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# The Performance of Femininity in the Works of Yinka Shonibare MBE

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# THE PERFORMANCE OF FEMININITY IN THE WORKS OF YINKA SHONIBARE MBE

by

RHONDA LYNN DANO

Under the Direction of Maria Gindhart

## ABSTRACT

Current scholarship on contemporary artist Yinka Shonibare MBE focuses on analyzing his deconstruction of identities through ready-made cultural paradigms epitomized by the use of Dutch wax textiles as an expression of “African-ness.” Through subversive tactics, Shonibare creates disoriented views of power that unveil the masquerade of identity. What is often unstated within this critique, however, is the role of the feminine performance. From the swinging maiden to the ballerina *sur les pointes*, women and femininity maintain an indelible role in Shonibare’s production. Thus, by evaluating gender with greater precision, I will highlight Shonibare’s dependency on stereotypes of femininity and the female body for cultural intelligibility.

INDEX WORDS: Yinka Shonibare MBE, Femininity, Gender, Textiles, Masquerade, Identity

THE PERFORMANCE OF FEMININITY IN THE WORKS OF YINKA SHONIBARE MBE

by

RHONDA LYNN DANO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

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THE PERFORMANCE OF FEMININITY IN THE WORKS OF YINKA SHONIBARE MBE

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## **Dedication**

I would like to thank my family for their endless support and motivation. I would like to dedicate this to my children, Isabella and Penelope, and my loving husband, Todd.

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## Introduction: Yinka Shonibare MBE and the Performance of Femininity

With an oeuvre of artistic works that span from the early nineties to now, contemporary artist Yinka Shonibare MBE continues to astound his public through grandiose acts of spectacle. Similar to a visit to the theater or circus, Shonibare's fantastically posed mannequins, wearing bold and exuberantly colored fabrics, are guaranteed to put on an unforgettable show. Shonibare's most recent and largest production includes his 2010 installation, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, which displays a period-style sailing ship, draped with thirty-seven sails, fitted into a jug measuring fifteen by nine feet (Fig. 1). In addition to the fame Shonibare has attained in putting together such a magnificent display in *Nelson's Ship*, he is also acknowledged as the first black artist ever to exhibit at Fourth Plinth, Trafalgar Square, in London, England.<sup>1</sup> He garnered similar acclaim for his 2007 installation at the National Gallery in London as one of the few living black artists ever to exhibit at the museum.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the implausible feat of encapsulating a ship in a bottle is an appropriate metaphor for Shonibare's subversive tactics that have gained him access to some of the most prestigious museums and locations around the world. In this way, we can imagine Shonibare as an artistic figure that arouses the power that Guy Debord proposed in *The Society of the Spectacle*, which hypothesized the notion that objective force could be attained through the presentation of society's "unreality."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "HMS Victory Returns to Trafalgar: Yinka Shonibare, MBE's Fourth Plinth Ship To Set Sail in May," Yinka Shonibare MBE, accessed March 13, 2012, <http://yinkashonibarembem.com/present.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony Downey, "Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare MBE in Conversation with Anthony Downey," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, ed. Rachel Kent (Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Debord defines "unreality" as society's invented visual form of itself. Guy Debord, "The Society of the Spectacle," in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2002), 142-143.

The key element or the language of the spectacle is formulated through the proliferation of Dutch wax textiles, commonly known as “African-print cloth.” This fabric is used in all his artistic media including: sculpture, painting, photography, and film.

Through the fabric, Shonibare adorns bodies in order to “redress” the masquerade of race, gender, and class performances from both historic and modern-day points of view.

As such, most of the scholarship on Shonibare centers on interlacing the strategic and constructive nature of the fabric to Shonibare’s own multicultural identity.<sup>4</sup>

Shonibare was born in London but was raised in an upper-class Yoruba household in Lagos, Nigeria. When he was sixteen, his parents sent him to an elite English boarding school. In 1981 he began his first year of art school at Byam Shaw then in 1989 he enrolled in Goldsmiths College, and it was during the course of his academic career that he became keenly aware of preconceptions of race and ethnicity that would come to define him as an artist.<sup>5</sup> While at Byam Shaw, he was questioned by a lecturer as to why he didn’t make “African” art since he was of African origin.<sup>6</sup> The cultural expectation to know and embody a perception of Africanity bewildered Shonibare, as his family’s financial and political ability to traverse Europe and Africa without difficulty bestowed in him the sentiment that he was more a global citizen than specifically tied to any one place. Shonibare reveals:

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Hobbs argues for a “reconsideration” of Shonibare’s Yoruba background from an international point of view, while John Picton and Nancy Hynes problematize the notion that Shonibare’s Yoruba or African identity can categorize or define his art in any applicable terms. Instead, Picton and Hynes situate Shonibare within the complex history of colonial and post-colonial rule that has come to embody the term “Yoruba,” as a modern aesthetic. Enwezor describes Shonibare’s work as a “trick of the mind,” in the way that it makes viewers comfortable with the contradictions that exist within his racial/ethnic performances, thus inferring that the “joke is on you,” if you fall for it. Robert Hobbs, “Yinka Shonibare: The Politics of Representation,” in *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, ed. Rachel Kent (Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008), 24-37; Nancy Hynes and John Picton, “Yinka Shonibare: Re-dressing History,” *African Arts* 34, no. 3 (2001): 60-73; Okwui Enwezor, “The Joke is On You: The Work of Yinka Shonibare,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 6-7 (1997): 10-11; and Okwui Enwezor, “Tricking the Mind: The Work of Yinka Shonibare,” in *Authentic, Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*, ed. Olu Oguibe and Salah Hassan (New York: Forum for African Arts, 2001), 214-227.

<sup>5</sup> Hobbs, “The Politics of Representation,” 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.



And of course, I've never actually been to an African village. I've only seen one on television...so the idea that I would have some connection to traditional African art is quite absurd. I can express myself with things I know, but I can't re-create something that I know nothing about.<sup>7</sup>

To challenge those who felt authorized in pigeonholing Shonibare and the kinds of works he was able to produce, Shonibare decided to explore other "ready-made" African symbols that he was obliged to know as an ethnic representative. This led him to the Dutch wax textiles, and after further investigation he discovered that they too were "unauthentic" signifiers of Africa. Dutch wax textiles are, in fact, derived from Indonesian batiks.<sup>8</sup> In the nineteenth century the Dutch and English took over batik production, and they were responsible for its steady dissemination throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia.<sup>9</sup> Thus, like the fabric, Shonibare is a product of imperialism, which he clearly resounds when he says, "It is normal for me to switch between cultures...I am a postcolonial hybrid."<sup>10</sup>

By exposing the artificiality of the fabric as an inauthentic signifier of "African-ness," Shonibare poses a dilemma for nationalists, nostalgists, and the general public who have been cued to look for cultural artifacts in the game of racial and ethnic identifications.<sup>11</sup> Through the textiles, Shonibare provokes and probes our deep-seated attachments to nationalistic symbols, and, as a result, viewers are compelled to consider how objects and bodies are interpolated with cultural and social meanings and the instability of those

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Okwui Enwezor, "Of Hedonism, Masquerade, Carnavalesque and Power: The Art of Yinka Shonibare," in *Art of the Contemporary African Diaspora*, ed. Laurie Ann Farrell (Gent, Belgium: Snoeck Publishers, 2003), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Kent, "Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE," in *Yinka Shonibare MBE*, ed. Rachel Kent (Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Hobbs, "Politics of Representation," 29.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Yinka Shonibare, "Fabric and the Irony of Authenticity," in *Annotations 1: Mixed Belongings and Unspecified Destinations*, ed. Nikos Papastergiadis (London, England: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1996), 40.

<sup>11</sup> Within his works, I believe Shonibare interchanges racial and ethnic politics, and so will I throughout this paper. For example, in Shonibare's *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* series, I argue that Shonibare not only seeks to ridicule the perception of "blackness" during the time of Hogarth, but also means to disrupt cultural differences between Europe and Africa.

significations in both time and place. These seemingly innocent fabrics reference the migration of peoples, commodities, and ideas that have come to create personal histories and mythic identities in a sea of diasporic languages. To “contaminate” and demystify racial and ethnic conceptions of self, Shonibare decided to “revisit” the historical period in which identities like race, class, and gender were being defined. The age of the enlightenment and subsequent eras (i.e. the era of colonialism), therefore, became Shonibare’s playground.

A closer look into Shonibare’s historic spectacle, though, reveals the overwhelming occurrence of a performance of femininity. From the swinging maiden to the ballerina *sur les pointes*, it is of no doubt that women and feminine tropes maintain an indelible role in Shonibare’s production. While several critics including Robert Hobbs, John Picton, Nancy Hynes, and Okwui Enwezor have explored Shonibare’s demystification strategies in terms of the subversive role of the Dutch wax fabric, gender and its representations are ironically disregarded or ignored all together. How is it that critics are able to see how Shonibare dresses and undresses racial and ethnic tropes but fail to reflect on how the female body is embellished or disrobed in opportunistic and objectifying ways? One way to explain this inconsistency is to evaluate the status of current “race-class-gender” methodologies that infuse scholarship today.

Sociologist Ivy Ken describes present-day research on “race-class-gender” as dependent on an “intersecting and interlocking” perspective, which she argues as both problematic and unsatisfactory.<sup>12</sup> This model relies on a number of factors, one of them

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<sup>12</sup> Ivy Ken, “Race-Class-Gender Theory: An Image(ry) Problem,” *Gender Issues* 24, no. 2 (2007): 2.

being that race, class, and gender mutually constitute each other.<sup>13</sup> By proposing a number of questions, which aim to situate each of these discourses within a social location, Ken is able to trouble this argument, and make a case for a new mode of thinking. She asks us to contemplate the following:

What form did gender have to take within a specific local context to fit together with race and class to produce a social arrangement so institutionalized it seems “natural”? What shape did class have to take to complement gender and race? In what direction did race have to move to lock into place with class and gender?<sup>14</sup>

“The final product,” she argues, is always a conglomeration of a variety of reasons and ways. Race, class, and gender are processes equally unique and in order to further empirical research, we must take into account the “patterned ways they create institutionalized forms of oppression, exploitation or liberation.”<sup>15</sup> To do so we must come up with new metaphoric representations that allow us to “operationalize” these concepts with greater precision.<sup>16</sup>

Ken’s observation of present “race-class-gender” methodological approaches is effective in grounding critical interpretations of Shonibare’s work. When analyzing gender, what I found is that many of his critics presuppose that race and gender go hand-in-hand. However, this sort of inference suggests that his racial or ethnic exaggerations could be equally applied to socio-sexual identities. Shonibare’s “deliberately primitive and exotic” (Shonibare’s words) methods are used to warn viewers of “what Africa is not.”<sup>17</sup> If we revert to gender, then, it means that we must vilify mainstream notions of femininity, represented in Shonibare’s work (the housewife, the leisure lady, the woman on the swing),

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Ibid., 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Hynes and Picton, “Re-dressing History,” 62.

as ridiculed states of being. Shonibare's deconstruction of identity is dependent on the reversal of meanings, but in terms of gender, this causes a devaluation of certain feminine realities. As a consequence, observations based on an "intersecting or interlocking" method fall short in establishing how gender is articulated within the forum of identity. To assume that race and gender are systems that intersect at even points is to simplify both the processes and effects of hegemonic domination and exploitation.

