

Postcolonial Textiles

— Negotiating Dialogue

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IT IS CURIOUS – considering the ability of the textile to capture and convey cultural, national, and individual identity – that textiles have enjoyed little attention in postcolonial studies. This essay will consider what the American artist Elaine Reichek has referred to as the “politics of thread.”¹ By this I mean debates about gender, skill, and the domestic that contribute, consciously or subconsciously, to our expectation of the textile’s meaning, used here with particular attention to themes of the postcolonial. Within the hierarchies of power that rule the visual arts, textiles are often experienced as a marginal discipline. The market value of art made in cloth tends to be lower than that made with the conventional materials of fine art, such as the framed canvas of painting. This is ironic, when we remember that painting for the most part resides *on* a textile; the painter’s canvas is cloth. But the familiarity, be it of the canvases under conventional paintings or, more commonly, the textiles that clothe our bodies and domestic lives, means that they are ultimately common. This familiarity means that textiles tend to be overlooked, rather than scrutinized.² This essay will attempt to counter this with a close reading of visual art created by Elaine Reichek, Yinka Shonibare, Susan Stockwell, Nicholas Hlobo, and, most recently, Studio Formafantasma, and their works that address themes of the postcolonial through the textile.

Writing of the 2005 exhibition *Beyond Desire* held at the ModeMuseum in Antwerp, Belgium, Zoe Whitley refers to the commercial motivations of the

¹ Elaine Reichek, telephone interview with author (12 October 2011).

² See also Jessica Hemmings, “Material Meaning,” *Wasafiri* 25.3 (September 2010): 38.

fashion industry to co-opt certain types of visual culture, particularly for their exotic associations. She observes: “difference, artisanal craftsmanship and indigenous traditions are all mobilized as types of aesthetic colonialism.”³ What I see Whitley observe is fashion’s appropriation of the material surface, hollowed out as fashion is so expert in achieving, and separated from original intentions. In the examples discussed in this essay, I look at a number of artistic practices that work in another way: the textile is used to capture hybridity and communicate the complexities of postcolonial identities. I would like to suggest that the works of Reichel, Shonibare, Stockwell, Hlobo, and Studio Formafantasma may be understood as offering us an aesthetic of *postcolonialism*.

I am aware that my observations may already feel out of date to readers, even out of step with the current priorities of postcolonial studies and an interest in moving beyond the postcolonial moment, particularly in terms of analysis of current global production and trade. This, too, is a crucial and overdue dialogue where textiles are and should be considered. But I will, for the moment, attempt to pause and test the inclusion of a number of visual art practices in our understanding of the postcolonial. Here the textile is used as a material of artistic practice, rather than as functional design. To separate the two any further is self-defeating, as it is in many cases the *potential* for function that assists the textile in commenting on the lived complexities of personal and national identity and history.

The literary roots of postcolonial studies mean that debates about voice and, crucially, voicelessness are familiar concerns. But it may be worth asking if it is fair to ‘read’ the textile in the same way that we might treat a piece of postcolonial literature. On the one hand, text and textile share numerous linguistic connections. It has, for example, been noted by scholars that the root of the word ‘text’ is shared with ‘textile’, essentially ‘to weave’.⁴ The construction of texts share similarities with that of the textile. By this I mean the building up of small increments (words, threads) into a larger whole (sentences, paragraphs, cloth). As a result, there is a structural familiarity between the two disciplines that has been explored by scholars who observe that the knowledge of one discipline may then be transferred to another. Elaine Show-

³ Zoe Whitley, “Craving the Exotic,” in *Beyond Desire*, ed. Kaat Debo (Ghent: Ludion, 2005): 82.

⁴ See Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, “Clues and Cloth: Seeking Ourselves in ‘The Fabric of Myth,’” in *The Fabric of Myth* (Warwickshire: Compton Verney, 2008): 12–14.

alter, for example, likens the patterns of various quilting traditions in North America to the rise of the short story written by women and suggests that a confidence in one creative task may have informed the structures adopted as women moved from one familiar creative act (quilting) into an unfamiliar one (the rise of the short story).⁵

To my mind, textiles do thrive under close reading in much the same way as a text can. The closer you look, the more detail you see, and the more information tumbles out. In some cases, such as Reichek's samplers, the textile literally contains text on its surface and can be 'read' as literature is read. But it would be unwise to adopt this as the only approach to understanding the messages contained in Reichek's work, or in any other textile, for that matter. For instance, decisions regarding the design and production of textiles are often informed by touch. This value draws something of a short straw in the optical priorities of our world today. We tend to believe what we read. After that, we at least want to *see* the message at hand. But *touch* the message? Touch (and taste/smell for that matter) enjoys little foothold in our contemporary communication. (They are, incidentally, wholly absent from the web-based world of Internet communication.) While the textile does deserve, even thrives, on close reading, this 'reading' should be understood as more than textual. Words on cloth deserve scrutiny. But so do the particular materials and construction methods, installation, and presentational decisions. Paul Sharrad offers a sage reminder of the challenges that may lie ahead when 'reading' the textile alone as a text:

It is not just a matter of avoiding mixed metaphors, but of attending to specific meanings, social histories and differences of value. Decolonising literatures is/are a complex enough phenomenon; if we bring in other heuristic devices to help us more clearly understand, we had best be as sure as possible we're not clouding the project even more.⁶

With Sharrad's warning taken to heart, I have selected a number of examples of visual art created over the past two decades that engage with ideas of the postcolonial. These examples have been chosen because of their use of cloth, and references to cloth, in tackling postcolonial ideas. Rather than use the textile for its functional potential, these artists situate their material practices

⁵ See Elaine Showalter, "Piecing and Writing," in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia UP, 1986): 222–47.

