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STYLIN': THE GREAT MASCULINE ENUNCIATION AND THE (RE)FASHIONING OF AFRICAN DIASPORIC IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Christine Checinska aims to: (i) outline the carnivalised theoretical approach that characterises her analysis of African diasporic cultural expressions, (ii) explore the creolised aesthetic that shapes the styling—or stylin', in colloquial terms—adopted by African diasporic men in the Caribbean, and (iii) to posit the notion of stylin' as a creolised non-verbal Nation Language (a term coined by Kamau Brathwaite; see *History of the Voice*. London: New Beacon, 1984). In this schema, the (re)fashioning of the body facilitates the reconfiguration of diasporic identities that are in constant flux as a result of geographical, psychological, and social border crossings. The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) is central to the discussion, since it arguably galvanised what the author calls "the Great Masculine Enunciation", a form of democratisation of dress that marked the shift from the functional, anonymous (un)dress of enslaved Africans to the elegant, embellished, individualised swagger of African diasporic peacock males. This constituted the reverse of the Great Masculine Renunciation in the West, which saw the abandonment of adornment in favour of understatement in fashionable male dress after the French Revolution (1789–1799), as described by J. C. Flugel (*The Psychology of Clothes*. London: Hogarth, 1966).

Keywords: creolisation; fashion; identity; African Diaspora; race; culture

In their text *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (1998), Shane White and Graham White examine the way in which African Americans have used their bodies to (re)fashion and express their identities from the period of enslavement in America to the 1940s. They trace African American style back to its origins in West Africa to suggest that there are certain cultural imperatives underpinning the modes of fashionable dress favoured by African diasporic peoples. The

term "stylin'", used by White and White, and which I borrow for the title of this article, is African American urban slang for "showing off" or looking excessively fashionable. It has migrated into everyday Jamaican language, hence its use here to refer to men in the Caribbean. Stylin' describes both a transformative act and a form of countergaze at a personal and collective level. It encompasses dress, accessorising, grooming, and gestures. I argue that stylin' could be regarded as a creolised, non-verbal form of what Kamau Brathwaite (1984) calls "Nation Language", one which ultimately speaks of cultural and racial autonomy.

The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) is key, since it arguably sparked what I call "the Great Masculine Enunciation": a democratisation of dress that marked the shift from the functional, anonymous (un)dress of enslaved West Africans in the Caribbean to the elegant, embellished, individualised swagger of African diasporic peacock males. Modern menswear in the West is said to have started with the Great Masculine Renunciation (Flugel 1966), which occurred during the period after the French Revolution (1789–1799). In fashionable male dress, adornment was abandoned in favour of understatement. This shift reflected the egalitarian ethos of the French Revolution. The Great Masculine Enunciation that I outline, whilst underpinned by a striving for equality, effectively constituted the reverse of this Western phenomenon; it is characterised by dressing up as opposed to dressing down.

Embracing White and White's use of the term "stylin'" and expanding on the idea of the Great Masculine Enunciation, I (i) outline the carnivalised theoretical approach that characterises my analysis of African diasporic cultural expressions, (ii) explore the creolised aesthetic that shapes the styling—or stylin', in colloquial terms—adopted by African diasporic men in the Caribbean, and (iii) posit the notion of stylin' as a creolised non-verbal Nation Language. In this schema, the (re)fashioning of the body facilitates the reconfiguration of diasporic identities that constantly shift as a result of geographical, psychological, and social border crossings.

CARNIVALISING THEORY

The travelling, ever-evolving communities that constitute the global African diasporas could be viewed as synonymous with diversity and syncretism. Herein lies the problem: what investigative methods can be used to analyse the cultural expressions produced? Finding one theory or theorist on which to hang one's thesis is ill-advised. One has to engage in a search for models that encourage the use of multiple methods from a diverse range of sources; methodological and theoretical boundaries have to be negotiated. Writing as a black British writer/artist of African Caribbean descent, I do not dismiss Western theorists; instead, I go "a piece of the way with them", to cite Carol Boyce-Davies (1994), by taking up a carnivalised approach. Going "a piece of the way with them", as a model for negotiating relations with strangers, is founded on an African tradition whereby the host travels part of a journey alongside a stranger or friend before returning home; the distance travelled, or the "piece of the way", depends

on the closeness of the relationship between the two or more parties. When used as a means of engaging with theory, it becomes a metaphor for a critical relationality, where a number of theoretical positions are examined for their efficacy in the analysis of diasporic cultural forms. Critical relationality has an inherent sense of fluidity, almost an inbuilt homelessness, that mirrors that of diasporic experiences. It suggests an integrated approach to theory, one that resists binary oppositions whilst challenging hierarchies of value and the privileging of Eurocentric viewpoints or "master" discourses, encouraging dialogue instead of separation or essentialism. It aims to be conscious of the plural self and diverse other(s).