If we presume existing research on Shonibare is based on an "intersecting" method, then, it comes as no surprise that quite a few scholars contend that Shonibare's work in postcolonial theory and deconstruction are analogous to feminist objectives. Hobbs locates Shonibare's subversion of universality as "grounded" in feminism.<sup>18</sup> Hynes compares Shonibare's art to that of British artist Helen Chadwick, whom she claims "pushed femininity to the extreme."<sup>19</sup> Art critic Cristiana Perrella discusses Shonibare's "dandy" as an example of feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis's concept of an "eccentric subject."<sup>20</sup> Shonibare's deconstruction of power, then, sounds very familiar to feminist objectives in dismantling stereotypes. But how can we dismiss the erotic value of women capitalized in Shonibare's work?

If we contemplate gender with an analytical eye, as Ken proposes, then what is exposed is Shonibare's objectification of the female body for the sake of reaffirming racial and ethnic diversity within the global economy. Shonibare "makes-up" differences

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<sup>18</sup> Hobbs, "Politics of Representation," 31.

<sup>19</sup> Hynes and Picton, "Re-dressing History," 62.

<sup>20</sup> Cristiana Perrella and Elena Di Majo, eds., *Yinka Shonibare: Bemuse* (Rome, Italy: Ministero Attivita Culturali, 2001), 20. Lauretis argues that through the "eccentric subject" and discourses of excess, feminism can rearticulate itself through consciousness, as a "subjective, cognitive practice," in order to displace patriarchy without creating or depending upon another binary. Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 1 (1990): 136. In similar methodological terms, Shonibare states, "excess is the only legitimate means of subversion." Hobbs, "Politics of Representation," 34.

between western and non-western women in order to deconstruct cultural identities tied to those bodies, but he fails to see how in the act of inscription, he perpetuates a form of gender oppression similar to nationalistic discourses which aim to erase the female body. In my own appropriation of Lauretis, I call this the “historic consciousness of *unfeminine* thought.”<sup>21</sup> In *Scattered Hegemonies*, transnational feminists Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan make a similar claim when they state:

What needs to be examined in light of such transnational hegemonic borrowings are the ways in which various patriarchies collaborate and borrow from each other in order to reinforce specific practices that are oppressive to women.<sup>22</sup>

Within this thesis, I resolve to discuss gender with more precision through a genealogical analysis of Shonibare’s historical appropriations and fantastical recreations of European women from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries.<sup>23</sup> In this way, I aim to highlight Shonibare’s misogynistic methods while also appealing for a modified approach to “gender-race-class” research.

To begin, my first chapter will focus on Shonibare’s parody of European power through productions of leisure. By staging the European body in acts of pleasure, Shonibare reorients the gaze between self and “other” to demonstrate westerners’ own “otherness.” Shonibare is employing Oriental and Occidental tropes to perpetuate a new mode of seeing that blurs the distinctions between those who have the power to view and those that are always on view. However, within the spectacle of “fun” Shonibare’s art neglects to mediate

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<sup>21</sup> Lauretis, “Eccentric Subjects,” 115.

<sup>22</sup> Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Post-modernity,” in *Scattered Hegemonies*, ed. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 24.

<sup>23</sup> My definition of genealogy is derived from sociologist Paula Saukko when she states that genealogy “investigates, how certain taken-for-granted, such as scientific, truths are historical constructs that have their roots in specific social and political agendas.” In my analysis I aim to show how femininity becomes the “taken-for-granted” truth, and is used to manipulate and twist racial identity politics. Paula Saukko, *Doing Research in Cultural Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 115.

gender implications that pervade leisure discourses. Historian Sarah Jordan's concept of eighteenth-century European women as "leisure-personified," demands our consideration of the ways in which women's idleness became an important commodity that reinforced not only class, but racial and ethnic status as well.<sup>24</sup> Chapter One includes, therefore, a critical analysis of how Shonibare's women take on object-like qualities in order to reiterate hegemonic power. Through a fetishistic expression of femininity, Shonibare augments women's position as "creators and guarantors" of the new world vision.

Chapter Two will continue an exploration of Shonibare's deconstruction of power, but through an analysis of body and dress politics. Cloth and body comprise an entangled relationship in the expression of race, class, and gender identities. While Shonibare visually references those identities as unstable and always changing via the Dutch wax textiles as a signifier of shifting cultural appearances, I would like to challenge those notions by describing the ways in which women have utilized dress in order to reclaim their body as a manifestation of gender power. Through a historical look into how women have "fashioned" their body in both European and African cultures, I posit that cloth can serve to determine how the body and self are interpreted. Thus, cloth plays an integral role in the assertion of a gender identity that is distinct from any racial, economic, or political inferences.

Chapter One and Chapter Two are both about analyzing Shonibare's methods within the context of history, post-colonial theory, and transnational feminism. Through a genealogical analysis of Shonibare's historic spectacles, I aim to highlight the physical and symbolic position of the feminine body within his oeuvre. When looking at Shonibare's

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<sup>24</sup> Sarah Jordan, *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in 18<sup>th</sup> Century British Literature and Culture* (London: Associate University Press, 2003), 17.

interpretation of gender, women’s role as “translators” is substantiated. His racial and ethnic deconstructions are often carried by his female figures, characterizing what British film theorist Laura Mulvey once defined as women’s position as “bearers, and not makers, of meaning.”<sup>25</sup> Through the objectification of the female body Shonibare accomplishes his Victorian fantasies and capitalistic obsessions. Thus, while Shonibare states that he adopted the MBE title, which acknowledges him as a member of the Order of the British Empire, as a platform of protest, what I endeavor to prove is that his function as a hegemonic subject is veritably reestablished through his poses of dominance over women.



NELSON'S SHIP IN A BOTTLE

©2010 Yinka Shonibare, MBE and courtesy the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery (London) and James Cohan Gallery (New York). Photography courtesy Stephen White.

Figure 1. Yinka Shonibare, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle*, 2010, bottle measures 4.7m in length and 2.8m in diameter. Source: Yinka Shonibare MBE Web Site. “HMS Victory Returns to Trafalgar: Yinka Shonibare, MBE’s Fourth Plinth Ship To Set Sail in May.” Accessed March 13, 2012. <http://yinkashonibaremb.com/present.html>

<sup>25</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 15.

## Chapter One: Women, Leisure, and Objects: Yinka Shonibare's Oriental Grid

Just as well that the six months I spent there are over; it is already nothing, I have seen so many places collapse behind my steps, like stage sets; what do I have left from them? An image as confused as that of a dream: the best of what one finds there, I already knew by heart.

— Gérard de Nerval, "World as Exhibition."<sup>26</sup>

These members of the aristocracy...are objects of curiosity in a kind of reverse way. So the fetish for me, as an African, is the eighteenth century European culture, whilst their fetish is the African mask.

— Yinka Shonibare, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation."<sup>27</sup>

Timothy Mitchell's discussion of the "world as exhibition," which refers not to an exhibition of the world, but to an "ordering up" of the world as if an "endless exhibition," alludes to the manner in which many outside cultures are recognized and defined by their commodities, artifacts, and treasures.<sup>28</sup> Via the exhibition space, as a stage for managing cultural differences, the metaphoric and physical separation between viewing subjects and objects of view, or more succinctly, westerners and non-westerners, is understood as natural or proper. Thus, within the world exhibition, non-western bodies or "others" take on object-like qualities in order to conform to social, political, or economic expectations. This transformation of bodies into objects is an "orientalizing" method used to reiterate hegemonic power. For example, French traveler and writer Gérard de Nerval's ability to know the Orient by heart references the discursive measures of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, in which "text can create not only knowledge, but also the very reality they

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Timothy Mitchell, "The World as Exhibition," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 2 (1989): 234.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Kent, "Time and Transformation," 18.

<sup>28</sup> Mitchell, "World as Exhibition," 218.



appear to describe.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, everywhere the western traveler went, from the times of colonial and imperial pursuits to now, he expected and interpreted the reality he saw in terms of its congruity to visual and textual pictures.

The discursive and semiotic language of objects within the “world exhibition” appears particularly central to Yinka Shonibare’s agenda to fetishize European aristocracy. His reverse Orientalism, or Occidentalism, is a method that allows him to undermine and deconstruct the authoritative voice of those (Europeans/westerners) who believe they know the “other” by heart by alluding to their own “otherness.” The act of disempowering the western body is possible through Shonibare’s parody of western notions of leisure. How the European spent his or her “free time” situated his or her social value within the global economy. By mocking the European, Shonibare is able to disrupt the exhibition space, in which the lines of separation between those who have the power to view and those who are always on view are blurred. However, what are the implications, in terms of gender, of this Oriental turn?

While we can ask this question in a more general sense of Shonibare’s work as a whole, I am specifically interested in how Shonibare negotiates these competing power structures through women. What I will demonstrate in this chapter is the manner in which Shonibare’s Oriental/Occidental methods mimic similar tropes used to disempower and subjugate women. In order to accomplish this analysis, I refer to anthropologist Laura Nader’s notion of an “Oriental grid” to demonstrate the arbitrary nature of negotiating difference on the global stage. Nader’s “Oriental grid” describes the function of “disavowed

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<sup>29</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 94.

resemblances,” as an apparatus that restates the commonalities between European and African societies, in which women’s subordination is “institutionally structured, culturally rationalized, and leading to situations of deference, powerlessness, and poverty.”<sup>30</sup>

Shonibare’s dressed sculptures embody a type of disavowal as they betray all allegiances to any one nation given their “hybrid” identity. The fact that the Victorians dressed in African clothes can never be wholly European or African stands as a reminder to viewers that identity is never complete. Ironically, however, what does remain constant within Shonibare’s masquerade or grid are women’s position as “creators and guarantors” of the new world vision. Through an Orientalism lens, I am able to prove that gender tropes are not challenged in Shonibare’s works, but reinforced. Therefore, in this chapter I will demonstrate how Orientalism and Occidentalism as aesthetic methods can be used to create imaginary figures of “make-believe” power that maintain women’s oppressed position within the “world exhibition.”