⁶ Paul Sharrad, "Introduction: (Un)fabric/ating Empire," *New Literatures Review* 36 (Winter 2000): 1–2.

in the gallery and promote reflection on ideas about identity, hybridity, and the systems of power – such as museums – that hold our visual records of the past. I will attempt to pay particular attention to material differences that these examples provide and, as Sharrad astutely warns, treat each with necessary specificity.

Elaine Reichek

The American artist Elaine Reichek has likened textiles to the “subaltern of the art world.”⁷ Over the past three decades, Reichek’s practice has used knitting and embroidery, often while making references across material boundaries to painting, photography, and literature. She describes her interest in textiles as driven by an attraction to a “non-rarefied quality. It doesn’t drag white western male identity with it.”⁸ Initially for Reichek, this white male identity referred to the establishment of fine art. The textile provided a route to questioning formal considerations surrounding the production of art. As Reichek explains,

The reason I began to use thread – a disembodied line – was because it pierced the support. If you made a picture from embroidery, construction was made evident behind the support.⁹

The fact that the textile is the painting’s canvas, the support that underpins Western art history, feels somewhat ironic today when the boundaries between what is art and craft continue, even in this inter- or trans-disciplinary moment, to be fiercely policed.

With these formal concerns in mind, Reichek reflects that the “politics of thread was not conscious for me until my first show.”¹⁰ Debates about the place of the domestic, handcraft, and gender – essentially the marginal nature of the textile within the broader value-system of visual culture – may not have been at the forefront of the artist’s mind when she set out to work with textiles, but they have become central to her practice. Her choice of embroidery samplers, for example, makes inescapable reference to the tradition of samplers used in Europe, Britain, and North America to teach young girls basic spelling and arithmetic, while honing their sewing skills. Reichek’s appro-

⁷ Reichek, telephone interview with author (12 October 2011).

⁸ Reichek, telephone interview.

⁹ Reichek, telephone interview.

¹⁰ Reichek, telephone interview.

priation of the format responds to these expectations, but revises the content to include alternative messages that reflect on cultural expectations about identity. As the artist explains, the textile “allows for a kind of seduction, a confrontation which is extremely ambitious although it uses a veil of modesty.”¹¹ The sampler is always, initially, non-threatening. This first impression comes in handy when used to lull the viewer into a false sense of security that can lead to ideas that may otherwise be met with resistance.

Throughout her work, Reichek uses the textile to help scrutinize alternative cultural perspectives. For example, her 1992 exhibition *Home Rule* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin uses photographic and textile works to consider the history of British colonization of the Irish and Native Americans. She explains that her interests behind the project are in “the way dominant culture constructs ‘the Other’ through images and packaging that stereotype colonised subjects and encourage them to stereotype and objectify themselves.”¹² Working from a catalogue-ordered craft kit, the artist stitched *Ten Little Indians* (Figure 1), an installation of ten child-size American-Indian waistcoats displayed on miniature hangers plus the original, now framed, paper pattern and pictures of the artist’s family in fancy dress as American Indians. The waistcoats line the gallery wall in one long row of what initially may look to be uniform, but slowly reveal the differences and discrepancies of the individual costumes constructed by hand. *Ten Little Indians* provides us with a number of entry-points: culture is consumable, making costume and simulacra difficult to differentiate from the ‘real’; culture is both individual and repeatable, entirely unique in its hand construction, while simultaneously for sale with the purpose of reproduction. Rather than establish a distance from which she observes, or even critiques, the erosion of culture, Reichek points out that the craft kits are not solely intended for foreign consumption.

It’s interesting, actually, that Native Americans use this stuff too, for powwows. It’s not just the white people. There’s a kind of ‘instant Indian’ thing – anyone can do it. You can make anything you want with these kits.¹³

¹¹ Reichek, telephone interview.

¹² Elaine Reichek, “Home Rule: 1992,” *Elaine Reichek*, http://elainereichek.com/Project_Pages/11_HomeRule/HomeRule.htm (accessed 8 January 2012).

¹³ Therese Lichtenstein, “An Interview with Elaine Reichek,” *Journal of Contemporary Art* (Winter 1993), 92–107, <http://www.jca-online.com/reichek.html> (accessed 8 January 2012).

The *Home Rule* exhibition also contained *Whitewash (Galway Cottage)* (Figure 2), consisting of an ethnographic photograph of a traditional Irish cottage displayed beside a knitted replica of the dwelling. The knitted version is inverted, with the thatched roof below the dwelling, but also chromatically, so that white becomes black and black white in what essentially acts as a ‘negative’ version of the original. These distortions suggest a garment rather than a home, but it is a home emptied of function: a knitted cottage impossible to inhabit in its upside-down condition. As a result, it contains nothing and can offer little by way of protection. The artist foregrounds a further reading when she explains that the knitted replica

severs the image from its cultural context and meaning (as documentary photographs also can) and summons the figure of ‘Mother Ireland’ and the common accusation that Irish patriots hid behind the skirts of women during the struggle for independence.¹⁴

Hidden in the pleats of the skirt/cottage, Reichek leaves us with alternative narratives to ponder. Any reading of protection or, more precisely, the absence of protection shifts from the literal to the metaphorical.

This shift is crucial to the existence of the multiple narratives contained within Reichek’s textiles. Her decision to rework photographic imagery in knitting pokes fun at the ‘seriousness’ of supposedly non-biased records of the past, as well as assumptions surrounding what we understand knitting to convey. Works from the *Tierra del Fuegians* series (1986–87) are made of knitted costumes based on photographs of Indians from the islands off the southern tip of South America where the population died out by the 1940s. The textile plays an unfortunate role in the island’s history as a carrier of ill-health. Reichek explains:

Christian missionaries there gave them clothing and blankets. They hadn’t worn any clothes before that – they’d just oiled and painted their bodies. The missionaries didn’t go for that. It’s a horrible climate, very harsh, very rainy, and I’m sure the missionaries thought they were doing something good, though I’m also sure it had something to do with shame as well. In any case, the clothing had germs in it to which they had no resistance. Also, it got wet. They’d survived for centuries without clothes; with clothes, they were cold. They died of upper respiratory diseases, measles, pneumonia.¹⁵

¹⁴ Reichek, “Home Rule: 1992.”

