brings each other down so there must be clothes that address that' (personal communication, February 2013).

Figure 4. The Who-she-feel-she-think-she-is? Dress. Image courtesy Arnaldo James.

Spirit Wear as Therapy

Key to Robert Young's deployment of clothing for validating bodies and making wearers feel better about themselves is his idea of spirit wear. Young proposes that in treating the body through dress, one can attend to the spirit of the person. He notes that despite the visibility of flesh, we may conceptualise ourselves as primarily spirit: "My idea of spirit wear considers ourselves as spirit in the first instance – I am offering that as a possibility through my clothing' (personal communication, April 2013). He draws inspiration for this concept partly from the way dress is understood in the philosophy of the Spiritual Baptist Faith in the Caribbean – specifically, the Spiritual Baptist religion, which has an Orisha orientation.[5]

This strand of religious practice combines Christianity with Black African tenets. It is a syncretic religion born within the colonial context of contact among Europeans and Africans in the Caribbean. Members of the faith wear what are called spiritual clothes, which they believe can do the work of defending the spirit from supernatural attack. While serving as protection, the garments worn by Spiritual Baptists are also believed to do the work of psychotherapy. For example, in her study of Spiritual Baptists, Carol Duncan observes:

> … the head-tie serves as a visible sign of identity of a Spiritual Baptist woman, and it can function…in curative and restorative ways…the head-tie [is used] to signify a binding of the head as a securing of the woman's consciousness. This practice is reminiscent of African-American Yoruban priestess and spiritual counselor Iyanla Vanzant's entreaty to "save yourself' by holding the head with one hand on the forehead and the other at the back of the head during a potentially consciousness-changing moment such as contentious, heated exchanges…. I interpret this gesture as a symbolic act of "holding the head,' which is akin to using the head-tie to quite literally 'keep it together' in potentially 'mind-blowing' situations (2008: 237-238).

The colour of the clothing worn by Spiritual Baptists is also symbolic. Colours can invoke the power or energy of African deities and their Christian counterparts. In his examination of African religions in Trinidad, Frances Henry talks about sacred colours. Red, for instance, can be associated with the African deity known as Ogun, the god of war or his Christian equal, Saint Michael. Red is also connected to Saint Jerome or the African deity Shakpana who drives away disease (Henry 2003: 22&24). Robert Young injects this insight into his clothing. He shares: 'Colour is significant in Orisha business. Vibrations and messages are transferred from colours. I try to pull that tradition into the clothes I design' (personal communication, February 2013).

Echoes of Spiritual Baptist dress are evident in Young's work. For example, he uses red to tie the waist in a manner that is similar to that of the garments of Spiritual Baptist women (see figure 5). In adorning the body, the colour red is used as battle armour, which can embolden and strengthen the spirit, making a person feel safe and poised to conquer whatever life brings. Young describes the impact of his clothes: 'My clients say that when they put on my clothes they feel strong, secure

and self-assured' (personal communication, February 2013). Through his referencing of Spiritual Baptist black tradition – a tradition, which emerged in the Caribbean – Young demonstrates dress as situated bodily practice; he connects dress and bodies, understood as spirit, to a specific culture. By using clothing to lift the spirit or boost self-confidence, Young points to a spiritual dimension to looking and feeling like people. The application of clothes to the body constitutes an administering of therapy to the spirit.

Figure 5. A Spiritual Baptist church member and one of Robert Young's designs.
Images courtesy Arnaldo James.

Robert Young's concept of spirit wear also attempts to rescue dress in the Caribbean from attachments to the specialised category known as resort or cruise wear – a clothing style that connotes 'maillots and caftans to fill the steamer trunks of wealthy women sailing off for winter holidays'; a style 'inspired by leisure time' (Mistry 2010: n.pag.). For Young, the notion of resort wear is tied to what he sees as servitude: the attending to vacationers at recreation sites in a way that reverberates with the corporeal subjugation of a colonial past. Tourists become the present-day 'people', while bartenders and waitresses in tropical places like the Caribbean slave away under a neo-colonial order. According to Young, resort wear does not acknowledge the bodies that live and work in the Caribbean. Young explains his view:

> Spirit wear is reactionary. It responds to the idea of resort wear. For me, resort wear is an assumption of what is worn in an island like ours but it is a definition that

> comes from those who do not live in our islands. Resort wear is not even for us to wear – our day-to-day life is not resort living. Resort wear does not cater to and recognise us. It is for people coming here [to the Caribbean], from a Northern metropolis, to relax, to rest. Resort wear is dress to lie on a beach or drink a cool beverage. We do rest on beaches but that is not a full reality of who we are. Spirit wear takes into consideration those who live in the Caribbean; it takes into consideration their resilience in the face of a genocidal past and their zest for life (personal communication, April 2013).

If resort wear is for 'people' – that is, for persons visiting the Caribbean for leisure and pleasure – then Young's work is a remedy or counter argument that makes Caribbean inhabitants look and feel like people through clothing that attempts to attend to the fullness of the spirit of who they are: a multidimensional spirit that transcends fun in the sun.

Conclusion

This article has tried to demonstrate dress as a means of rewriting a script or discourse of self-empowerment and wellbeing. It links the notion of 'people' to ideas of confidence, security and feeling good about self. By specifically examining the work of Trinidadian clothing designer Robert Young, the article posits him as a source of therapeutic solution for recasting a structure of feeling about black bodies in the Caribbean. It establishes Young's aesthetics of dress, not as a commercial fad but rather as a bodily practice that is embedded in a history and culture that calls for treatment with a look and feel – a context that requires an aesthetic therapy. Young aptly sums up the idea of clothing as a mediating, reparative force: 'I have deliberately thought about clothes and the kind of intervention I can make with bodies in this [Caribbean] space because those who live here want to look and feel a certain way' (personal communication, February 2013).

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Notes

[1] Robert Young lives and works in the Caribbean island of Trinidad, where he has been practising as a clothing designer since 1986. He designs under the label called *The Cloth* [www.facebook.com/theclothcaribbean].

[2] There have been some attempts to move the idea of aesthetic experience beyond the boundaries of form. Yet, James Shelley (2013) has described those efforts as 'formalism-and' and 'formalism-or' theories, where form still receives attention to differing degrees.

[3] 'Meh' is the Trinidad English Creole way of spelling and pronouncing the word 'me.'

[4] In Trinidad, a smart man is someone who is cunning or deceptive – someone involved in fraud, usually in the context of white-collar crime or corruption.

[5] The Orisha religion in Trinidad is derived from religious beliefs among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Orisha is part of a strand of the Spiritual Baptist Faith in Trinidad. Stephens (1999) notes that the Spiritual Baptists in Trinidad – and the sister island of Tobago – have developed in different directions. One strand insists that it is entirely based on Christianity. A second strand weaves Christian, Cabalistic, African and Hindu beliefs. What Stephens identifies as a third strand, combines Roman Catholicism with a strong Orisha slant. It is to this third strand that I refer in this article.

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