To begin, I will explore the discursive measures of Orientalism as one of the frameworks from which Shonibare builds his hegemonic truths. Said’s renowned 1978 publication, *Orientalism*, is of foremost importance given his elucidation of the formulaic language in which the non-western body or the “other” is both figured and constituted. Said states that anyone who writes, researches, or teaches about the Orient is inherently an Orientalist as they contribute to the recirculation and dissemination of this discursive tradition. Thus, one is led to believe that the east or “other” only accrues social, political, or economic meaning through the west. This perception leads one to believe that Orientalism is unidirectional, which fails to account for the heterogeneous and multivalent nature of

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<sup>30</sup> Laura Nader, “Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Control of Women,” *Cultural Dynamics* 2, no. 3 (1989): 334.

“Orientalisms” that occur within and outside the Orient. Scholar Dennis Porter argues that Said’s conception of a continuous history of oppositional representations, from the eighteenth century to now, assume that Orientalism is not only “what we have, but all we can ever have.”<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, many critics have successfully argued that Said’s *Orientalism* is more about uncovering the productive and reproductive discourses surrounding the “other” within a “series of multiple connotations and orientations.”<sup>32</sup> Said is drawing upon Foucault, who defines discourse as an “irregular set of regularities” in order to disrupt the “over-determining idealities of traditional history study, with its desires for origins, unified developments, and cause and effects.”<sup>33</sup> While the “Orient” seems to reference a specific location, it is, more accurately, the metaphoric place from which “West-centrism” operate. As such, Said’s Orientalism can account for the inconsistencies that occur in orientalizing methods across cultures, making it an appropriate methodological framework upon which Shonibare is able to build.<sup>34</sup>

Given the dual nature of Shonibare’s work, in which it is never clear from which angle, whether Oriental or Occidental, his gaze is directed, it is pertinent to consider the speculative bounds of Occidentalism. The term Occidentalism allows us to conceptualize how the west figures into the imaginings of African culture and identity.<sup>35</sup> What Occidentalisms reveal are the constant negotiations that take place on non-western ground, where the west is seen in one sense as a celebrated “model” that the “other” should

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Sara Mills, *Discourse* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 119.

<sup>32</sup> Wang Ning, “Orientalism versus Occidentalism?,” *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 60.

<sup>33</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ning, “Orientalism versus Occidentalism,” 60.

<sup>35</sup> Meltem Ahiska, “Occidentalism: The Historical Fantasy of the Modern,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2/3 (2003): 362.

duplicate, and in another a threat to “indigenous” national values.<sup>36</sup> Shonibare’s dressed and headless sculptures serve as a perpetual reminder of this debate as tones of both mimicry and menace are inscribed on them. We, the viewer, are never quite sure from which racial or ethnic position his figures purport to stand. Hynes and Picton observe, “Are they ‘African’ Europeans, or Europeans who have made her or his fortune from Africa?”<sup>37</sup> The acceptance of this identity ambiguity is crucial to understanding Shonibare’s methods as his representations remain in a liminal state between both Oriental and Occidental discourses. As Turkish poet Ece Ayhan elegantly remarks:

One who goes too far East,  
Because of geography arrives in the West,  
The reverse is also true.<sup>38</sup>

Ayhan’s poem comments on the circular quality of both discourses in which it is never clear how far one can gaze in either direction.

What is apparent, however, is that both Occidentalisms and Orientalisms expose western and non-western dependencies on dualisms for the expression of “otherness.” Often nationalisms are determined by the positioning of difference for the purpose of justifying oppressive and dominating state legislatures. Sociologist Simon Harrison argues that nationalisms are best understood as:

Processes in which felt similarities, and shared features of identity, are disavowed, censored, or systematically forgotten. To understand ethnicities and nationalities, then, involves understanding the ways in which they are constructed, in part at least, from devices for the elision and undoing of resemblances.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 353.

<sup>37</sup> Hynes and Picton, “Re-dressing History,” 62.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Ahiska, “Occidentalism: The Historical Fantasy,” 361.

<sup>39</sup> To denounce resemblances is just another affirmation of cultural differences that authorize border and boundary controls. It is often these supposed “differences” that come to define a nation as “American “ or “European,” etc. Simon Harrison, “Cultural Difference as Denied Resemblance: Reconsidering Nationalism and Ethnicity,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 2 (2003): 345.

Orientalisms and Occidentalisms are the discursive “devices” that structurally embody “denied resemblances,” and contribute to the formation of imaginary bodies of nationalistic character. These imaginary bodies, like the ones found in the paintings of Jean-Leon Gerôme or even the dressed sculptures of Yinka Shonibare, contribute to the “truths” that societies have to *work* to produce.<sup>40</sup>

Laura Nader’s “Oriental grid” is useful in determining these examples of “worked truths” as they are often found in systems or structures that subjugate women. Nader also identifies “disavowed resemblances” in her proposal of the existence of commonalities between European and African societies, in which women’s subordination is frequently “culturally rationalized.”<sup>41</sup> Nader’s supposition is just one instance of “sameness” (women’s oppression) that is theoretically disregarded for the sake of imperial, colonial, national, and even gendered significance. What would happen if notions of western modernity and freedom were found to be more regulatory than liberating for women?<sup>42</sup> According to Nader, the effects of colonialism and capitalism on non-western women have been extensively researched, but little has been said about the “first female victims of Industrialization—European and American women.”<sup>43</sup>

One could read Shonibare’s sculpture *How to Blow Off Two Heads at Once (Ladies)*, 2006, as communicating the victimization European women experienced during the Industrial Revolution as their position in society was based on an “economic relation of

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<sup>40</sup> Mills, *Discourse*, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Nader, “Orientalism, Occidentalism, and the Control of Women,” 334.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 338-339. Nader describes how in the 1960s, western concepts of the “nuclear family” and “ideal couple” actually took away from Libyan women’s roles and rights in society and in the family as they no longer had a communal group of women for support and companionship. This social isolation allowed for Libyan men to completely dominate their wives.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

exploitation (Fig. 2).”<sup>44</sup> In this piece two female mannequins are dressed in brightly colored Dutch wax with the prominent colors of red, yellow, orange, and green. The models stand a foot apart pointing guns at each other’s headless bodies while holding their other arm on their hip. Physically and metaphorically there is nothing to shoot, as they are the same body in that they represent equivalent forms of hostility and aggression found in both European and African societies. The mirror-like quality of their poses and almost identical style and color of their dresses reaffirms their equivalency.

Though it is usually read for its commentary on race, through a lens of gender, this work conjures up a history of female subjugation. English professor Thad Logan notes that European mothers and wives were the official representatives of the new global market in which they served as protectors and insurers of the bourgeois identity.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the violence evoked by this piece can be viewed as a representation of the “face-off” that Victorian women were resigned to given the effects of trade and colonialism. Women during this period were regulated by severe and stringent policies on appropriate feminine behaviors, thus, reinforcing their position as boundary markers. Moreover, the cultural showdown was not reserved for European women, but affected non-western women as well. On both sides of the invisible line, women were expected to act as “visible signs of national homogeneity” and, through discourses of dress, demeanor, and home, to reinforce national values.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Lauretis describes the “economic relation of exploitation” as women’s position as a social category. Lauretis, “Eccentric Subjects,” 132.

<sup>45</sup> Thad Logan, “Foreign Objects: Souvenirs and Exotica in the Victorian Parlor,” in *Borders of Culture, Margins of Identity* (New Orleans: Xavier Review Press, 1994), 36.

<sup>46</sup> Anne McClintock, “‘No Longer in Future Heaven’: Gender, Race, and Nationalism,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 97.

In relation to the ladies, the “gentlemen” version of *How to Blow Off Two Heads*, 2006, clearly demonstrates Shonibare’s inability to incorporate gender as meaningful (Fig. 3). While the female version calls attention to the objectification of femininity as an instrument of power, the male version reasserts power as a masculine right through its reference to the duel. As a result, the masculine take on *How to Blow Off Two Heads* neutralizes or annuls any feminized motivation that we could apply to the ladies as an example of women’s experiences and, therefore, we are left to interpret it in terms of its Oriental/Occidental gaze. Shonibare’s failure to exemplify the gendered significance of his portrayals further emphasizes that it is not gender Shonibare is deconstructing, but race.

Shonibare’s disavowal of gender goes even further if we examine his installation *The Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour*, 1996 (Fig. 4). Critics have noted that this piece recollects the discrepancies between the “colonial haves and colonized have-nots.”<sup>47</sup> In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the parlour was the quintessential space in which to display one’s possessions. In Shonibare’s *Parlour*, the viewer can find a Victorian chaise, wingback chair and ottoman, console, fire screen, and various decorative arts with almost everything draped in custom Dutch wax featuring a “black footballer” motif to conjure a historic past with modern-day pretenses. Thus, through this work, Shonibare is reminiscing, but not on furniture styles. This installation is a parody of “period rooms” found in history museums around the world.<sup>48</sup> By exoticizing the Victorian home via the fabric, Shonibare is corrupting the anthropologic or scientific belief that we can “know” the

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<sup>47</sup> The “have-not’s is an allusion to the colonized Africans, however, it could also reference working class Victorians given the rise of the bourgeois class in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Kent, “Time and Transformation,” 18.

<sup>48</sup> Hynes and Picton, “Redressing History,” 62.

“other” by way of replicating their daily life. His Occidental or re-Oriental gaze allows him to objectify the European as a maneuver of power.

Besides the subversive character of this work as a manifestation of cultural visibility issues, this space also has historic gendered connotations that seem to go unnoticed. In reference to this piece Shonibare states:

Sport is a field in which nationalism is asserted very strongly. It is also very interesting that if you are a good footballer and you are black, you can become English, French or Italian, whatever you like, as long as you remain a good footballer. Of course everything changes once you start playing badly.<sup>49</sup>

For Shonibare, the black footballer closely resembles the “dandy” or the “flaneur” that covertly infiltrates European society. Like the dandy, who in exchange for his supper supplies “witty conversation and style ” the black footballer also barter his skills for social, political, and economic acceptance.<sup>50</sup> Shonibare’s parlor continues his curiosity for ethnic/racial radicals that can freely penetrate both western and non-western homes, but what is forgotten or not considered is how women used these spaces to escape or invent their own sense of social autonomy.

Via the home space, women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were expected to bridge the distinctions between the public and private world. The parlor became a site of “intense ideological pressures,” in which the gathering of ornaments, souvenirs, and “foreign” objects by women analogously represented the Europeans’ attempt to rectify the “inside” and “outside” world.<sup>51</sup> Shonibare’s parlor acknowledges the

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Valentina Bruschi, “Interview with Yinka Shonibare,” in *Yinka Shonibare: Be-Muse*, ed. Hendrik Christian Anderson (Rome, Italy: Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, 2001), 100.