¹⁵ Lichtenstein, “An Interview with Elaine Reichek.”

Yellow Man and his colleagues *Red Man* and *Gray Man* (Figures 3–5) are impossible costumes to inhabit. Each lacks a physical entry-point for the potential user and is distorted, much like *Whitewash*, by the weight of its own fabrication. Here Reichek's costumes could even be read as memorials. They are hermetic replicas of a now lost culture based on curiously empty sources. As Jo Anna Isaak observes,

the process of transcoding or reweaving of texts reveals the bias of the original fabrication, what in fact the anthropological and ethnographic accounts have tried to cover up – the body of the text or, rather, the bodies of the natives.¹⁶

Writing about the *Native Intelligence* exhibition, Isaak interprets the artist's translations of photographs into knitting as a way to highlight the absurdity of both endeavours:

There is a flagrant and funny feminism weaving in and around Reichek's reworking of ethnographic, anthropological and museum practices. It is manifest most overtly in the female-identified medium of knitting, which she uses to reproduce documentary photographs of native peoples and their dwellings. Knitting is an 'inappropriate' tool for this purpose – so unscientific, one of those typical feminine misunderstandings, as if some dotty old woman had gone on an anthropological expedition equipped with wool and knitting needles instead of camera and notebook.¹⁷

Reichek harnesses the sense of marginalization that the textile experiences within the larger hierarchy of visual culture as a way to critique the seeming authority of the photographer and the photograph that have come before her. Isaak is less inclined to this reading, noting instead that *Native Intelligence* is

not about the failure of the museum to produce "truth," or an objective account of other peoples. Nor is it about first world culpability. Rather this is a text about textuality, about fabrication and about our imbrication in our own fabrications.¹⁸

Instead of accusations, Isaak reads intricacies. It seems possible to allow both interpretations to coexist. Reichek's work does pass comment on the failure of the photographic archive as a collection of cultural knowledge. Photography, so often used to record the 'truth', misses the point. The knitted simulacra

¹⁶ Jo Anna Isaak, "Who's 'We', White Man?" *Parkett* 34 (1992): 145.

¹⁷ Isaak, "Who's 'We', White Man?" 144.

¹⁸ "Who's 'We', White Man?" 143.

critique the seeming authenticity of the photograph, by suggesting that *neither* is particularly accurate.

The textile may be understood to act as something of a Trojan horse smuggling across these difficult and complex stories. The innocent façade is part of the plan. But so, too, is an enormous investment in the physical act of making. In an interview with Therese Lichtenstein, Reichek explains at length:

So if I present two separate versions of reality, mine and the photographer's, I'm asking the question, What's real. It's really a very simple question. But the way the work operates physically, on a tactile level, means that my knitted replication is in some ways more real: it's out there in your space, it has body, some kind of presence that photography conspicuously lacks. Yet the photograph comes with a kind of a reality tag attached to it, in part because it appears, perhaps too convincingly, to have isolated a certain moment in time. That's something else that interests me – the moment a photo takes to make, as opposed to the long, labor-intensive process of knitting [...]. So I kind of like it when people ask me how long it took me to knit this or that. It means the element of time has come up in their reading, some idea that this is not an instant reproduction.¹⁹

The very nature of textile production reveals a sense of intention. If something is going to take a long time to make, it is unlikely that the ideas it contains are flippant or accidental. If something is produced swiftly, intention may or may not be present. This is not to say that labour in and of itself creates meaning, but it is harder to dismiss meaning from an object that has considerable time invested in its creation.

In 1992, Susan Goodman from the Jewish Museum in New York approached Reichek and asked, “Done anything Jewish?” The artist explains:

What was startling, at least to me, was the fact that I had never even considered working with any issues around Jewish identity. When Susan left I filed “Jewish” in the catacombs of the psyche and went on reading about Native Americans, Fuegians, and Ireland's Easter Rebellion. Of course, the idea could not stay entombed, and the result was *A Postcolonial Kinderhood*, an installation re-creating my childhood bedroom.²⁰

¹⁹ Lichtenstein, “An Interview with Elaine Reichek.”

²⁰ Elaine Reichek, “A Postcolonial Kinderhood: 1984,” *Elaine Reichek*, http://elaine-reichek.com/Project_Pages/9_Postcolonial/PostcolonialKinderhood.htm (accessed 8 January 2012).

The project (Figures 6–9) uses material far closer to home than explored in the artist’s previous works. Reichek refers to her childhood in Brooklyn and memories of a large Dutch Colonial house “full of reproduction Early American furniture”²¹ and concedes, of her family’s aspirations, “we were a bunch of Mayflower wannabes.”²² There is little sense of comfort offered up by the installation, which re-creates her childhood bedroom with furniture on a reduced scale to capture “an environment that I hope felt melancholy, unsettled, and out of kilter.”²³ Distances between bed and mirror, for example, feel too great – as though every step must be motivated by feats of bravery and determination to travel across large empty expanses. Cosy this bedroom is not.

The life of a middle-class Jewish girl from Brooklyn, I saw, encompassed the same sorts of ambiguities of belonging that the cultural theoretician Homi Bhabha has ascribed to cultures “in-between” – those “produced in the articulation of cultural differences.”²⁴

Here the artist’s childhood bedroom feels like the site of surveillance, the policing of manners and measured movements rather than childhood freedoms, all caught in an impossible cultural trap of neither one nor the other.