The term "carnivalising theory" is proposed by Joan Anim-Addo (2006) as a means of reading the creolised literary text. I utilise it to create a methodology that is sympathetic to the syncretic cultural practices found in the Caribbean. There is a reflection of the schism of migration central to diasporic experiences, the notion of cultural exchange characteristic of creolised culture and the concept of the past, albeit a fragmented one, acting as an incubator for, and cutting into, the present.[1] It encourages theoretical complexity, relationality, and depth, whilst grounding the analysis in empirical investigation. Subsequently, the range of investigative methods that I apply to my research includes oral testimony and auto-ethnography. Although there is currently considerable interest in the efficacy of oral testimony in fashion studies,[2] my use of it allows for the rediscovery of forgotten voices from within the African diasporas whilst referencing oral (hi)storytelling traditions.

In working from a Western perspective, I draw on Roland Barthes's (1990; 2006) semiotic approach to the history and sociology of clothing, where fashion, dress, and—by extension—stylin' are languages and texts waiting to be "read". As a human being, one constantly "speaks". Language and dress, for example, are both systems that operate at the level of the individual and the collective. Structurally, systems of language and dress are shaped by particular cultural contexts. The displacement of just one element changes the whole, producing a new structure. Verbal language and stylin' cannot be separated from their cultural roots or, indeed, routes. Brathwaite (1984), in his analysis of Caribbean language structures, makes a distinction between the imposed imperial languages of Standard English and Creole English—the form of English that evolved in

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1   Mark McWatt (1982), writing on the pre-occupation with the past in West Indian novels, highlights the irony of this concern with history, since, regarding the formerly colonised Caribbean region, the past is "buried" or "absent". For this reason, the object of the writers' focus is, in fact, the "historyless-ness" or the invisibility of Caribbean history. I would go beyond that to suggest that this condition of perceived "historyless-ness" is inextricably linked to a perceived culturelessness, which feeds the absence of the African Caribbean within the fashion theory canon, hence the concern with speaking into certain absences in this article.

2   Examples of this trend include the exhibition *Fashion Lives* (November 11, 2005 to February 7, 2006, The British Library, London), the lecture series *Talking Design: Fashion Fiction* in which presenters discussed the links between autobiographical storytelling and fashion (2006, V&A, London), the *Nova* magazine exhibition (March 27 to August 26, 2006, The Women's Library, London), and the *Fashion Lives* study day (2006, The London College of Fashion, London).

the new Caribbean environment—and Nation Language, the language of the enslaved. He notes that verbal Nation Language is strongly influenced by West African models. It consciously ignores the pentameter in order to express the everyday from African Caribbean, and by extension African diasporic, perspectives.

Whilst I do not advocate outmoded forms of essentialist thinking, in my view the African diasporic stylin' emerging from the Caribbean is also in some instances influenced by West African models. Referencing Brathwaite's (1984, 2) analysis of the lexical features of verbal Nation Language, "in its contours … it is not English", even though the garments being worn "might be English to a lesser or greater degree". Tracing the history of creolised African Caribbean self-fashioning back to plantation slavery, the attention paid to stylin' was instrumental in keeping alive fragments of shattered histories and traditions, mirroring the role played by verbal Nation Language. The sound explosions that punctuate the verbal are alive in the details of an outfit, for example the use of statement accessories such as a hat strategically placed at an angle, the glint of an earring worn with an otherwise sombre ensemble, a flash of colour, or a principled clash of pattern. The performativity of stylin' parallels the "total expression" or "orality" of verbal Nation Language (Brathwaite 1984, 18). The audience is key to the generation of meaning. Echoing the "call and response" of the spoken word, the styled body in movement demands a response (Checinska 2012).

A CREOLISED AESTHETIC

The interrelated systems of colonisation and enslavement drove the seventeenth-century Caribbean plantation slave economy, providing a breeding ground for complex, layered cultural exchanges between Europe, the New World, and Africa. In their article *In Praise of Creoleness* (1990), the Guadeloupean linguist Jean Bernabé, the Martinican novelists Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, together with Mohamed T. B. Khyar, discuss what it is to be creole, to be both French and Caribbean, yet not fully recognised as French. Twentieth-century overseas governance served to maintain the uneven power dynamic between metropole and colonies that had been established centuries before. Bernabé, et al. (1990) seek to reconcile the resulting tensions by reclaiming *creolité* and creolisation, and embrace the concept of "Caribbeanness" posited by the Martinican Édouard Glissant.

Glissant (1989) resists Western scholars' framing of the Caribbean solely against issues of dislocation and fragmentation. He notes that the tensions inherent within the processes of colonisation, enslavement, and displacement were necessary for the emergence of creolisation. However, by acknowledging plurality, diversity, exchange, and transformation as well, Glissant (1989) redefines Caribbean histories, languages, and identities. He emphasises the continual transformation and reinvention that distinguish creole societies and the cultural expressions that emerge. He also suggests that creolisation as a theory of creative disorder might be expanded to apply to histories,

societies, and cultures beyond the Caribbean. Importantly, issues of power, domination, and subalternity are always present (Hall 2003).