<sup>50</sup> Dandy reference from Jean Fisher, “The Outside Within: Shonibare’s Dandy and the Parasitic Economy of Exchange,” in *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dress*, ed. Anna Barber (Jerusalem, Israel: Kal Press, 2002), 33.

<sup>51</sup> Logan, “Foreign Objects,” 35.



cultural and economic ramifications of foreign negotiations without consideration of its effects on women and domestic life.

Nineteenth-century Victorian photcollage albums reveal the ways in which aristocratic women transformed the parlor or drawing room into a site for portraying desires and staging class relationships in order to emphasize their worldliness, cleverness, and taste. Given the restrictions surrounding suitable feminine recreation, album making provided women an outlet through which they could pay tribute to their family, by promoting their class status, while also accentuating their individual “accomplishments” as artists.<sup>52</sup> The *Filmer Album*, mid 1860’s, displays Ms. Caroline’s humor and ingenuity in carving herself her own unique space (Fig. 5). It reveals not only the people she desires to surround herself by, but also the types of proper feminine behaviors that articulated her respectability and refinement. Within this work, one woman watches the children over her shoulder, while another sits at a writing desk. The painting on the wall displays a woman at a piano, and another is shown entertaining a male guest by showing him what looks like an album. Together these female demonstrations of recreation restate the function of the parlor as a feminized space. In contrast, Shonibare’s parlor obscures all feminine associations given the emphasis on the fabric.

While Victorian-era photcollages are fascinating and full of quirks that we can appreciate as a modern viewer, one could argue that the autonomy women gained from album making and similar ornamental arts was quite problematical given the new emphasis placed on “accomplishments” in women’s education. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, growing tastes for private entertainment meant that women were

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<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Siegel, “Society Cutups,” in *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, ed. Elizabeth Siegel (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2009), 15.

desired more than ever to be seen in their domestic settings. This change in “custom of display” led to a rise in the arts being taught at secondary schools in order to increase woman’s marriage eligibility.<sup>53</sup> As art historian Ann Bermingham remarks:

For her part, the accomplished woman’s role was to consume art in order to be exchanged as art, and it was her very skills as a consumer—her taste and discrimination in choosing and displaying those commodities that would be an extension of her subjectivity—that in turn would determine how she was consumed.<sup>54</sup>

The photocollage albums present a glimpse into the world of social play, in which European women were both creators and captives of their “objectness.” In the parlor women could perform leisure while also rendering themselves as objects of leisure. Men were the “connoisseurs of culture,” who judged the aesthetics and performance of woman.<sup>55</sup>

As discussed in the introduction, historian Sarah Jordan’s conception of women as “leisure-personified” reaffirms the objectivity assigned to female bodies as they were perceived as the “ornamental companions of men’s nonworking hours.”<sup>56</sup> In male conduct books it was a common conception that “women were placed on earth to make men’s leisure more pleasant.”<sup>57</sup> Minister and poet James Fordyce, who frequently wrote about femininity, comments:

We [men] are willing on such occasions, to make more allowance for the imbecility of those who were formed to delight us, not so much by an emulation of intellects, as by external graces and decorations, united with the softer virtues of the heart, and the sprightlier charms of the fancy.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Ann Bermingham, “The Aesthetics of Ignorance: The Accomplished Woman in the Culture of Connoisseurship,” *Oxford Art Journal* 16, no. 2 (1993): 3-4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Bermingham, “Aesthetics of Ignorance,” 13.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Jordan, “*The Anxieties of Idleness*,” 87.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 88.

White woman's objectness is formulated through a process of externalization in which her body is understood in terms of its correlations to objects, which parallels Mitchell's discussion of the "other" within the world exhibition as both discourses are dependent on an oriental or outside gaze.

Women's leisure was, therefore, not only about class and social status, but also a method in which hegemonic power was reiterated. Jordan describes how the rising position of the bourgeois meant that "British-ness" was defined more by occupation and money than by birth.<sup>59</sup> Exemplifying one's "British-ness" often depended upon the consumption of objects of curiosity (white woman and the foreign object) and the ability to tame or assimilate them into "ordinary" life. Logan notes:

To aestheticize a culture is to subsume its political, moral, and economic complexity into a style, to reduce that complexity to an appearance open to (and possessed by) the gaze of the European.<sup>60</sup>

The manner in which the foreign object was disciplined corresponds to the way women were dominated, objectified, and controlled through leisure discourses. Woman was diminished to a set of signs and significations, which depended upon her acceptance of object-like qualities.

Shonibare's art is dependent on the assumption that both culture and woman can be bottled up and sold on the department store floor. In fact, Shonibare states:

Actually it is very difficult to tell the difference between a fashion shop window and my work. My work is located within popular culture, whereas traditional sculpture is too precious to put clothes on.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>60</sup> Logan, "Foreign Objects," 44.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Jaap Guldemond and Gabriele Mackert, "To Entertain and Provoke Western Influences in the Work of Yinka Shonibare," in *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dutch*, ed. Jaap Guldemond (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2004), 38.

By reversing the gaze and fetishizing European culture through a discourse of leisure, Shonibare simulates a parallel form of externalization and objectivity that occurred in the world exhibition and in the European parlor. We, the viewer, curiously search his figures for deeper meaning and begin to question the hierarchal position of western society to “others,” even if we are western ourselves. Thus, Shonibare’s “objectness” is a mechanism for resistance.

So how does Shonibare create an object-driven gaze? Curator Laurie Ann Farrell states that Shonibare is reliant on “gestures, poses, fashion and furniture” instead of faces and minds for bodily and cultural recognition (which is even more ironic given that Shonibare’s Yoruba culture values the head as the location of one’s soul and identity).<sup>62</sup> His beheaded figures obscure racial identity while retaining a dual function. In one sense, the beheaded figures recall the manner in which non-western cultures have been historically stripped of identity and meshed together into one, under the title “other.” In another sense, his beheaded figures visually reference the dislocation of western imperial power that Shonibare *works* to produce. The interruption of power is accomplished through Shonibare’s use of objects of Victorian leisure because westerners’ hierarchal status is questioned, mocked, and problematized through the very notion of leisure or idleness. Western power is disrupted, but only by reinforcing woman as object. Thus, Shonibare’s fetish is really the female body.

When analyzing Shonibare’s work, what is apparent is his lack of regard for the history of women’s objectification. Instead, he reiterates familiar gender tropes in which we, the viewer, must read women’s bodies through signs and “customs of display.” In

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<sup>62</sup> Laurie Ann Farrell, “Re-Dressing Power: The Art of Yinka Shonibare,” *Twice* (2004): 85.

*Leisure Lady (with ocelots)* and *Leisure Lady (with pugs)*, 2001, Shonibare references women's position as "leisure-personified" as their bodies are activated only through the exotic goods they hold and wear (Fig. 6 & Fig. 7). In each of these pieces the women are dressed in elaborately layered petticoats, bodices, bustles, and skirts stitched together with Shonibare's signature Dutch wax. The women are displayed not only performing leisure, through the act of walking their pets, but also as objects of leisure themselves. Each woman holds a leash in one hand, with the other hand to their side as if trying to balance their body from the force of the pulling animals. The combination of the women's headlessness juxtaposed to the three animals transforms the leisure ladies into monsters analogous to the mythological guard dog Cerberus. As a result, their function as objects is reinforced by their part as "guard-dogs" of European values.

The varying animals and dress motifs in the sculptures also illustrate the fetish that African and European cultures had for each other's cultural objects of beauty, reiterating the discourse of "denied resemblances" within Orientalisms and Occidentalisms. If we consider the ocelot as symbolic of an African fetish and the pug as a representation of European culture, then the two ladies are correspondingly European and African based on their oppositional desires. The motifs found on the dresses also allude to cultural identification. For example, the clock motifs on *Leisure Lady (with ocelots)* are associated with themes of progress, modernity, and forward-thrusting potential, which are identified as symbols of western culture.<sup>63</sup> *Leisure Lady (with ocelots)* is, therefore, expressing her "European-ness" through the exotic objects she holds and wears.

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<sup>63</sup> McClintock, "No Longer in Future Heaven," 92.

The electric fan motif on the dress of *Leisure Lady (with pugs)* presupposes the fascination that the “other” had for western technology and dress. Africanist Manthia Diawara characterizes this figure as a “been-too” or non-westerner who has adopted English manners.<sup>64</sup> “Been-toos” have been visualized in art works since as early as the thirteenth century.<sup>65</sup> For example, art historian Mary Roberts describes how English women who traveled to the Orient were regularly offended by the adaptations of western dress within the harem.<sup>66</sup> Thus, through the embodiment of this historical perspective, Shonibare is able to align national identities to these headless bodies. It is the garments they wear and the symbols they hold that communicate notions of cultural identity. Furthermore, Shonibare’s leisure ladies illustrate women’s position as “active transmitters and producers of national culture,” or as stand-ins or “guard dogs” for the power struggles between the east and west.<sup>67</sup>

Through Shonibare’s *Leisure Ladies*, the viewer is left to interpret European and African femininity as excessive and frivolous. Shonibare adds:

To be in a position to engage in leisure pursuits, you need a few bob...whilst the leisure pursuit might look frivolous—my depiction of it is a way of engaging with that power.<sup>68</sup>

It is the excess associated with women of leisure as an expression of male power that Shonibare is trying to undermine, but what is not taken into account is how these feminine

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<sup>64</sup> In Kent, “Time and Transformation,” 17.

<sup>65</sup> For example, statue of St. Maurice Magdeburg, 13<sup>th</sup> century, located in the Cathedral of Magdeburg, Magdeburg, Germany.

<sup>66</sup> Mary Roberts, “Contested Terrains: Women Orientalists and the Colonial Harem,” in *Orientalism’s Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography*, ed. Mary Roberts, and Jill Beaulieu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 190.

<sup>67</sup> McClintock, “No Longer in Future Heaven,” 90.

<sup>68</sup> Quoted in Kent, “Time and Transformation,” 14.

exaggerations reinforce women's oppression and commodification within the global market.