Reichek reflects on the silence that accompanied her family’s Jewish identity and the importance placed on taste, referred to as a gesture of ‘passing’ (more commonly used in reference to African Americans who ‘passed’ as white members of their community) as a way of signalling their American identity. The result is a site with all the necessary components to signify a bedroom, but without any sense of security or warmth. The mattress is wafer-thin. The bed made only with sheets. The white linen towels clean enough to cause worry if used. Even the rag rugs are displayed with an unnerving attention to symmetry and edited down to coordinated hues of cream and light brown, rather than the riot of clashing colours that a rag rug made by recycling would produce. The samplers that adorn the walls bring some visual variety to the setting, but do not contain the familiar ‘home sweet home’ proverbs we are conditioned to anticipate. Instead, comments the artist overheard from Jewish family and friends are stitched into the samplers. Some deliver unexpected humour: “If you think you can be a little bit Jewish, you think you can be a

²¹ Reichek, “A Postcolonial Kinderhood: 1984.”

²² Lichtenstein, “An Interview with Elaine Reichek.”

²³ Reichek, “A Postcolonial Kinderhood: 1984.”

²⁴ “A Postcolonial Kinderhood: 1984.”

little bit pregnant...’’²⁵ But even here humour is tinged with a weight, an unspoken expectation of appropriate demeanour. Others are more alarming in tone: “I used to fall asleep every night thinking of places to hide when the SS came. I never thought this was in the least bit strange.”²⁶ As a whole, the installation initially connotes stability and comfort, but façades are shown to be misleading and discomfort runs close beneath the surface.

From sources in her own culture, as well as those far afield and, in the case of *Tierra del Fuego*, long lost, Reichek scrutinizes our material records. She finds absurdities, both gross and minor, that she magnifies through material re-interpretation, causing a pause in information too often accepted at face value.

Yinka Shonibare

The British-born Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare has made batik cloth the trademark of his artistic practice. Shonibare’s work typically involves installations of headless individuals, often dressed in Victorian-style fashion reworked in boldly patterned and coloured wax resist cloth. Since the mid-1990s, his work has depicted clothed copulating couples, aliens, ballerinas, and the sails of slave ships all reworked in wax resist cloth. The artist explains his choice of materials as follows:

The fabrics are signifiers, if you like, of ‘Africanness’ insofar as when people first view the fabric they think Africa. When I was at college in London my work was very political. I was making work about the emergence of *perestroika* [restructuring] in the then Soviet Union and I was also quite intrigued by the idea of the Cold War coming to an end. However my tutor, upon seeing this work, said to me: ‘You are African aren’t you; why don’t you make authentic African art?’ I was quite taken aback by this but it was through the process of thinking about authenticity that I started to wonder about what the signifiers of such an ‘authentic’ Africaness would look like.²⁷

Shonibare’s choice of wax resist cloth is highly deliberate. Curiously, it is prompted by a similar line of questioning that Reichek recalls leading to the

²⁵ Elaine Reichek, [http://elainereichek.com/Project_Pages/9_Postcolonial/Sampler\(JesseReichek\).htm](http://elainereichek.com/Project_Pages/9_Postcolonial/Sampler(JesseReichek).htm) (accessed 8 January 2012).

²⁶ Reichek, [http://www.elainereichek.com/Project_Pages/9_Postcolonial/Samplers\(ER_JohnPEngel\).htm](http://www.elainereichek.com/Project_Pages/9_Postcolonial/Samplers(ER_JohnPEngel).htm) (accessed 8 January 2012).

²⁷ Anthony Downey, “Setting the Stage: Yinka Shonibare in Conversation with Anthony Downey,” in *Yinka Shonibare MBE* (London: Prestel, 2008): 39.

creation of the *Postcolonial Kinderhood*, essentially an external expectation of engagement with the artist's personal identity. As John Picton explains,

his [Shonibare's] work is generally concerned (among other things) with the deconstruction of stereotypes and essentialized identities, most especially those of black and African people in the so-called West that persist within the three-fold legacy of racism, slavery, and colonialism.²⁸

Reichek deployed the textile to cast doubt on authenticity, of the information photography records (and misses), of what the surfaces of affluent furniture are trying to suggest and lay claim to, and by embedding alternative voices in the narratives of embroidery samplers. In Shonibare's case, wax resist cloth is a tradition that multiple cultures lay claim to originating. Because of this, it, too, provides an articulate critique of the notion that any identity, human or material, can be narrowed down to a single source.

The Javanese islands of what is now present-day Indonesia have a particularly refined tradition of wax resist cloth production, referred to as batik. During Dutch colonization of the region, batik production was taken up in Holland, as well as by other textile manufacturing centres such as Manchester, England, initially for trade with the Indonesian market. There are several explanations for the failure of this plan. Commonly held is the idea that the Dutch batik was inferior to that made in Indonesia and the local market rejected the cloth on aesthetic grounds. Picton explains:

the Indonesians rejected the Dutch fabrics because of the unacceptable quality of their veining and spotting, but these very imperfections found favor on the colonial African Gold Coast.²⁹

Robert Hobb has suggested that the cloth manufactured in Holland and Manchester was not rejected by the Indonesian market *only* on aesthetic grounds, but because "the Indonesian Dutch government protected local productions by imposing stiff tariffs, thus forcing Vlisco and other Dutch companies to develop markets elsewhere, including Africa, which became Vlisco's major focus."³⁰

²⁸ John Picton, "Undressing Ethnicity," *African Arts* 34.4 (Autumn 2001): 66.

²⁹ Picton, "Undressing Ethnicity," 67.

³⁰ Robert Hobbs, "Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation," in Rachel Kent, Robert Hobbs & Anthony Downey, *Yinka Shonibare MBE* (London: Prestel, 2008): 29.