Prior to Glissant's observations, Brathwaite (1971) asserted that the foundation of contemporary Caribbean societies is rooted in, and through, the creole societies created by the plantation slave system. He defines creolisation as a cultural process that emerged as people from mainly Britain and West Africa interacted with one another to create a distinctive culture that was neither British nor West African. However, creolisation was a process of contention rather than blending. Echoing Glissant's writings, the dynamics of domination and subordination characteristic of the plantation slavery system were central to it. A recurring theme in Brathwaite's work is the relationship between language, culture, and the structure of Caribbean society. He describes West Africa as the "submerged mother of the Creole system", since it was both the physical and psychological home of the majority of the enslaved (Brathwaite 1971, 6). Similarly, James Walvin (1971, 148), discussing the slave society on the eighteenth-century Jamaican estate Worthy Park, notes that traces of West Africa were apparent in social attitudes, culture, and identity. Even up to emancipation, one-third of the slaves at Worthy Park had been born in West Africa. The constant influx of the newly enslaved kept memories of home alive. Absenteeism on the part of the Jamaican planters enabled these traditions to be retained. The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), together with the American Revolution (1775–1783), gave an increased impetus to the creolisation process.

There were physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects to the enslavement process instigated by the plantation slave owners. It began with "seasoning": a three-year procedure of naming, branding, and re-clothing. The enslaved would learn a new language and become acclimatised to his/her role. Then came "socialisation", involving integration into recreational activities such as drumming, dancing, and slave festivals. Thereafter followed "identification" with the group and authority figures such as the driver and the *obeah* man.[3] The collision of the enslaved and the plantation owners may have been violent, but it was also creative. The development of a creolised language structure amongst the enslaved was integral to the cultural exchanges that took place (Brathwaite 1971).

Brathwaite (1971) suggests that the fragmentation in history and culture that occurred in Jamaica when the indigenous Taino were wiped out by Europeans and replaced by enslaved West Africans gave rise to creolised cultural expressions. One aspect of this was verbal Nation Language (Brathwaite 1984). I suggest that non-verbal Nation Language developed simultaneously. The concept of a language of fashion and/or style is by no means a new one (see, in particular, Barthes 1990 and 2006).

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3   The *obeah* man is a spiritual leader in the Jamaican Spiritual Baptist Church.

Indeed, Barthes's semiotic approach is fundamental to fashion theory.[4] However, where Barthes's approach has been applied to dress styles developed beyond the West, it has been done from an all-too-narrow, Eurocentric viewpoint that pays little attention to the cultural imperatives of the wearer. Such dress is read against the Western fashion system and is consequently seen as subversive, subcultural, exotic, something *other* than the norm. A binary system is established. Some examples that illustrate this include writings by Christopher Breward (1995), Stuart Cosgrove (1989), and Dick Hebdige (1979). By drawing on and developing Brathwaite's concept of Nation Language as a means of defining or reading African diasporic stylin', I trouble the narrow confines of Barthes's *The Fashion System* (1990). The fashion systems referenced by African diasporic peoples in the Caribbean were informed by a creolised aesthetic—the same aesthetic that spawned new language structures in spoken and written form. There is a symbiosis between vernacular linguistic and sartorial expression; both are underpinned by the negotiation of identities.

Brathwaite (1984, 5) begins his analysis of Caribbean language structure by defining the region's language as a "process of using English in a different way from the 'norm'. English in a new sense … English in an ancient sense. English in a very traditional sense. And sometimes not English at all, but *language*". Since the enslaved were drawn from a number of different tribes, no single West African language existed. However, according to Brathwaite, there were common semantic and stylistic forms. He identifies the Ashanti, Congo, and Yoruba languages. These languages had to be submerged, since the language of public discourse was Standard English. Nevertheless, this submergence served an important "interculturative" purpose (Brathwaite 1984, 7), which allowed creolised languages to develop. The submerged language of the slaves constantly transformed itself, influencing and transforming the contemporary English of public discourse as it did so. Nation Language can be defined as the emergent language of an emergent people. Its primary purpose was to express the everyday from African Caribbean perspectives. It was English in some of its lexical features, but it was strongly

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4   Barthes (1990) demonstrates the way in which high fashion functions as a process of signification. In doing so, he also exposes the social constructedness of language. He applies the theory of semiotics to examine the way in which fashion communicates varied meanings shaped by the context in which garments are worn and/or read. Through semiology (Saussurean analysis), Barthes translates fashion into a non-verbal language, governed by specific structures and systems. Through close readings of fashion magazine editorials, he identifies the signifiers, signifieds, signs, and sign systems that generate meaning.

The signifier is the concept that one applies to an individual garment or accessory, which is the signified. The signifier and the signified combine to produce the sign. The sign system is the cultural and/or historical context that frames meaning. The sign system can be subdivided into particular norms and forms. For Barthes, the detached detail of an outfit ultimately fine-tunes meaning; changing just one detail of an outfit changes the meaning just as the context changes one's perception of that outfit. All objects have multiple potential meanings. Hierarchies of value are reproduced, communicated, and maintained through fashion systems (see also Barthes's collection of essays in *Language of Fashion*, 2006).

influenced by West African models: "[I]n its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words as you hear them, might be English to a lesser or greater degree" (Brathwaite 1984, 13).