Shonibare's *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, 2002, installation recapitulates his complete disregard for gender oppression as he exploits the female body for the sake of subverting western conceptions of "worldly" sophistication (Fig. 8). In Shonibare's installation, he constructs a shipping dock where a vehicle, luggage, and cargo are being unloaded in the midst of an orgy. The presence of luggage at the site of this sexual escapade infers not only tourism, but also specifically sex tourism as a masculine right. Shonibare is specifically referencing the "Grand Tour" as a European leisure activity and its strategy to create cultured beings. For the most part, these tours could hardly be called "civilized," and Shonibare beckons the viewer's attention to the incongruity between the motives of these trips in relation to what commonly took place. Anthropologist Cynthia Enloe describes how for men during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women were "something to be experienced" and in the realm of tourism the male traveler felt he could shed "civilization's constraints" imposed by women at home.<sup>69</sup> So, like the cargo and the western objects that infiltrate foreign lands, the women in Shonibare's piece are also shown as "entered." The male figures also being "experienced" reiterate the position of nonwestern men as feminized bodies. Shonibare states, "I consider myself a hedonist...I think that pleasure is king—as well as a very strong basis for being subversive."<sup>70</sup> By procuring gratification from acts of female domination and subjugation Shonibare validates his titles as both a lecher and a hegemonic overlord. Through a discourse of excess and

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<sup>69</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 27.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Hobbs, "Politics of Representation," 34.

pleasure, Shonibare seductively undermines notions of European leisure, but does so only through the replication of women's objectness and sexual portrayal within the game of ethnic/racial/ national negotiations.

In the photographic series, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*, 1998, Shonibare reasserts his sybaritic tastes for various pleasures (Fig. 9). The photographs follow a durational narrative set by the time of day, recalling William Hogarth's moralistic cycles of the eighteenth century. At 11 am he awakes, at 2pm he conducts business, at 5pm he plays billiards, at 7pm he attends a musical performance, and finally at 3am he engages in an orgy. In each of these photographs Shonibare's central figure is not only marked by color, as the only black man surrounded by white men and women, but also by the parenthetical structure of the bodies that surround him. The other actors bend, crouch, and sway according to Shonibare's every move.

For this analysis, I will focus on *Diary of a Victorian Dandy 0.300 hours* given its close resemblance to Eugène Delacroix's Orientalist painting, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, (Fig. 10 & Fig. 11). The striking parallels, including the bed/couch combination, the lounging disenchanted emperor, and the excess exemplified by the bodies and booty, reinforce Shonibare's methodological appropriation of Oriental motifs. In his photograph a number of men are portrayed receiving pleasure from women. Shonibare is shown in the foreground with two women caressing and looking at him for more attention. The butler glances over his shoulder at Shonibare as if to make sure he is being serviced. Similar to the Orientalist painters of the nineteenth century who used the image of the female body to transfer notions of non-western brutality and primitiveness, as exemplified by Delacroix's work, Shonibare also trivializes his female figures in order to demean and belittle western



life and culture. Women's objectification is reinforced by the ways in which their bodies are manipulated and staged to emphasize Shonibare's subversive power. Undergirding both Shonibare's and Delacroix's work is the masculine fantasy to embody the masculine "other," and his various objects, including women.

The associations between women and leisure are key methods to Shonibare's disruption and parody of European culture. By reducing women to an object status by way of ignoring the gender qualities of many of his works, Shonibare is able to maneuver women throughout his power productions. The denial of gender oppression is a truth that Shonibare must work to produce, thus referencing Nader's supposition of the grid system in which only certain knowledges are filtered within the world exhibition. Shonibare's grid disavows the female body for the national body.

While it is not necessarily clear if Shonibare's approach is an Orientalizing or Occidentalizing aesthetic, it is, however, effective for understanding notions of "objectness." An object-driven gaze forces the viewer to look from the outside, which mimics the line of vision found within the world exhibition and the Victorian parlor. Both spaces endeavor to consume femininity through discipline and control in order to reiterate hegemonic power.



Figure 2. Yinka Shonibare, *How to Blow Off Two Heads at Once (Ladies)*, 2006, 2 life-size fiberglass mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton, two guns, shoes, leather riding boots; plinth: 160x245, 122 cm; figures: 160x155x122 cm. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.



Figure 3. Yinka Shonibare, *How to Blow Off Two Heads at Once (Gentlemen)*, 2006, 2 life-size fiberglass mannequins, Dutch wax printed cotton, two guns, shoes, leather riding boots; plinth: 160x245, 122 cm; figures: 160x155x122 cm. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.



Figure 4. Yinka Shonibare, *The Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour*, 1996; reproduction furniture, fire screen, carpet, props, Dutch wax printed cotton, 260x488x530 cm. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.



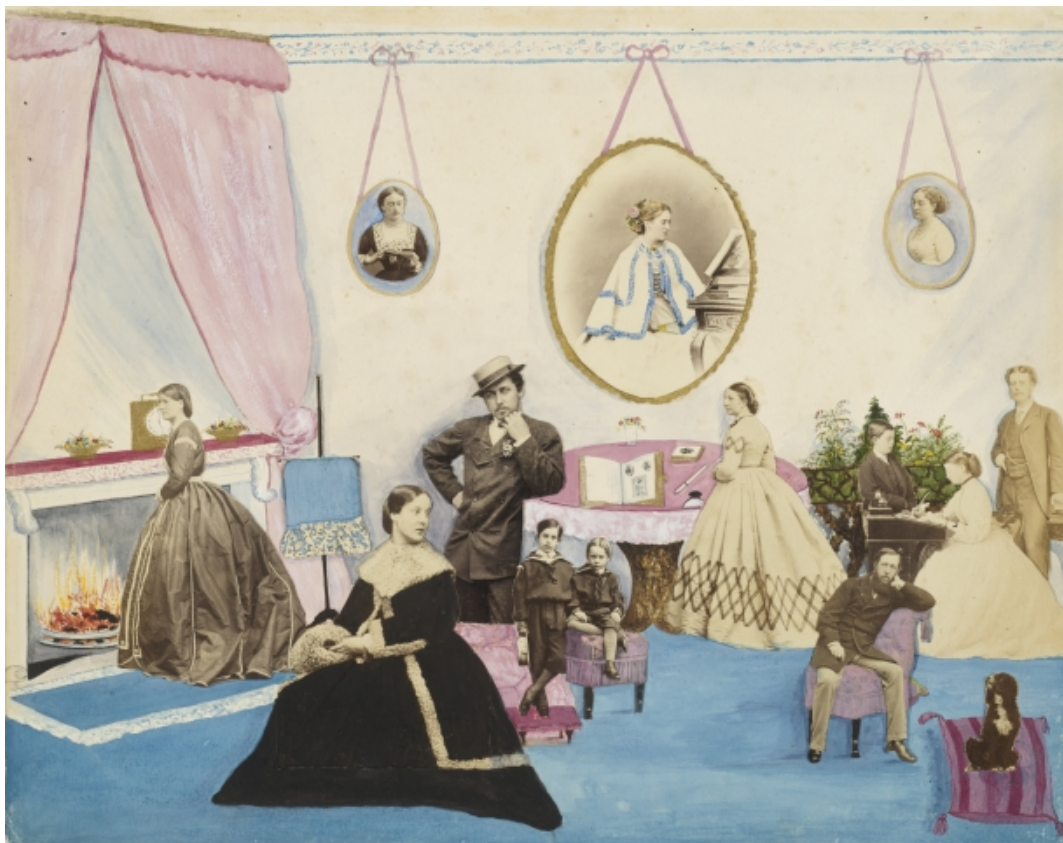


Figure 5. Mary Georgiana Carolina, Lady Filmer, From the *Filmer Album*, mid-1860's.  
Source: Siegel, Elizabeth. *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*. Chicago:  
The Art Institute of Chicago, 2009.



Figure 6. Yinka Shonibare, *Leisure Lady (with ocelots)*, 2001, life-size fiberglass mannequin, three fiberglass ocelots, Dutch wax printed cotton, leather, glass; woman 160x80x80 cm; ocelots 40x60x20 cm each. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.



Figure 7. Yinka Shonibare, *Leisure Lady (with pugs)*, 2001, Life-size mannequin, fiberglass dogs, Dutch was printed cotton, figure: 160x80x80cm; dogs 40x60x20 cm each. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.





Figure 8. Yinka Shonibare, *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, 2002, 11 life-size fiberglass mannequins, metal and wood cases, Dutch wax printed cotton, leather, wood, steel; carriage: 200x260x470 cm; plinth 900x900x12 cm. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.





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Figure 9. Yinka Shonibare, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* series, 1998 photographs  
 Source: Art Value Website. "Shonibare, Yinka." Accessed March 15, 2012.  
<http://www.artvalue.com/auctionresult--shonibare-yinka-1962-united-ki-1-diary-of-a-victorian-dandy-1-2500887.htm>



Figure 10. Yinka Shonibare, *Diary of a Victorian Dandy: 0.300 hours*, 1998, type C photograph, Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.



Figure 11. Eugène Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827. Source: Wikipedia. "Delacroix Sardanapalus." Accessed March 15, 2012.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Delacroix\\_sardanapalus\\_1828\\_950px.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Delacroix_sardanapalus_1828_950px.jpg)

## Chapter Two: Body and Cloth: “Dressing Up” Difference

“Dressing up” enables me to separate myself from my own image and, at the same time, regain control of it.

— Yinka Shonibare, “Bemuse”<sup>71</sup>

In Chapter One, I discussed Yinka Shonibare’s “orientalizing” methods and how the transformation of foreign bodies into objects reiterated historical forms of gender oppression specifically linked to women’s position and role in society. Shonibare’s work reminds us of the ways in which women are often handled like props, exploited for the purpose of reinforcing both hegemonic power and difference. For Shonibare, the plasticity of identity performativity, regardless of gender, reaffirms the object quality of identity itself. He, therefore, takes for granted the gendered quality of many of his works, leaving women in very profane, sexualized, and objectified spaces.

In this chapter, I will further investigate racial and ethnic notions of identity in relation to gender by addressing Shonibare’s treatment of the body through dress politics. One could think of this chapter as a focus on the object (textiles) and how it stands in for the body, while Chapter One analyzed how the body was diminished to a language of signs through an outside gaze. By evaluating the history of “fashioning” the body in both a European and African context, I aim to highlight the manner in which women have engaged in performative acts through dress in order to assert themselves by means that are often subversive to power. For women, acts of self-affirmation are commonly forgotten or erased, articulating what English professor Anne McClintock notes as the abyss of

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<sup>71</sup> Bruschi, “Interview with Yinka Shonibare,” 100.



“anachronistic space” where both women and “other” are historically positioned.<sup>72</sup> By providing examples of how women have “reclaimed” their body through dress, I aim to undermine Shonibare’s deconstruction methods, casting doubt on his ambivalent approach to identity, while also emphasizing the necessary consideration of the role of the feminine body within his oeuvre.