It was originally aimed at consumers in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), but proved more popular in central and western Africa, and so companies quickly tailored their designs accordingly. Vlisco was and remains the market leader with its patented Wax Hollandais fabric. “It’s made in the Netherlands yet Africans feel like it’s their product, which is magical,” says Vlisco’s Ester Huigen.³¹

Either way, the imported version was not successful with the Indonesian market and instead found a home further up the Dutch trading route in West Africa. Filip De Boeck and Césarine Bolya note:

In the late 19th century, it [wax resist cloth] found its way into Africa on a grand scale. As a hybrid product, partly from earlier Dutch colonial influence in West Africa and partly through Ghanaian soldiers who had served under the Dutch in Indonesia and become acquainted with the Javanese *sarong* and batik printing, the wax print first captured the West African coasts and then rapidly gained in popularity in other parts of the African continent. Although these wax prints were also industrially produced in such major manufacturing centres as Manchester and Liverpool, the Dutch manufacturers were the ones who succeeded in winning over the African market.³²

Today wax resist cloth is a symbol of national pride associated with independence of the West African nations gained in the late 1950s through the 1970s, but this, too, is a ‘new’ tradition. Shonibare courts this sense of complex and indeterminate authenticity in his practice, dressing headless sculptures of unspecified race (the mannequins’ skin-tone is not white and not black) in garments that refuse to suggest one clear cultural lineage or loyalty.

As can be seen in *The Victorian Philanthropist’s Parlour* (Figures 10–11), the wax resist Shonibare chooses to use often includes the veining and spotting that may have encouraged the Indonesian market to reject the Dutch version of wax resist cloth. From a designer’s perspective, this material poses a difficult combination of information, striking my eye at least as lacking in quality. But to conclude with this interpretation, as I must confess I once did, is to miss the point entirely and to not ‘read’ the complex history of trade and exchange the artist refers to precisely through his choice of cloth. Further complicating the

³¹ Helen Jennings, *New African Fashion* (London: Prestel, 2011): 9.

³² Filip De Boeck and Césarine Bolya, “Fashion in the African Metropolis,” in Philipp Pirrotte, Carol Tulloch, Zoe Whitley, Filip De Boeck & Césarine Bolya. *Beyond Desire* (Ghent: Ludion, 2005): 109.

history of this textile, Shonibare's source of cloth today comes from the multi-cultural area of Brixton market in the south of London.³³ Shonibare explains:

When you realize that [African-print textiles] are designed and produced by people in Dutch and English factories, then that completely destroys the methodology of this seductive African thing. Therefore it is important that I don't go to Africa to buy them, so that all African exotic implications remain fake.³⁴

Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads (Figure 12) is taken from a Thomas Gainsborough painting from 1750. The English painter Gainsborough originally painted the couple *with* their heads of course, and the backdrop of land that confirmed their wealth and status. Shonibare takes off the couple's heads and erases their comfortable backdrop. He concedes to allow the hunting dog to remain at the master's heel, but otherwise the pair is stripped of the land that secured their wealth and therefore identity. The removal of heads is a tactic deployed throughout the artist's work. Alongside allusions to the guillotine, beheading his characters also leaves his sculptures' identities open-ended. Who are we looking at? Could it be you, or me? The gesture renders each of his installations peculiarly generic, in the same way as his choice of indeterminate skin-tone makes race vague. Shonibare explains:

In the contemporary world, Gainsborough's painting is an anachronism of sorts insofar as a man stands next to his wife, dog and gun – in no particular order – and displays the extent of his land ownership in the background. The view of his estate in the background indicates a society where reverence, if not deference, is absolute. This painting is first and foremost a celebration of deference and I want to deflate that somehow.³⁵

In *Scramble for Africa* (Figure 13), fourteen headless male figures are seated around a table on which rests a map of the African continent. Even headless, their crowded body language suggests the animation of the moment. Each individual shares a style of dress that has been reworked in bright wax resist textiles with little to reveal national or cultural allegiance. This may in part be the point. *Scramble for Africa* is, in Shonibare's words,

³³ Downey, "Setting the Stage," 39.

³⁴ Quoted in Rachel Kent, "Time and Transformation in the Art of Yinka Shonibare MBE," in Rachel Kent, Robert Hobbs & Anthony Downey, *Yinka Shonibare MBE* (London: Prestel, 2008): 12.

³⁵ Quoted in Downey, "Setting the Stage," 40.

about people having a conference about a continent that was not theirs and deciding how they are going to divide it up without any form of consultation with those who would be most affected – the Africans.³⁶

This is the same moment in history, the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, that Wole Soyinka has likened to a blood-stained quilt:

One hundred years ago, at the Berlin Conference, the colonial powers met to divvy up their interests into states, lumping various tribes together in some places, or slicing them apart in others like some demented tailor who paid no attention to the fabric, colour or pattern of the quilt he was patching together.³⁷

Either way – blood-stained quilt or fancy-dress party – the historical moment is captured for the alarmingly arbitrary nature of the dialogue that went on to have a decisive impact on the lives of an entire continent.

In 2005, the Cooper–Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York City, a branch of the Smithsonian Institution devoted to design, invited Shonibare to be a guest curator. He responded to the museum’s extensive archive with a selection of objects that “addressed themes of transportation, imperialism, tourism, and cultural change.”³⁸ Accompanying the exhibition drawn from the archive were two new works by Shonibare, a forceful pair of sculptures depicting two women on six-foot-tall stilts. Three Hewitt sisters, granddaughters of the industrialist Peter Cooper, founded the museum in 1897. Shonibare’s *Figure of Eleanor Hewitt* and *Figure of Sarah Hewitt* (Figures 14–15) move two of these sisters onto teetering stilts. In doing so, Shonibare alludes to the problematic provenance of many museum collections. Curiously, Shonibare’s own description of the works he created for the Cooper–Hewitt exhibition somewhat dilute a critical reading of their meaning when he explains that the sculptures refer to the “Hewitt sister’s superiority over their contemporaries in terms of their taste and adventurous spirit.”³⁹ This may indeed be true, but, placed on what could be read as extreme pedestals, looming large above the crowds, all the while peering at the world through spectacles, the figures leave

³⁶ Downey, “Setting the Stage,” 41.