As the language emerged from an oral (hi)storytelling tradition, performance is integral to Nation Language. It echoes the sounds of Caribbean carnival, *kaiso*,[5] and calypso. Brathwaite (1984, 18) describes the play of sound and performance as "total expression". The voice moves in an intervallic pattern rather than in a single forward plane, as it does with the iambic pentameter. There are intricate syncopated rhythmic variations that play sound off against silence. As with Barthes's language of fashion and the notion of stylin', the audience is key to the generation of meaning. In Brathwaite's words (1984, 19), "'[t]otal expression' grew from conditions of poverty, where people had to rely on their own resourcefulness in order to exist: they had to rely on their very *breath* rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines … they had to depend on *immanence*, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves". Nation Language became a strategy for survival and overcoming, and an act of free creative expression. The fragments of histories and traditions embedded within it carried with them bodies of knowledge with which the enslaved re-imagined or remembered themselves and, in so doing, resisted their allotted place in the plantation hierarchy.

Brathwaite (1984) contends that the roots of Nation Language can be traced back to *shango*, *anansesem*, the Spiritual Baptist movement or Africanised Church, yard theatres, ring games, and tea-meeting speeches. These were vernacular spaces, routed through West Africa and the Middle Passage, hidden from the planters' gaze. This brings me to the relationship between Brathwaite's Nation Language and the creolised aesthetic of African diasporic stylin' in the Caribbean.

26th December 1804:

Nothing but bonjoes, drums, and tom-toms, going all night, and dancing and singing and madness, all the morning … Some of our blackies were most superbly drest, and so were several of their friends, who came to join in the masquerade; gold and silver fringe, spangles, beads, &c. &c. and really the most wonderful expense altogether. General N. gave the children money, and threw some himself among them from the gallery, and in the scramble all the finery was nearly torn to pieces, to my great vexation. However, they seemed not mind it, but began dancing with the same spirit as if nothing had happened, putting their smart clothes into the best order they could. We gave them a bullock, a sheep and a lamb, with a dollar to every person in the house, from the oldest individual to the youngest infant; besides a complete new dress, with two changes of linen. This is the case every Christmas, and at all the festivals they have a present of clothing. (Nugent 1839, 129–130)

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5   *Kaiso* is a genre of Trinidadian vernacular music that originated in West Africa and later evolved into calypso. It has a narrative form usually containing a satirical or political subtext. In Barbados the term is used to refer to the staged performances of calypso that coincide with public festivals.

The above is an extract from Lady Nugent's[6] 1839 diary, *A Journal of a Voyage to, and Residence in, the Island of Jamaica, from 1801 to 1805, and the Subsequent Events in England from 1808 to 1811*. The diary entry cited above refers to the Jonkonnu Christmas masquerade.[7] The military costumes, European dress, West African-inspired masks, ox-horn headdresses, and animal skins of the Jonkonnu masqueraders are a microcosm of plantation slave dress. These masquerades performed an important interculturative function in terms of the development of non-verbal Nation Language (Brathwaite 1984, 7). Those who were not in masquerade costume were "most superbly drest", with "gold and silver fringe on their robes"; all were "dressed with a variety of trinkets and finery, and many not unbecomingly, though very fantastically" (Long 1970, 426).

Feast days and holidays, like Sundays and Christmas, allowed the enslaved to display their "better cloaths" (Long 1970, 426). These were of a "very superior description" and often exceeded in value "those possessed by the generality of European peasantry" (De la Beche 1825, 12). Lady Nugent's *Journal* is peppered with comments about the "odd appearance" of the "blackies". She notes their "finery" and the novelty of seeing them in European dress. For example, her diary entry of 13 September 1804 reads: "Lady M., her young people, and myself in the sociable, with our two black postillions, in *scarlet liveries*, but with black ankles peeping out of their particulars, and altogether a rather novel sort of appearance, to Europeans just arrived" (1839, 100–101, emphasis added). I use this image of the "two black postillions, in *scarlet liveries*", together with slavery apologist Edward Long's (1970, 500–504) observations that the "better cloaths" of the enslaved were chiefly made in the "finest and costliest fabrics", invariably dyed in the "gaudiest colours", to consider the traces of West African cultural expressions in the enslaveds' tastes in colour, pattern, and use of cloth.[8]

Traditional West African cloth was woven from a range of materials, including local silk and cotton, bark, bast, goat's wool, and raffia (Picton 2004). The use of draped, uncut cloth was a distinctive feature of indigenous dress. This stemmed from a concern with the elegance of the body in movement; draped cloth enhanced performance. Before the nineteenth century, male dress from Benin, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast, for example, was characterised by cloth draped over the left shoulder and under the right. Traditional dress to the east of Benin consisted of a wrap "skirt" worn with a long tunic

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6   Lady Nugent was the wife of the governor of Jamaica during the time of the Napoleonic War.

7   Also known as John or Johnny Canoe. The Jonkonnu festival is a creolised art form that grew out of the collision and exchanges between West African masquerade and English folk festivals.

8   Mirroring the relationship between power and dress, cloth visually consolidates social relations based on hierarchies of power, as well as communicating individual and cultural identities. Cloth production, trade, and consumption are woven into the history of the slave trade. For example, slaves were purchased by British merchants in Africa "with a variety of woollen goods" (Long 1970, 491), cotton produced in the Americas supplied the raw materials for the textile industry in France, and Haiti produced quantities of indigo needed for dyestuffs. Meanwhile, Jamaica imported "mill-work of all sorts" from London, cottons, and ready-made clothing from Liverpool, and cottons from Lancaster to clothe the enslaved (Long 1970, 500–504).

over it (Picton 2004). As Olaudah Equiano (1998, 4) writes regarding the "manners and customs" of his country: "The dress of both sexes … generally consists of a long piece of calico or muslin, wrapped loosely around the body, somewhat in the form of a Highland plaid."