The copious use of Dutch wax textiles in Shonibare’s works serves in communicating both transient and perpetual meanings in relation to the history of colonialism and colonization.<sup>73</sup> Given the unbridled quality of the fabric in its expression of cultural metaphors, it is not surprising to see his work featured in several textile exhibitions, including: *Aware: Art, Fashion and Identity*, 2010, *Pattern ID*, 2010, *The Poetics of Cloth: African Textiles*, 2008, *The Essential Art of African Textiles*, *Design Without End*, 2008, and *Reinventing Textiles*, 2002. As briefly discussed in the introduction, Dutch wax and similar ready-made “African” fabrics are embedded in colonial discourse and stand in as false markers of “Africanity” due to their European origins. Dutch wax textiles are, in fact, copies of Indonesian batiks. In the nineteenth century, the Dutch and English took over batik production and began selling the fabric to African traders along the coast of West Africa. Hence, the “African-ness” of these fabrics is a myth and “impedes on the value of cultural authenticity” that is desired, for instance, by diasporic communities searching for an emblem of “home,” which, in itself, is a variable space of a myriad of allusions.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> McClintock defines “anachronistic space” as the empty or ambivalent location women and “others” inhabit that allows for men to orient themselves as “agents of power and knowledge.” Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 24.

<sup>73</sup> Anthony Downey, “Practice and Theory: Yinka Shonibare,” *Bomb Magazine* 93 (2005): 30.

<sup>74</sup> Enwezor, “The Joke Is On You,” 11.

According to art critic Okwui Enwezor, the fabric not only exemplifies an ambiguous past occupied by many Africans, but:

Rather it signifies the inventive appropriation of their ideogrammatic character by Africans who now have found numerous ways to weave their own narratives, hence new ownership, into the surface of the cloth.<sup>75</sup>

Enwezor regards this “new ownership” found in the cloth with caution as it seems to say less about the imagined space we call “home,” rather than the exile from it.<sup>76</sup> In my opinion, however, this process of “reweaving,” whether physical or metaphorical, should be valued as an act of reclamation.

Shonibare assumes that because “African prints” have their historical origins in European colonial and capitalistic pursuits they are somehow diluted of their “African-ness”; however, many African artists and cultural groups have discovered means to recover their identity through the fabric. Cultural dress historian Joanne Eicher describes how imported textiles from Europe, Africa, and India play a vital role in cultural rites of passage for the Kalabari people living in the western Niger Delta of Nigeria. The Kalabari are known for their handmade clothes called *pelete bite*, which are created by unthreading and cutting out portions of ready-made fabrics in order to reweave symbolic designs back into them (Fig. 12).<sup>77</sup> These fabrics are prized for their uniqueness and craftsmanship despite their “refurbished” qualities. In this instance, the fabrics are infused with “African-ness” because it is not how the fabrics are originally manufactured or produced that counts, but the ways in which personal and cultural meanings are subsequently knitted into the designs.

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<sup>75</sup> Enwezor, “Tricking the Mind,” 218.

<sup>76</sup> Enwezor, “The Joke Is On You,” 11.

<sup>77</sup> Joanne Eicher and Tonye Erekosima, *Indian Textiles in Kalabari Funerals: Asian Art and Culture, 1968-79* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 71.

Another example is the works of Kenyan artist Grace Ndiritu whose *Still Life* video series, 2005-2007, demonstrates how African fabrics, in general, can be imbued with bodily significance (Fig. 13).<sup>78</sup> In this series, Ndiritu videotapes herself smoothing, caressing, and shaping her body behind a veil of African print cloth. The viewer can only see a select few body parts, like hands and legs, and Ndiritu moving and breathing. The effect is that the fabrics and designs get entangled with body and identity references, resulting in them becoming physical extensions of her self. Ndiritu's work challenges the artificial and synthetic character of fabrics as ubiquitous products of capitalism. Instead, the fabrics acquire organic and biological implications that allow her to move, breath, and exist.<sup>79</sup>

What both of these examples divulge is that cloth, as a physical extension of the body, is laden with political, social, and cultural metaphors, making it an appropriate apparatus to discuss identity.<sup>80</sup> Shonibare employs textiles for the effect of deconstructing cultural and ethnic authenticity by using "African" fabrics in a European context, while other cultural groups and artists, like the Kalabari and Ndiritu, have reinterpreted these same ready-made fabrics in terms that recoup cultural and bodily importance. Hence, textiles are subversive tools that can either reaffirm or denounce identity constructions, without clear indication as to what is culturally "right" or "wrong." The relationship between textile and body, however, is integral to understanding how identity is performed or visualized. We must, therefore, take in to account the language of cloth and the manner in which Shonibare fabricates the presence or absence of bodies.

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<sup>78</sup> Ellen Rudolph, "The Cultural Currency of Pattern and Dress," in *Pattern ID*, ed. Barbara Bradley (Akron: Akron Art Museum, 2010), 20.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Enwezor, "Tricking the Mind," 217.

The entangled relationship between fabric and body is amplified by the metaphor of cloth as a “second skin.” I am drawn to this metaphor because it accounts for textiles’

“embodied” characteristics. Art professor Janis Jefferies states:

The softness and fragility of cloth are linked to organic bodily matter and the vulnerability of humans, whose every relationship is transient, subject to the degenerative process of decay and death.<sup>81</sup>

Jefferies’s observation helps us to visualize the permeability of body and cloth and the fluid (in both its noun and verb usage) intersections between culture and self that are materialized and imprinted onto the fabrics. Thus, skin is an apt comparison as it demonstrates fabric’s dual function as both surface and integrally tied to what it covers.<sup>82</sup>

To explore cloth’s “double-ness” it is useful to take into account Shonibare’s Yoruba culture, specifically Yoruba scarification practices, as it shares an affinity to cloth in the construction of identity. The Yoruba community originally consisted of a number of different ethnic groups that merged at the end of civil war in 1893.<sup>83</sup> During this tumultuous period, scarification was used to mark citizenship, making it a powerful tool to convert enemies into allies, sometimes in forceful terms.<sup>84</sup> There are two basic types of Yoruba markings. First, there is the tattoo or *kóló*, described by scholar Richard Burton in 1863 as designs in the images of tortoises, alligators, lizards, stars, concentric circles, and right lines (Fig. 14).<sup>85</sup> The hatch marks were filled with charcoal or lamp black to create a textured surface. The second type of body markings is usually found on the face and torso

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<sup>81</sup> Janis Jefferies, “Midnight’s Children: Salman Rushdie and the Translations of Hybridity in the Artworks of Zarina Bhimji, Hew Locke and Yinka Shonibare,” in *Reinventing Textiles*, ed. Paul Sharrad and Anne Collett, vol. 3 (Bristol, England: Telos Art Publishing, 2002), 6.

<sup>82</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2011), 28.

<sup>83</sup> Olatunji Ojo, “Beyond Diversity: Women, Scarification, and Yoruba Identity,” *History of Africa* 35 (2008): 348.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*



and involves an incision into the skin that leaves a permanent scar after healing. Scars are not only visual, but verbal as well. For example, phrases like, “he who has no money to procure marks,” serves as a metaphor for poverty within Yoruba culture.<sup>86</sup> As a result, body markings are an integral element in the fabrication of a Yoruba identity.

Both scars and textiles are forms of adornment, and the similarities between the two further communicate each one’s role as a “second skin.” Scars are worn on the body in an analogous manner to which different qualities and types of cloth dress the western body to indicate rank, status, gender, or occupation. From a western perspective, scars are misunderstood because of the severity of their application and the permanence of the marks themselves. The pain of physically engraving the body has often been used to reaffirm non-Westerner’s “primitiveness.”<sup>87</sup> However, western beautification practices for the advancement of class or status are no less “primitive” according to both historical and modern-day models.<sup>88</sup> Victorian-era feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft described this parallel in her critique of Victorian woman’s dress in her infamous book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, first published in 1787. She states, “We laugh at the Hottentots and in some things adopt their customs.”<sup>89</sup> The mimetic nature of beautifying, disciplining, or interpreting the body reaffirms the ways in which both forms of dress, scars or clothes, are types of “visual vocabulary” and assists in the communication of the self to society.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>87</sup> Mary Nooter Roberts, “Inscribing Identity: The Body,” in *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer and Sarah Adams (Washington, D.C.: 5 Continents, 2007), 59.

<sup>88</sup> In the book, *In the Flesh*, Victoria Pitts discusses the use of primitive discourses by body modifiers as a way to escape western society. Via the act of cutting the body, modifiers believe they could tap into the spiritual and symbolic realm inhabited by primitive societies around the world. Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 13.

<sup>89</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>90</sup> Christine Mullen Kreamer et al., “Inscribing Meaning,” *African Arts* 40, no. 3 (2007): 85.

Feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak states, “we must consider the *text* of the *textile* as it manipulates textile.”<sup>91</sup> Accordingly, we must be cognizant of the language of cloth and its relationship to performances of pretend and disguise in both cultural and personal forms of affirmation.

In comparing Shonibare’s textiles to Yoruba scarification patterns, I aim to highlight the manner in which textiles have more corporeal and intimate implications than what is translated through Shonibare’s work.<sup>92</sup> Shonibare’s ability to “dress up” difference conceals the allusions to self that are part of body and cloth, and displays his ambivalence towards those marks as material remnants of self.<sup>93</sup> Instead, Shonibare sees the fabric as a device that calls attention to the constructed nature of identities. By denying the fabric its corporeal attributes, however, he reinscribes processes of hegemonic domination that reinforce women’s position as cultural objects and situates them, once again, into anachronistic space.

The physical and metaphorical absence of the body is exemplified in Shonibare’s work, *Five Under Garments and Much More*, 1995 (Fig. 15). The installation includes five corsets hanging vertically from fishing wire in a zigzag line. The corsets are cloaked in Shonibare’s signature patterns, and, together with the prettiness of the knotted bows, ruffles, and frills, the pain inflicted by these miniature torture chambers is masked. Busks of steel and bone ran the lining of the European corset, and, when worn, pinched the skin creating imprints similar to the hatchings found on scarified bodies. Shonibare leaves the body out and depends on the viewer to conjure its presence into the garments, like one

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<sup>91</sup> Jefferies, “Midnight Children,” 9.

<sup>92</sup> For the most part, an interpretation of the relationship between body and cloth remains missing in scholarship on Shonibare, which is quite ironic given that his work is full of bodies.

<sup>93</sup> This ambivalence is also displayed in his choice to keep the mannequins skin color neutral or ambiguous.

does when looking into his or her closet. Independent researcher Dr. Janice Cheddie interprets the absence of bodies in these pieces as an allusion to the ways in which cultural and gendered identities are not constructed through the presence of bodies, but from the masquerade.<sup>94</sup> While the textiles alone do recall the body in their primary function as body covers, they are too ambiguous in their attempt to deconstruct identity. Are these pieces about femininity or race? And if about both, then are we to believe that they are fabricated in the same ways? Also, how do we account for the marks that corsets leave on the body, are they to be forgotten?