³⁷ Wole Soyinka, “The Blood-Soaked Quilt of Africa,” *The Guardian* (17 May 1994): 20.

³⁸ “Yinka Shonibare Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection” (15 July 2005), <http://www.cooperhewitt.org/press/exhibition-press-materials> (accessed 17 January 2012).

³⁹ “Yinka Shonibare Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection.”

ample room for a reading that questions the connection between collector, collection, and provenance.

As Reichek pokes fun at the ethnographer's photographs by reworking them in knitting to show up the treatment of human beings as objects of curiosity, so does Shonibare re-create the long-distance focus that gathered many of our museum archives. The Hewitt sisters are, frankly, above it all. Propped on stilts, observing life from a sanitized distance, they are cast as distant and un-touchable. Even Sarah's spectacles, difficult to balance on a headless woman, are carried on a stick, the better to keep things out of focus that aren't part of the narrative desired. Here Reichek and Shonibare share a number of strategies, the most overt perhaps being what Picton quotes Shonibare as calling his "'deliberate denial of the authentic'."⁴⁰ The textile, which is with us every day, in such mundane familiarity, works for both artists to overturn the expectation of historical 'truth' and a narrow notion of a singular cultural identity.

Susan Stockwell

The British artist Susan Stockwell makes use of familiar materials, often used in repetition, to tackle postcolonial themes. Coffee filters, rubber, paper currency – materials that allude to the physical excess of our contemporary lives – appear in re-creations of maps and dresses that refer to colonial-era expansion and trade. As the art critic Anat Rosenberg observes,

Stockwell's works are indeed accumulations of the debris of everyday life. However they conjure up additional implications of accumulation, the strongest being the desire to appropriate everything from luxury goods to land to people. And in mapping out her chosen locations, Stockwell reminds us of the cost of this far-flung impulse.⁴¹

Pattern of the World (Figure 16) makes use of a paper dressmaking pattern of stained tea, reconfigured into a Mercator map of the world. It provides us with yet another version of the scramble for Africa, not blood-soaked as Soyinka sees it, nor disembodied as Shonibare's table of headless men, but poignant nonetheless. "Shorten or lengthen here," instructions to adapt the pattern to the wearer's size, coincide with the tip of the African continent to provide yet another interpretation of the arbitrary madness that went into the creation of

⁴⁰ Picton, "Undressing Ethnicity," 66 (comment by Shonibare, 1992).

⁴¹ Anat Rosenberg, "Susan Stockwell: Accumulations, Thomas Korzelius Fine Art, New York," *Art on Paper* 4.6 (July–August 2000): 60.

the contemporary African map. Stockwell seems to be telling us that skirts can be lengthened and shortened. Continents cannot, and should not.

Trayne (Figure 17) uses coffee filters to create a life-sized woman's dress with a pronounced bustle. The filters remind us that the wealth behind the ownership of luxury clothing came directly from the trade of materials such as tea and coffee. As I have noted previously,

Stockwell collects the accessories to contemporary consumption [...].
Alongside a historical reading is a contemporary concern with the sheer quantity of disposable clutter we send out into the world's rubbish each day.⁴²

The exaggerated form of the garment can be understood as alluding not only to the popular Edwardian silhouette but also the figure of Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman, known as 'the Hottentot Venus' in early-nineteenth-century Europe. Baartman was taken from what is now South Africa to Europe and displayed as an object of curiosity and ridicule because of the pronounced shape of her buttocks and genitals. She is thought to have turned to prostitution, and her short life ended in Europe. Her remains were finally returned to South Africa for burial in 2002.⁴³ Thus Stockwell uses the domestic and essentially non-threatening materials surrounding coffee preparation to create a sculpture that uses the intricacies of its own modular making to refer to an extraordinarily tragic moment in history.

In Stockwell's work, the colonial project becomes a set of symbols – headless like Shonibare – that remind us of exchanges both material and human. In a number of works including *Colonial Dress* (Figures 18–19), *Empire Dress*, and *Highland Dress*, the map and its history of mapping British colonization become the garment's new material. The textile is very much personal and national at the same time. In more recent work, Stockwell refers to "today's colonization – her world map of 'A Chinese Dream', for instance, shows the Chinese influence spreading globally, particularly in Africa, again through banknotes."⁴⁴ This approach is shared by the final artists to be discussed in this essay, the South African Nicholas Hlobo and the Italian design pair, Studio

⁴² Jessica Hemmings, "Revisiting the Colonial," *Surface Design Journal* (Spring 2005): 42–43.

⁴³ Anon., "Hottentot Venus Laid to Rest," *BBC*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/2183271.stm> (accessed 17 January 2012).

⁴⁴ Hugh Pearman, "Plot on the Landscape," *Crafts Magazine* (November–December 2011): 40.

Formafantasma, both of whom create work that questions the ‘post’ in post-colonial and often suggests that the systems of power and imbalance witnessed during the colonial era have very material – and contemporary – examples in our world today.

Nicholas Hlobo

The South African artist Nicholas Hlobo uses materials such as rubber and leather combined with brightly coloured stitches in satin to construct his sculptures. In 2009, his exhibition at the Tate Modern in London included a large patchwork sculpture of leather and rubber titled *Ingubo Yesizwe* (Figures 20–21). The materials Hlobo works with can be traced back to their cultural significance, as the exhibition pamphlet at the time explained: “extensive use of leather in this piece reflects the economic, social, political, and spiritual importance of cattle in Xhosa culture.”⁴⁵ But perhaps more important than the individual materials is the way in which Hlobo integrates the two, physically connecting what may otherwise be disparate parts.

The leather top, representing traditional Xhosa values and practices, and rubber bottom, signifying modernisation and urbanisation, are carefully integrated so that the beginning of one material and the end of the other is not wholly discernible.⁴⁶

The shape that results is difficult to define. A tapered tail greets the viewer entering the gallery. The ‘body’ of the sculpture – and it is a form that is difficult not to anthropomorphize – is in some indefinable way damaged. Perhaps it is the closeness of the bulk to the floor that suggests a weight or burden, or the ‘wound’ from which coloured ribbons pour near what may be expected to be the head.