In order to wear these voluminous wrapped styles, one had to stand upright and be aware of one's posture in movement; if not, the garment would fall away. It had to be checked and adjusted accordingly if it was found to be lying or hanging incorrectly (Picton 2004). This awareness of the body in movement translates into the "total expression" of verbal Nation Language. Stylin' is as much about deportment, gesture, and stance as it is about individual items of clothing. As with spoken Nation Language, if the performance is ignored, meaning is lost.

Voluminous draping communicated the wearer's status. Expensive cloths, due to their finer weave, draped more readily. Furthermore, if, as J. C. Flugel (1966) suggests, dress is an extension of the bodily self, the increase in the perceived bulk of the wearer that results from draped and wrapped clothing, particularly when in movement, increases the wearer's perceived status in the eyes of the audience.[9] West African leadership dress was layered further still in a visual display of status, wealth, and power. As a result, an abundance of draped cloth became synonymous with prestige. The layers of cloth in leadership dress were combined with jewellery, headgear, and handheld regalia to reinforce the wearer's position at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. Considering this use of draped cloth, could one say that there is a trace of West African tastes in the draping and wrapping of "coloured petticoats" about the waists of the newly arrived gang of "Eboe Negroes", whom Lady Nugent (1839, 136–137) met on her morning drive on 22 January 1805?

West African leaders appropriated European garments from the earliest contact. Items were traded on the basis of regional aesthetics and included such pieces as printed chintz, taffetas, damask silks, linen shirts, and "scarlet cloth" (Bradley-Foster 1997, 18–43). Particular colours, such as scarlet, had political and ritual meanings. In Benin, for example, scarlet in ceremonial leadership dress symbolised anger, blood, war, and fire. When worn, it communicated a threat to the viewer whilst simultaneously warding off evil. Other common colours in Beninean dress included white, yellow, scarlet, green, and the bright indigo blue that Equiano (1998, 5) recalls. For example, a trading ship left Benin in 1769 carrying a cargo of "360 slaves and … red, blue, violet and yellow dyewoods … and cloths"; similarly, a ship that left in 1789 carried "1,000 cloths … and red, yellow, blue and violet dyewoods" (Bradley-Foster 1997, 56). Although the draping and folding of fabric described above obscures colour and pattern, both were vital to creating the desired impression.

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9   Clothing—or, in my interpretation, cloth—by adding to the perceived mass of the body, allows the wearer to fill more physical space, promoting an increased sense of power and authority: "a sense of extension to our bodily self" (Flugel 1966, 34).

Patterning was made complex by the construction of the cloth. European trade cloths were sometimes unravelled and rewoven to suit local West African tastes. Scarlet cloths were particularly hard to dye, so cochineal or kermes-dyed commercial cloths, such as those from Lyon and the Middle East, traded through the trans-Saharan caravans, were recycled (Schneider 1987, 428). Imported cloths were also used as bases onto which geometric patterns were printed using calabash shell stamps. Alternatively, tie-dye techniques were deployed to personalise the fabric (Bradley-Foster 1997, 56–58). Common cloths, such as West African *kente*, were woven in narrow ten-centimetre strips. These were then cut into sections and stitched together edge to edge, forming a patchwork length.

There is a correlation between the unravelled and reworked European cloths, the patched effect of *kente* cloth, the bricoleur's approach to dress displayed by the enslaved, and the percussive "sound explosions" of Brathwaite's Nation Language. In *kente* cloth, for example, multicoloured chequerboard patterns were stitched against simple two-colour stripes—pink against green, gold against scarlet. Additional layers of colour and pattern were introduced through the use of floating or non-structural weft threads. These floating threads generated a melange of effects. Three-dimensional weaves were simultaneously created (Perani and Wolff 1999, 26). Such complex patterning was punctuated by the simplicity of blocked colour, reminiscent of the interplay between speech and silence in Brathwaite's Nation Language. In this way, a polyrhythmic effect was created across each length of cloth. Harmony was achieved in spite of the juxtaposition of seemingly clashing colours. The play of light on these cloths created a luminosity that echoed the use of opalescent materials and mirrors in West African masquerade, where shininess was said to have magical properties, such as the ability to deflect evil by reflecting it back onto its source (Picton 2004, 32).[10] With this in mind, could the "gold and silver fringe, spangles, beads, &c. &c." that Lady Nugent (1839, 129–130) observed be related to this earlier use of opalescent materials?

Evidence of *riddimic* (rhythmic) patterns in slave dress has been difficult to find. Available visual imagery, for instance as found in the writings of Henry de la Beche (1825), show either the elaborately decorated Jonkonnu masquerade costumes or madras checks and ticking stripes like those found in Agostino Brunias's paintings. However, was Jemmy, who ran away from his master in 1793, carrying a blue coat with striped yellow buttons and a purple and white-bordered waistcoat, displaying a flair for syncopated colour co-ordination? Or was Billy, who escaped in 1790 wearing blue pantaloons and a sailor's jacket, showing a taste for striking colours that reveals an alternative fashion aesthetic to that of the Anglo-Saxon West (Brathwaite 1971, 203–204)? Do their sartorial preferences evidence the development of a distinctive, creolised, non-verbal language structure?