Shonibare's *Five Under Garments* stands as a reiteration of hegemonic power rather than a subversion of it. Shonibare fails to consider the corset's position as a "multi-functional discursive device," in which masculine critics could discuss the dangers of sexuality while regulating and controlling it at the same time.<sup>95</sup> This form of control is found in both European and African societies, and, therefore, through the corset, we are reminded of how women's bodies, from either continent, are manipulated to represent and police social and cultural boundaries.

*Five Under Garments* does, however, lead us to a discussion of body masquerade and the fantasy of transformation that is found in textile discourses. Psychoanalysis helps us to understand how "dressing up" is both an assertion and denial of difference that goes beyond the theatrical performance.<sup>96</sup> Jacques Lacan's concept of the "mirrored body" is

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<sup>94</sup> Janice Cheddie, "A Note: Yinka Shonibare: Dress Tells the Woman's Story," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, no. 3 (2000): 351.

<sup>95</sup> Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (Oxford, England: Berg, 2001), 3.

<sup>96</sup> Gail Ching-Liang Low, "Chapter 6: The Colonial Mirror," in *White Skins/Black Masks: Representation and Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 188.

instrumental in recognizing “visual codes of difference” that are posed to the self.<sup>97</sup> He states that through a process of “recognition” and “misrecognition,” we mold the mirrored body into a form that is both useful and intelligible to society.<sup>98</sup> Like textiles, “the mirrored body is not the real 'body of anatomy and physiology,' but 'an internalized image' of culturally shared and individualized bodily significance.”<sup>99</sup> The focus on the cultural image of body is in many ways key to understanding the important role cloth plays in identity politics, especially in relation to Shonibare’s work, as the reflected image or “second skin” is not self, but self as “other.”<sup>100</sup>

Shonibare’s film *Odile and Odette*, 2005, visually expresses the reflexive nature of self/other or self/mirror trajectories (Fig. 16). The film features two ballerinas, one black and one white, dressed in classic ballerina costumes comprised of bodices and skirts made from Dutch wax textiles with the predominant colors being pink, orange, and blue. The film takes place in a large room with a brooding black background and a very large gold gilded frame. The ballerinas dance on either side of the frame facing each other as if they were mirror reflections. Every gesture is the same, even the superfluous actions like them stretching and fitting their slippers. At one point the ballerinas step outside of the frame and the white ballerina disappears, reaffirming the fact that the frame is acting as a mirror. The lens shoots from both points of view, switching back and forth, beginning with the

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<sup>97</sup> I am drawing on psychoanalytic theory for the purpose of showing how “dressing up” and similar fantasies imagined by Shonibare can be explained in terms of how the self sees the body. Elizabeth Grosz describes how these perceived separations, between the body and the mind, reaffirm Enlightenment ideals of bodily inferiority (when posed to reason) and lead to metaphors in which the body is seen an instrument or tool that can speak for or reaffirm the interior self. In Low, “Colonial Mirror,” 190.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Grosz quoted in Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

black ballerina facing the white ballerina and ending with the white ballerina confronting her self/other.

*Odile and Odette* illuminates both the mimetic and menacing characteristics of identity posed by binaries like self/other, good/evil, black/white, feminine/masculine, etc. *Odile and Odette* are iconic figures from Tchaikovsky's opera, *Swan Lake*, and, when performed, are usually played by one ballerina.<sup>101</sup> By splitting up the roles, and visually referencing this division by the ballerina's skin color, Shonibare is recalling post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's conception of the "hybrid" as a way to cast ambivalence on the perception of self/other identifications. According to feminist scholar Gail Ching-Liang Low, Bhabha's hybridity demonstrates "the subject's narcissistic demand for imaginary wholeness and its avowal of difference results in a splitting of the site of enunciation—preventing the completion of self-identity."<sup>102</sup> The menace exists, therefore, by the fact that the ballerinas and identity can never be truly fused, as each binaric self is dependent on the other for existence.

Shonibare's depiction of the ambivalence of identity in *Odile and Odette* falls short, however, in that it fails to illuminate the power struggles and anxieties that permeate identity formations. By "dressing up" both of the ballerina's in the same outfit, and reinforcing the notion that they are the same body through the presence of the mirror, Shonibare downplays the controversial image of "white woman in native dress" and the implications of privilege tied to white bodies. For example, when trying to cast a black ballerina for this film, Shonibare notes how he had to outsource and hire an independent

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<sup>101</sup> Downey, "Practice and Theory," 30.

<sup>102</sup> Low, "Colonial Mirror," 193.

dancer because the Royal Ballet did not have a black ballerina in its corps.<sup>103</sup> The ballerinas' close resemblance and mirrored movements conceal and wash out the social, political, and economic controversies that plague identity differences and the various types of gazes aligned with each racial body.

In comparison, Candice Breitz's photomontage series titled *Rainbow*, 1996, exposes the apprehensions surrounding identity splits and the incongruous nature of how white and black bodies function within a post-colonial context (Fig. 17). In this group of works Breitz cuts out and pastes together pornographic images of white women and ethnographic postcards of black women in response to the too quickly celebrated homogenous national subject of post-apartheid South Africa, or "Rainbow nation."<sup>104</sup> Within the photographs, the ways in which the bodies are combined allows both white and black bodies to experience "otherness" through various forms of dress. The erotic white body is all of a sudden transformed into an anthropological subject via the "second skin" she now wears. The tensions caused by this new embodiment is not only revealed formalistically by the fact that Breitz makes no attempt to soften or elide the symbolic and literal unevenness of her bodily contortions, but also by the fact that the sexual gaze of pleasure is now disrupted or altered by her new cover.

In juxtaposing Shonibare's *Odile and Odette* to Breitz's *Rainbow* girls, the incongruity of relations of power and the various visual pleasures tied to western and non-western bodies are revealed. The ethnographic postcards illuminate the scientific gaze and the history of surveillance and classification that permitted westerners to view the naked

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<sup>103</sup> "National Museum of African Art: Yinka Shonibare MBE Exhibition November 10, 2009-March 7, 2010", n.d., accessed April 10, 2012, <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/shonibare/odette.html>.

<sup>104</sup>Brenda Atkinson, "Rethinking Pornography: Imagining Desire (Candice Breitz Interviewed by Brenda Atkinson)," *Camera Austria*, no. 56 (1996): 6.

African body as a non-sexual act. Shonibare's black ballerina in "exotic" dress does not recall this gaze as the fabrics have been sewn into western garments. We must, therefore, see the cloth in relation to its new owner, whose body is almost identical to her white counterpart. In contrast, Breitz's pornographic images of white women re-sexualizes or calls attention to the ways in which the ethnographic images have been denied erotic implications, even though they too garner an analogous visual pleasure as does the act of looking at pornographic photographs. At the same time, the white body is now draped in a way that her erotic value is cut off or dismantled, subverting the male gaze and its ability to consume her as an object of pleasure.

Shonibare's inability to cut off this gaze reaffirms women's objectivity within his feminine performances. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey discusses this gaze in more depth in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 1975. She states:

Woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.<sup>105</sup>

Like Mulvey's description, Shonibare stages his racial and ethnic fantasies in woman's space or through the manipulation of woman's body.<sup>106</sup> For Shonibare, women are "objects of communication" rather than "subjects of information."<sup>107</sup> Through a process of appropriation, Shonibare demonstrates his preference for feminine space as the location to live out his imperialistic fictions. By looking at the intrinsic relationship between cloth and dress, I will spotlight Shonibare's hegemonic gaze while also highlighting the ways in which

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<sup>105</sup> Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 15.

<sup>106</sup> The discussion of the Victorian parlor in Chapter One reiterates Shonibare's preference for feminine spaces.

<sup>107</sup> Within the panopticon, Foucault discusses the imprisoned body as an object of information, which is analogous to the history of surveillance tied to feminine bodies. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Vintage Books, 1995), 197.

women have used dress to subvert it.

One of Shonibare's most infamous works that elucidates the male gaze is his installation, *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001, which is based on Jean-Honoré Fragonard's 1765 painting (Fig. 18 and Fig. 19). Fragonard's work, *The Swing*, is called an "intrigue painting," because during the Rococo period observations of aristocratic life became the central location for the portrayal of playfulness, flirtation, and excess in response to the tyrannical control of the late Louis XIV.<sup>108</sup> In Fragonard's piece, two men interact with a youthful girl. The jovial men and cupid statue within the painting entice the viewers to look, but not tell. An older man pushes her from behind, while a younger man is strategically placed at her feet, allowing him to view up her skirt as she swings. She playfully kicks her shoe off, seductively tempting both the young man and viewer, who is also presumed to be male.

Shonibare closely mimics Fragonard's painting, except he leaves out the male figures. This absence can be interpreted as a form of female empowerment in the way that it frees her from the oscillating male gaze found within the painting, but her role as an instrument of hegemony is reasserted through her position as "leisure-personified," as discussed in Chapter One. In relation to *The Swing*, Shonibare states:

It is actually an expression of something much more profoundly serious insofar as the accumulation of wealth and power that is personified in leisure was no doubt a product of exploiting other people.<sup>109</sup>

Thus, the swinging girl represents the European nation as the icon for European frivolity and excess. Via the Dutch wax he "Africanizes" her in order to draw attention to the power

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<sup>108</sup> Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Nineteenth-Century European Art*, second edition (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 24.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Kent, "Time and Transformation," 14.



relations that exist within notions of European leisure. However, through the spectacle of her body as a nationalistic symbol, he erases all gender subjectivities that can be linked to this image.

An analysis of the dress in *The Swing* acknowledges the powerful relationship between women/body and nation/nature upon which Shonibare is dependent. Her decapitation emphasizes her bodily-ness and also her role as the physical representative of European society. The earthy motifs found on her dress, including leaves, flowers, and vines, assert her position as the mother goddess. The way her hand wraps around the rope and the manner in which her legs separate like branches affirms her ties to primitive aesthetics. The opening of her dress between her legs visually resembles a “venus fly trap,” beautiful on the outside, but deadly on the inside. For Shonibare, the swinging girl’s ability to seduce and tame the viewer via the flamboyance of her dress is essential to his sabotage of western power as she becomes the embodiment of multiple elements of European-ness under one skin or one dress.