Hlobo also creates large-scale drawings made of paper that are cut and re-sewn with ribbon. In a telephone conversation in 2010 he referred to the process of creating these drawings: “I draw with a weapon. Cutting through the surface is a metaphor”⁴⁷. This being the case, then the act of sewing or repairing the paper can also be read as a gesture towards recovery if not reparation. The drawings are maps of sorts, complete with contemporary lines drawn by

⁴⁵ Tate Modern, *Nicholas Hlobo* (exh. cat. pamphlet), <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/nicholashlobo/artworks.shtm> (accessed 28 January 2012).

⁴⁶ Tate Modern, *Nicholas Hlobo*.

⁴⁷ Nicholas Hlobo, telephone interview with author (27 February 2010).

the white cables of iTouch ear-phones. The boldness and brightness of his stitches seem to suggest that the wounds – literally of apartheid, but also more personally of his identity as a young gay artist working in a conservative culture – are impossible to erase. When recovery is possible, traces, here bold, bright traces, are unlikely to fade.

Much like Reichel and Shonibare, Hlobo refers to the burden of what may be expected of his artistic practice, in particular what he refers to as assumptions about what “African art should look like, especially from a black artist.”⁴⁸ He concedes little in this respect, with the exception of his decision to use the Xhosa language to title his work. The artist explains this move as an effort to recover a linguistic heritage little known to him, as well as a gesture towards modernization of the language. (He explains that the Xhosa language has not adapted in the way that English and Afrikaans has to “global trends in technical terminology and high culture.”⁴⁹) While Reichel, Shonibare, and Stockwell have all mined the past, Hlobo (and works such as Stockwell’s more recent *Chinese Dream*) focuses on the current. This interest in contemporary versions of the postcolonial experience is also apparent in the final example to be discussed here, Studio Formafantasma.

Studio Formafantasma

Again it is the map, which appears in Stockwell and Hlobo’s work, that is taken up by the Italian designers Simone Farresin and Andrea Trimarchi, known as Studio Formafantasma. In their 2011 *Colony* collection (Figures 22–26), the woven textile is used to explore themes of Italian colonization in Africa, alongside contemporary immigration. Each blanket in the series refers to a capital city of a country that experienced either Italian colonization or intervention: Tripoli in Libya, Asmara in Eritrea, and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. While many of the previous examples have been preoccupied with individual identity, Studio Formafantasma explores issues of colonization from the viewpoint of urban identity – literally the development of buildings and urban planning that occurred during Italian colonial occupation of North Africa. “The series investigates the impact of Italian imperialism on the urban infrastructure

⁴⁸ Hlobo, telephone interview.

⁴⁹ Hlobo, telephone interview.

of these former colonies and the complex relationship these countries now have with Italy,” explains Studio Formafantasma’s Gallery Libby Sellers.⁵⁰

In contrast to Reichek’s hand production, the woven mohair blankets of the *Colony* series were produced at the Textile Museum in Tilburg and commissioned by Gallery Libby Sellers. Each is the size of a single bed and includes a white line drawing overlaid with a city plan developed by Italian architects during colonization, followed by a brown architectural section drawing of a key building built during Italian colonization of the country. The third layer of overlaid text pertains to the site – for example, discussion from the 1940s of how an architect should build a city, as debated at the Fifth Triennial, Milan. The text for Tripoli (written in Italian) refers to the concord between Italy and Libya from 2005/7. Postal stamps that adorn the edges are woven replicas of those used during the colonial era, and on the back of each blanket a label helps to decipher these many layers of narrative. Asmara includes lines on the map that refer to immigration from North Africa to Italy in 2011.

Architectural sites and cartographies of migration flows are woven together with iconic symbolism and written data, including the (now threatened) 2009 Italy–Libya friendship treaty that promised Italian investment as compensation for its former military occupation in exchange for Libya’s cooperation to combat illegal immigration coming from its shores.⁵¹

Throughout all their projects, Formafantasma chart the changing perceptions of production techniques, artistic heritage, and the “notion of tradition in a globalised context.”⁵² They refer to the “narrative potential of textiles to always tell a story” and see today’s anxieties surrounding national identity and immigration as ironic when understood in the bigger picture of centuries’ worth of exchange between cultures that are far from new.⁵³

Conclusion

Textiles are a material that in many ways lends itself to postcolonial dialogue. While textiles are, in the eyes of many, what Elaine Reichek has compared to

⁵⁰ Gallery Libby Sellers, Studio Formafantasma press statement.

⁵¹ Anon., “Colony by Formafantasma,” *domus* (20 June 2011), <http://www.domusweb.it/it/news/colony-by-formafantasma> (accessed 28 January 2012).

⁵² Studio Formafantasma, interview with author (26 October 2011).

⁵³ Studio Formafantasma, interview.

the “subaltern of the art world,” this position can also be understood to place the textile in an unexpected location of power. In recent years, artists have used the textile to communicate increasingly complex ideas informed by a broad range of theoretical thinking, including that of the postcolonial. The narratives held by textile art increasingly exist on a number of levels that range from the functional to the metaphoric. The beauty of the textile is often deployed as a visual seduction used to package challenging narratives. The presence of beauty can easily suggest a decorative role for the textile that does little justice to the concepts that underpin much of the work discussed in this essay. Working from the perspective of individual identity out to that of the nation, the examples discussed here make use of recurring themes such as mapping and photography that consistently question the authenticity of our visual culture. These are textiles that, operating within a system of intertextuality, benefit, as literature does, from close reading. But they also deserve to be understood within a value-system that, as Paul Sharrad notes, pays particular attention to the specificities of the textile – differing histories of production, use, and meaning that have a bearing on our contemporary understanding of cloth. To begin understanding the aesthetics of the postcolonial textile, we need to know how to read, touch (even if the latter requires a feat of imagination), and listen simultaneously to the complex stories they tell.