The propensity to drape and wrap cloth was exhibited in the attention that the enslaved paid to the dressing of their heads. Long (1970, 412) notes: "They are fond of

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10   Contemporary *kente* cloth also incorporates lurex yarns to achieve a heightened level of shininess.

covering this part of their bodies at all times, twisting one or two handkerchiefs around it, in the turban form, which, they say, keeps them cool, in the hottest sunshine". He adds that "they buy the finest cambric or muslin for the purpose, if their pockets can afford it". This preoccupation with dressing the head can be traced to the importance of the human head in certain West African ritual possession masquerade and figurative art. For example, if one acknowledges that in the Dahomean Yoruba religion, the head is regarded as the receptacle in which the spirit resides, paying attention to the dressing of the head is key to the (re)fashioning of identities in the midst of plantation slavery's "ungendering", feminisation and infantilisation (Checinska 2009). Majors and Mancini Billson (1992, 56–57) suggest that West African spirituality was an important survivor of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, they argue that the behavioural patterns of the African diasporas across the Black Atlantic today are informed by this trace. By the term "spirituality", Majors and Mancini Billson mean taking a vitalistic rather than a mechanistic approach to life, one that believes that supernatural forces impact daily events. In the Jamaican context, the West African possession rituals that took place during the initial stages of slave rebellions point to this spiritual aspect of dressing the head; it was believed that through these rituals, the enslaved would be able to expel "Massa's spirit from Quashies's head" (Burton 1997, 244–248).[11] Cuffee, the 1730s leader of the Maroons, wore a silver-laid hat. The 1750 rebel leader, Cudjoe, wore a feathered one (Burton 1997, 245). The re-enactment of possession rituals had the effect of empowering the enslaved to appropriate the power of their masters by drawing on spiritual powers. The physical and metaphorical masks in possession rituals enabled the (re)fashioning of identities in performance that contested those of the everyday (Picton 1990).

To summarise, enslaved West Africans emerged from the limbo of the Middle Passage carrying with them Old World knowledge, which provided models which then informed new creolised cultural expressions, including language structures. Certain interrelated dimensions of indigenous West African culture, such as spirituality, movement, and expressive individualism, rather than specific material artefacts, were retained. On the plantations, the Africanised Church and Caribbean carnival performed a pivotal interculturative function. Aspects of West African and European culture collided in these spaces. Both were re-inscribed and a bricoleur's approach was employed to create distinctive creolised forms. Without suggesting an essentialist West African culture, the detail of the outfits worn by the enslaved—such as the waistcoat with purple

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11   Here the word "Quashie" refers to the enslaved (Burton 1997, 244–248). The spiritual aspect of the *presentation* of self is a recurring issue in the interviews and reminiscence workshops with African Caribbean elders that were conducted as part of my doctoral research (Checinska 2009). There is, for example, an equation between spirituality, "coolness", and "fine dressing". In particular, the "coolness" of Jamaicans is regarded as a spiritual gift; at an individual level, style is regarded as a reflection of one's soul. This is not the forum in which to go deeply into the relationship between spirituality and "coolness". I raise it because this connection, which is highlighted by African Caribbean elders themselves, is worthy of further research.

and white trimming, the colourful draped petticoats, the yellow-and-white-striped buttons placed on a bright blue background, and the turbaned heads—reveals traces of the wearers' pasts. Tastes in colour, pattern, and use of cloth, alongside exaggeration and abstraction in styling and the preoccupation with dressing the head, reference previous traditions. The clothing worn by the enslaved was given a creolised inflection. Like the relationship between standard and vernacular English in Brathwaite's verbal Nation Language, the garments may well have been European, but the manner in which they were worn was not. Stylin' became a strategic non-verbal Nation Language, in effect an act of transformation and freedom from the constraints of plantation life.

On Sundays, feast days and Saturday nights, the enslaved achieved a temporary freedom from the ungendering, infantilisation, and feminisation that characterised the Caribbean plantation system (Checinska 2009). The everyday dress of the enslaved reiterated the plantation's social hierarchy that fixed enslaved West Africans as social non-persons. The enslaved majority were clothed, fed, and housed by the European minority, whose hegemonic masculinity equated "being kept" with the feminine and therefore the inferior. (Infantilisation, for example as evidenced in fictitious characters from slave literature, such as Quashee, was an adjunct to this feminisation.) Restrictions in clothing were fundamental to the negotiation of gender roles. For example, until the age of 12–14 young boys wore just a simple coarse linen overshirt or smock, as did young girls. This denial of clothing that signified the transition into manhood, at a crucial point in male development, could be regarded as a disavowal of masculinity or a form of ungendering. Moreover, although slaves were issued with new clothes at Christmastime, in the early decades of plantation slavery, both male and female slaves in Jamaica were almost naked for much of the year once these clothes wore out (Sloane 1707). During carnival and feast days, as the boundaries between master and slave became blurred, dehumanisation was transformed into a "numinous experience", to reference Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 73). New consciousnesses of self were created through the act of dressing and re-*presenting* the body—through stylin'. The enslaveds' state of emergence was made visible. However, freedom was ritualised and temporary; oppression was resisted and challenged but not permanently overcome. Poignantly, the masquerade ends, in the case of Lady Nugent's "superbly drest" "blackies" (1839, 129), when money is thrown from the gallery and all their finery is torn to pieces in the scramble to catch it. The plantation's social hierarchies come back into play. This brings me to the Haitian Revolution and the inspiration of the *ancien régime* elegance embraced by its leaders.