Shonibare’s *The Swing* also recalls Josephine Baker’s role in Marc Allégret’s film *Zouzou*, 1934, where she plays an entertainer that holds performances on a swing in a cage. This image allows us to re-conceptualize the notion of object-ness and body authenticity (Fig. 20). English professor Anne Anlin Cheng discusses Baker’s nakedness as a “second skin” or surface that allowed her to enact the fantasies of black femininity.<sup>110</sup> The layering of banana skins, feathers, and drapery upon this body reiterates the complex negotiations between self and body that both viewers and Baker had to undertake. Cheng describes that during some of Baker’s performances, people felt the need to turn away as they could not

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<sup>110</sup> Cheng, “Second Skin,” 39.

bear the depths of “true” blackness. Cheng argues that it is not blackness that the viewers could not bear to witness, but its failure. She states, “it is blackness’s failure to provide distinction: the horrifying insight that *the ‘glittery’ and the ‘blackened’ may be uncannily equivalent.*”<sup>111</sup> This realization is what Shonibare’s work attempts to produce, but falls short given his focus on the symbolic role of women within the world stage.

Both Shonibare and Baker are attempting to demonstrate the fine line between the performance of white and black identity through the spectacle as an “appearance” of reality. However, Shonibare’s alignment with nationalistic ideals keeps viewers from being able to separate the distinctions between body and self and body and nation, causing the re-institutionalization of the hegemonic gaze. All gendered inscriptions and subjectivities are erased from the textiles as the national body takes over. Thus, what Baker’s work reveals, that Shonibare’s does not, is the individualized nature of cultural inscriptions tied to various “skins.”

To further demonstrate the power of dress as a production of self, it is useful to explore a work of art from the period that Shonibare appropriates. Within the frivolity promulgated during the Rococo period, as epitomized by images like *The Swing*, there is proof of women using their objectivity as an act of bodily reclamation. Art historian Melissa Hyde describes how François Boucher’s painting *Mme de Pompadour at Her Toilette* (1758), which looks like a typical Rococo portrait painting with its pastel colors, whimsical lace garments, and overly made-up faces, is actually a “self-re-presentation,” in which Pompadour authorizes her own image (Fig. 21). By portraying herself as the allegory of painting, Pompadour is able to render herself as her own artist instead of the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 64.

object from which the male artist paints.<sup>112</sup> Because of the associations between putting on make-up and painting that disseminated throughout the Rococo, Pompadour was able to disguise herself as an artist by “making herself up” in front of the mirror. In addition, Pompadour used dress and jewelry to testify to her position as a powerful ally of the king.

What we can learn from Hyde’s research, therefore, is that what you see in painting is not always a clear visual message. Through femininity Pompadour was able to reclaim her identity as an artist while also performing her social role as the king’s mistress. Thus, Pompadour’s make-up is not only a masquerade of her position in society, but also a performance that imparts authority back to her over how her body is consumed. She not only wears the garments, but authorizes them as well.<sup>113</sup>

In relation to Shonibare’s *Swing*, and subsequent works, what the Pompadour painting acknowledges is the intrinsic relationship between cloth and body in the construction of self-identity. In contrast, Shonibare’s alignment with nationalistic discourses causes the viewer to interpret the object or fabric in terms of a world-view and separate from any material reality. Shonibare understands this in the re-presentation of his own image as seen in the *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* series, but fails to see how in the act of dressing up “other” bodies he reiterates and reinscribes a form of gender discipline specifically tied to women’s bodies. In displaying the female body as vulnerable, sexual, and objectified, it is once again consumed as an object of male desire. Shonibare transplants his Victorian pleasures and capitalistic dreams onto the female form in order to deconstruct notions of power, but by not paying attention to the gendered implications of

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<sup>112</sup> Melissa Hyde, “The ‘Makeup’ of the Marquise: Boucher’s Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette,” *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 3 (2000): 470–471.

<sup>113</sup> Hyde suggests that Pompadour actually made that cameo bracelet. *Ibid.*, 469.

many of his works, he becomes a form of the hegemonic subject he was aiming to denounce.

Historically, women have used the act of “dress up” in order to reclaim their body. By infusing the fabric with corporeal attributes, the “dress up” practice can be seen as a self-assertion that is distinct from the masquerade of identity. By denying the way women have reclaimed their body through cloth, however, Shonibare repositions women back into “anachronistic space” from which they are forgotten so that he may orient himself in space as an agent of power and knowledge.

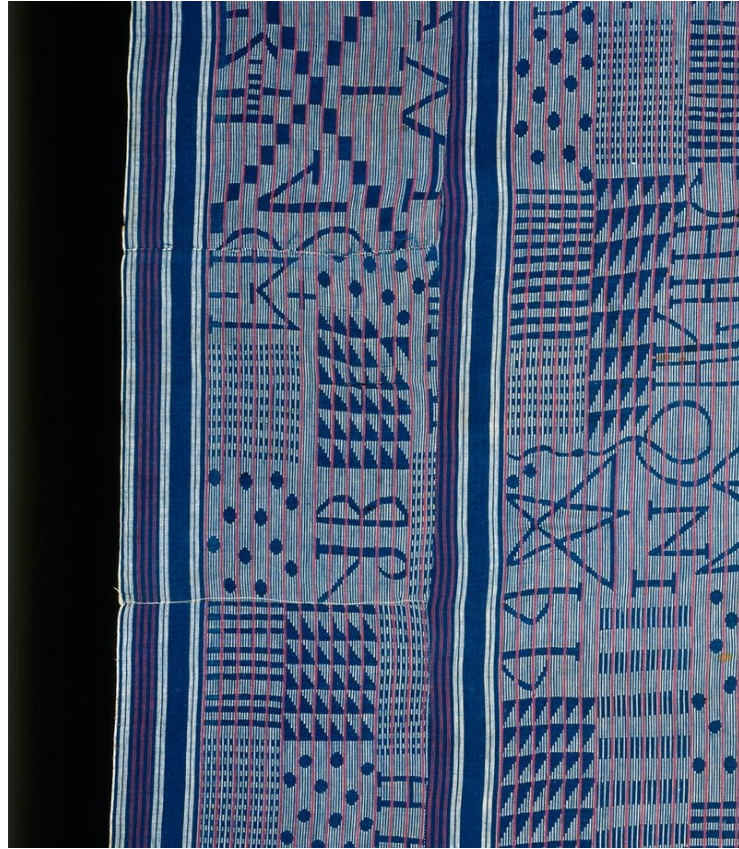


Figure 12. Osana John Bull, Kalabari Ijo peoples, Wrapper, Cut-thread cloth (pelete bite), 2002. Source: Art Stor Web site. "Pelete bite." Accessed February 2, 2012. [www.artnet.org](http://www.artnet.org)



Figure 13. Grace Ndiritu, *Still Life Video Series: Lying Down Textiles*, 2005-2007. Source: Axis Web Site. "Grace Ndiritu." Accessed February 2, 2012. [www.axisweb.org](http://www.axisweb.org)





Figure 14. Yoruba Woman with kóló marks on hands, arms, neck, and face, 1973. Source: Art Stor Web Site. "Kolo" Accessed February 2, 2012. [www.artnet.org](http://www.artnet.org)



Figure 15. Yinka Shonibare, *Five Undergarments and Much More*, 1995, African fabric, rick-rack, fishing line, interlining, circumference 95x130 cm each. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.





Figure 16. Yinka Shonibare, *Odile and Odette*, 2005, Film still. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.



Figure 17. Candice Breitz, *Rainbow Series #4*, 1996, Cibachrome Photograph. Source: Candice Breitz Web Site. "Rainbow Series." Accessed April 10, 2012. [www.candicebreitz.net](http://www.candicebreitz.net)



Figure 18. Yinka Shonibare, *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001; mixed media, 330x350x220 cm. Source: Kent, Rachel. *Yinka Shonibare, MBE*. Munich, Germany: Prestel, 2008.



Figure 19. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1765, Oil on canvas, 35x32 in. Source: Art Stor Web Site. "Fragonard, The Swing." Accessed March 12, 2012. [www.artnet.org](http://www.artnet.org)





Figure 20. Josephine Baker, In *Zouzou*, 1934, Film still. Source: Tout le Cine Website. "Josephine Baker." Accessed April 12, 2012. [www.toutelecine.com](http://www.toutelecine.com)



Figure 21. François Boucher, *Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour*, 1758. Cambridge, Mass. Fogg Art Museum. Source: Hyde, Melissa. "The 'Makeup' of the Marquise: Boucher's Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette." *The Art Bulletin* 82, no.3 (2000): 453-475.

## Conclusion

In 1997, Yinka Shonibare organized a project titled “Portable Personal Histories,” which featured a collection of museum display cases put together by eight Birmingham, England, locals. What the project meant to demonstrate was the malleability of identity and the controversial role the museum plays in constructing “authentic” views of historical and non-western figures. Interestingly enough, in Shonibare’s display he chose to imagine himself as an African-American cowgirl named *Mary Beth Regan*, who currently holds the title, “Miss Rodeo Colorado.”<sup>114</sup> What the box discloses about Mary Beth is her enjoyment of cigarettes and cigars, her love of the color red as evidenced by her boots and bandana, and her passion for music, which I am assuming is country music (Fig. 22).

Shonibare’s make-believe life reaffirms his conviction that identity is a “bargain of sorts.”<sup>115</sup> Shonibare strives to undermine the notion that any identity or any objects tied to that identity are real. The irony of the existence of a “black” cowgirl is as disorienting as Shonibare’s own role as the black dandy. His “Trojan horse” approach to subverting social and cultural norms is meant as an attack on dominant hegemonic values, but in the act of appropriating identity, specifically female identity, he becomes the exploitative character he was trying to denounce. In stereotyping femininity, as exemplified in his need to categorize Mary Beth as a “pageant queen,” he reduces and devalues such titles as insignificant. Moreover, the manner in which people have used the body as an inscriptive surface emphasizes the importance of reading such identities as forms of self-affirmation.

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<sup>114</sup> Hynes and Picton, “Re-dressing History,” 73.

<sup>115</sup> Ike Ude quoted in Perrella, “Between Mimesis,” 19.

Shonibare's manipulation of femininity throughout his oeuvre requires additional consideration, as does the role of gender in relation to race and class discourses. Throughout this thesis, I have endeavored to challenge the assumption that race and gender can be deconstructed or subverted in the same ways. The articulation of gender does not necessarily align with racial concepts, thus, within the postmodern objective, an analysis of new feminine spaces is as imperative as understanding racial differences.



Figure 22. Yinka Shonibare, *Mary Beth Regan's Case*, from "Portable Personal Histories" Exhibition, 1997. Source: Iniva Web Site. "Shonibare." Accessed April 13, 2012. [www.iniva.org/dare/themes/translation/shonibare.html](http://www.iniva.org/dare/themes/translation/shonibare.html)



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