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FIGURES
(see pages 45–50 following)

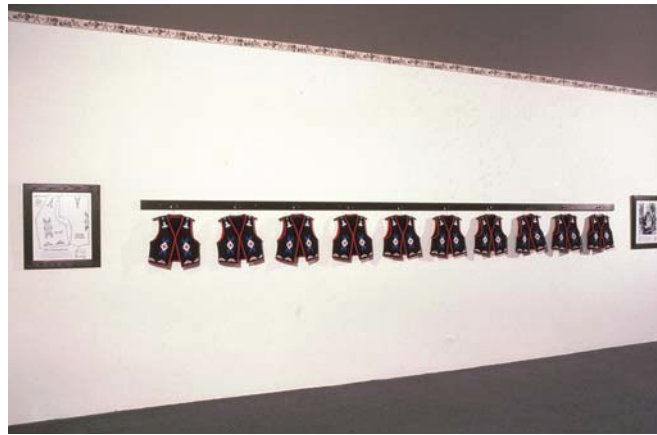


Figure 1. Elaine Reichek, *Ten Little Indians* (1992).
Photographer: Orcutt Photography, New York.



Figure 2. Elaine Reichek, *Whitewash (Galway Cottage)* (1992-93).
Knitted wool yarn, hanger and gelatin silver print.
Overall dimensions 114.3 x 337.8 cm. Photographer: Orcutt Photography, New York.



Figure 3. Elaine Reichek, *Yellow Man* (1986).
Knitted wool yarn and hand-painted gelatin silver print. Overall 180.3 x 292.1 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4. Elaine Reichek, *Red Man* (1988). Knitted wool yarn and gelatin silver print. Overall 165.1 x 177.8 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 5. Elaine Reichek, *Gray Man* (1989). Knitted wool yarn and gelatin silver print. Overall 165.1 x 180.3 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* (1994). Installation view, The Jewish Museum, New York. Image courtesy of the artist.

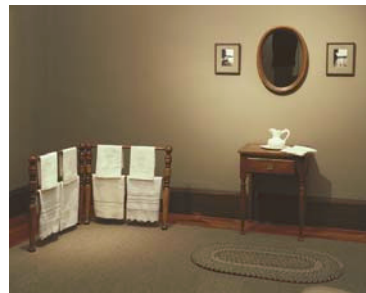


Figure 7. Elaine Reichek, *A Postcolonial Kinderhood* (1994). Installation view, The Jewish Museum, New York. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 8. Elaine Reichek, *Untitled (Jesse Reichek)* (1994). Hand embroidery on linen. 28.6 x 31.8 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 9. Elaine Reichek, *Untitled (E.R.)* (1993). Hand embroidery on linen. 33 x 21.6 cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 10. Yinka Shonibare, *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996–97). Reproduction furniture, fire screen, carpet, props, Dutch wax printed cotton textile. Approx. 2.60 x 4.88 x 5.30m. © the artist. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

Figure 11. Yinka Shonibare, *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996–97), detail.



Figure 12. Yinka Shonibare, *Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads* (1998). Wax-print cotton costumes on armatures, dog, mannequin, bench, gun, 165 x 570 x 254 cm. © the artist. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.



Figure 13. Yinka Shonibare, *Scramble for Africa* (2003). 14 figures, 14 chairs, table, Dutch wax printed cotton textile. Overall: 132 x 488 x 280cm. © the artist. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.



Figure 14. Yinka Shonibare, *Figure of Eleanor Hewitt* (2005). Image lent by the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and James Cohan Gallery, New York.



Figure 15. Yinka Shonibare, *Figure of Sarah Hewitt* (2005). Image lent by the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and James Cohan Gallery, New York.



Figure 16. Susan Stockwell, *Pattern of the World* (2000). Paper, dress making patterns, tea. 180 x 120 x 2 cm. Image courtesy of the artist. © Susan Stockwell.



Figure 17. Susan Stockwell, *Trayne* (1998). Coffee filters, coffee, paper portion cups, cotton thread. Image courtesy of the artist. © Susan Stockwell.



Figure 18. Susan Stockwell, *Colonial Dress* (2008).



Figure 19. Susan Stockwell, *Colonial Dress* (2008), detail. Maps, wire, glue. Image courtesy of the artist. © Susan Stockwell.



Figure 20. Nicholas Hlobo, *Ingubo Yesizwe* (2008). Leather, rubber, gauze, ribbon, and steel. 150 x 260 cm x 3 m. © Nicholas Hlobo. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.



Figure 21. Nicholas Hlobo, *Ingubo Yesizwe* (2008), detail. Leather, rubber, gauze, ribbon, and steel. 150 x 260 cm x 3 m. © Nicholas Hlobo. Courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg.



Figure 22. Studio Formafantasma, *Moulding Tradition: Colony (Addis Ababa)* (2011). Mohair, cotton, ceramic tiles. 230 x 120 cm. Photographer: Luisa Zanzani. Courtesy of Gallery Libby Sellers.



Figure 23. Studio Formafantasma, *Moulding Tradition: Colony (Asmara)* (2011). Courtesy of Gallery Libby Sellers.



Figure 24. Studio Formafantasma, *Moulding Tradition: Colony (Tripoli)* (2011).



Figure 25. Studio Formafantasma, *Moulding Tradition: Colony* (2011), detail. Mohair, cotton, ceramic tiles. Photographer: Luisa Zanzani. Courtesy of Gallery Libby Sellers.



Figure 26. Studio Formafantasma, *Moulding Tradition: Colony* (2011), detail. Mohair, cotton, ceramic tiles. Photographer: Luisa Zanzani. Courtesy of Gallery Libby Sellers.