HAITI: THE GREAT MASCULINE ENUNCIATION

The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) gave impetus to a process of creolisation already underway. Haiti, being the first independent black republic, represented cultural and racial autonomy. According to Western fashion history and theory, modern menswear began

with the democratisation of dress galvanised by the French Revolution (1789–1799). This period is typically referred to as the Great Masculine Renunciation, for example in the writings of Barthes (2006), Breward (1999), Chenoune (1994), and Flugel (1966). Fashions in male dress shifted from an *ancien régime* emphasis on embellishment as a means of displaying social rank towards the foregrounding of function, discretion, and suitability. The French Revolution's ethos of equality and the resulting new social order demanded simplification, sobriety, and uniformity. In my view, from the perspective of African diasporic stylin', the Haitian Revolution sparked an alternative form of democratisation. Here, dress shifted from the functional and anonymous (un)dress of the enslaved to the elegant, embellished, and individualised, announcing the status of the wearer as free, equal, and part of humanity. This interpretation, driven by a striving for personhood, was characterised by dressing up rather than dressing down.

When the African diasporic male entered the global political stage, he was dressed. If one considers the issues of ungendering, of feminisation and infantalisation, of dominance and subalternity (Checinska 2009), and if one contemplates portraits of the Haitian revolutionary leaders Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Citizen Jean-Baptiste Belley against this, what is revealed is a visual representation of the African diasporic man's standing. These portraits represent the affirmation of masculinity and the articulation of personhood. Each symbolic male figure re-*presents* himself. The stylin' of each is underpinned by the dignity and self-respect of the sitter. These creolised sartorial compositions represent visual strategies where elaborate costume and an attention to detail come to signify the journey from powerlessness to power. They anticipate the "new shapes and consciousness" of African diasporic selves, to draw an analogy with Brathwaite's (1984, 49) verbal Nation Language. If being in diaspora means being situated between different cultures, holding the complex layered tensions between differing cultural imperatives, there is a further connection with Homi K. Bhabha's (1994, 177) assertion that the "in-between space" is the space of emergence. Thus stylin' becomes an enunciative practice.[12]

In the portrait shown on the next page, Dessalines stares directly at the viewer, his plumed bicorn hat set at an angle, the squareness of his jacket's shoulders accentuated by heavily tasselled epaulettes. His jacket facings are embellished with a laurel leaf design, resonating with the symbolic use of the laurel wreath in visual representations of imperial Rome. There is an echo of the *ancien régime* reliance on ornamentation to display wealth, status, and power in the use of extravagant surface decoration. These excessive trimmings legitimise Dessalines's authority; his appearance demands respect. However, this apparent embracing of the ostentation of the pre-revolution ruling classes is interrupted by the presence of a geometrically patterned skullcap, worn

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12   Bhabha (1994, 177) writes that if culture as epistemology prioritises function and intention, reflecting its empirical referent, then culture as enunciation prioritises signification, troubling, and re-inscribing social hierarchies such as notions of ours/theirs or high/low. The possibilities of *other* narrative spaces are opened up.

GENERAL JEAN JACQUES DESSALINES,
LIBERATOR OF HAITI.

Figure 1: Book illustration showing Jean-Jacques Dessalines (The Louverture Project 2005)

discreetly underneath his bicorn hat. Barthes (2006, 63–65) describes jewellery as the "soul" of an outfit, a "*next-to-nothing*" that is "the vital element in getting dressed, because it underlines the desire for order, for composition, for intelligence". Drawing on Barthes's assertion that "meaning" is revealed in the "detached detail", the depiction of Dessalines wearing a skullcap underneath a Napoleonic bicorn hat is significant. The addition of the skullcap moves Dessalines's dress beyond mimicry. Furthermore, the skullcap punctuates the outfit; it breaks the flow of the eye in a manner that parallels the syncopated sound explosions in verbal Nation Language.

Dessalines had been enslaved and transported to San Domingo at the age of 16. His formative years were spent in West Africa. Could the skullcap reference his West

African past?[13] When juxtaposed against Western dress, the skullcap is re-inscribed, becoming a potent cultural symbol. In one sense, the artist is conveying Dessalines's West African-ness and his metaphorical journey: from slave to soldier, to general, to emperor. However, by including the skullcap, the artist also shows the creolised nature of Haitian society and the creolised aesthetic of the formerly enslaved. By depicting Dessalines in this way at a time when blackness, with the advent of the Haitian Revolution, became a political force, the artist alerts the viewer to both the reversal of the plantation system's hierarchies of power and the contestation of the aesthetic values of the master classes. Worn with a French dress uniform, the skullcap becomes an ideological weapon. However, since meaning does not reside in the material object itself, both the skullcap and the dress uniform are re-inscribed when worn together in the moment of revolution and independence. Haitians at this historical juncture were a people in the process of becoming, of (re)fashioning identities by returning to their heritage and adapting key cultural symbols such as the skullcap to visually communicate that identity. The significance of this portrait lies in the sitter's use of dress to simultaneously signify the removal of Western domination and the entry of men of West African descent into the international political arena on an equal footing with Europeans.[14]

Dessalines succeeded L'Ouverture after his capture, having been the latter's lieutenant in the fight against the British and Spanish attempts to seize San Domingo from the French (James 1980, 250). Their leadership styles differed greatly. Whereas L'Ouverture was reserved, seeking advice from no one and neglecting to inform the masses of the rationale behind his strategies, Dessalines was decisive, did not pander to the colonists, and communicated directly with the people during the fight for independence. At Crête-à-Pierrot, for example, whilst awaiting the approach of the French, Dessalines patrolled the fort, naked to the waist, wearing dirty boots and a hat through which a bullet had passed (James 1980, 315).

Once the French were driven out in 1803, Dessalines became governor general of San Domingo. In January of the following year, he renamed the island "Haiti". By October he was declared Emperor Jacques I:

> Private merchants of Philadelphia presented him with the crown, brought on the American boat the Connecticut, his coronation robes reached Haiti from Jamaica on an English frigate from London. He made his solemn entry into Le Cap in a six-horse carriage brought for him by the English agent, Ogden, on board the Samson. Thus the Negro monarch entered into his

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13   In the 1810s, Osifekunde, an Ijebu (between Oyo and Benin), wrote: "[T]he common people … contend [*sic*] themselves with the *botiboti*, a simple cap made in the country. The more well-to-do prefer the *akode* or brimless hat" (as quoted in Bradley-Foster 1997, 268).

14   A parallel can be drawn between the wearing of West African dress in the moment of political strength in Haiti and the wearing of indigenous dress in newly independent Nigeria during the 1960s. As Jennifer Craik (1993, 27) points out, in the early days of colonialism, the educated classes adopted Western dress. However, with Nigerian independence, as nationalisation became a strong political movement, indigenous clothing re-emerged; meaning had shifted.

inheritance, tailored and valeted by English and American capitalists, supported on the one side by the King of England and on the other by the President of the United States. (James 1980, 370)

In this carefully stage-managed entry into Le Cap, Dessalines's naked torso, dirty boots, and bullet-holed hat are replaced by a coronation robe and crown. He marks the legitimacy of his imperial leadership by being "valeted by English and American capitalists" (James 1980, 370). By surrounding himself with symbols of luxury from a Western perspective, Dessalines's visibility on the international political stage is amplified.

CONCLUSION

The leaders of the Haitian Revolution appropriated the elegance of the *ancien régime*, re-inscribing it with a West African inflection, thereby creating a creolised effect. On the ground, the military attire adopted by the Haitian army was seen as an act of defiance. Napoleon, for example, vowed not to leave one gold epaulette on the shoulders of those "gilded Africans" (James 1980, 271). The image of these revolutionaries is as important to the history of African diasporic male stylin' as the French Revolution is to the history of European male dress. However, unlike its French counterpart, the Haitian Revolution sparked the Great Masculine *Enunciation*—the reverse of the Great Masculine *Renunciation*. On a collective level, it represented cultural and racial autonomy. Moreover, it marked psychological freedom. The sight of the Haitian revolutionary leaders sporting personalised military uniforms awakened the Caribbean region to a new level of consciousness, founded on dignity and pride in being black-skinned. The reversal of the everyday ungendering, infantilisation, and invisibility of the enslaved was given impetus. Stylin' was an embodied non-verbal articulation of this reversal.

The portraits of Dessalines, first patrolling the fort naked to the waist wearing a hat through which a bullet had passed, then seated with a geometrically patterned skullcap clearly visible underneath a French bicorn hat, represent a strategically (re)fashioned identity. Read against the tensions noted by Brathwaite (1971; 1984), Glissant (1989), and Bernabé et al. (1990), stylin' allows the border between the interior self and the outside, or between the private and the public, to be temporarily ruptured. This mirrors Brathwaite's (1984, 49) assertion regarding verbal Nation Language: "The detonations within Caribbean sound-poetry have imploded us into new shapes and consciousness of ourselves". The articulation of a transformed, (re)fashioned identity through the process of stylin' momentarily fuses the sense of inner conflict, allowing for "new shapes and consciousnesses" of the self to be seen. This amplification or presencing of the inner self simultaneously acts as a countergaze.

Setting the findings discussed here into a broader context, stylin' is a vital visual marker of the continual process of fashioning and refashioning identities. What is being articulated is a particular state of emergence that is integral to the negotiation and

contestation of geographical, psychological, and social borders. By definition, this is an ongoing feature of African diasporic experiences. Dessalines's self-fashioning and the appearance of Lady Nugent's (1839, 129) "superbly drest" "blackies" reveal a creolised aesthetic shaped by a language structure routed through particular cultural experiences and environments. In this schema, stylin' as Nation Language acts both as a facilitator and a symbol of transformation and emergence, and as a mediator of the process of (re)fashioning identities, a process that never reaches completion.

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