AD(DRESSING) INDIGENEITY: IDENTITY, HEALING, AND SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH CLOTHING, FASHION, AND STYLE

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Introduction

Clothing, fashion, and style can be active agents in indigenous peoples' cultural identity, social change, and healing. This is evident in the momentous new wave of indigenous artists, designers, content creators, curators, and scholars of fashion and clothing practices. Within research contexts, scholars from North America/Turtle Island and New Zealand/Aotearoa are prominent in indigenous-led fashion and clothing studies and provide valuable and foundational resources for the emerging First Nations fashion scholarship in Australia (Henare, 2005; Kucheran et al., 2022; Metcalfe, 2010; Mills, 2018; Ottmann, 2020). Although there are various texts on Australian First Nations fashion, art, and dress, ranging from anthropological analysis, textile production, fashion theory, lived-dress narratives, and wellbeing through dress practices (Craik, 2019; Gilligan, 2008; Hamby and Kirk, 2014; Jones, 2010; Kleinert, 2010; Martinez, 2007; Maynard, 2002), research and scholarship from First Nations-led perspectives are still emerging (Andrews, 2020; Bedford, 2020; Blacklock, 2010; Couzens, 2011; Couzens & Darroch, 2012; Hayman, 2015; McDaniel, 2016; McGregor, 2019; Riley, 2016; Troy, 1993). My project, titled 'Ad(dressing) Indigeneity: identity, healing, and social change through clothing, fashion, and style', aims to contribute essential and unique First Nations-led research in Australian scholarship and highlight the fashion-lived-narratives of First Nations peoples.

This four-year project, initiated in January 2022, aims to weave past and present narratives of the designing and wearing of First Nations fashion and style for a holistic insight into First Nations cultural practices and well-being. The following developmental paper will briefly summarise the project methodology and the existing results from the literature and archival review under the broad themes of pre-1788 colonization, resisting invasion and colonisation, First Nations art and fashion, and shaping political and cultural clothing. The following terminology of First Nations fashion, art, and dress will be used to encompass the holistic sphere of First Nations fashion design, embodiment, and connections with artists. This definition is inspired by terminologies and definitions from fashion critical and decolonial scholars (Eicher, 1995; Jansen, 2020; Kaiser and Green, 2012; Tulloch, 2010), notably North American/Turtle Island Indigenous fashion scholars (Kramer et al., 2021; Metcalfe, 2010; Mills, 2018; Ottmann, 2020). The term 'First Nations' will be used to represent and encompass both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. Occasionally, 'Indigenous' will be used, especially in relation to world indigenous groups. In line with decolonising efforts and indigenous peoples' sovereign self-representation, cultural words will be used in conjunction with the official names of countries, regions, cities, and towns.

Methodology

This project will be determined by First Nations positions and standpoints through which the documents, stories and histories will be analysed and interpreted. As an Aboriginal woman, my worldview influences and self-determines my chosen research methods, privileges stories, gives back to community, and collaborates with other First Nations peoples. I am Adelaide/Tarntanya (South Australia) born and raised and of Kokatha and Wirangu descent on my mother's side and Warlpiri and Gurindji on my father's side. My university qualifications focused on First Nations public relations and activism, which has naturally led to First Nations fashion, art, and dress studies, especially in relation to communication, storytelling, and healing. The project has an interdisciplinary methodological approach to guide and inform the examination and collection of historical and contemporary data through Indigenous research methodologies (Foley, 2003; Martin, 2008; Rigney, 1999), ethnography (Reeves et al., 2008), and storytelling (Archibald, 2008; Bunda et al., 2019; Iseke, 2013). The research will focus on urban areas where serious study is almost nonexistent on the interconnected metropolitan histories of fashion, insight into identity, resistance, and cultural revitalization.

Yarning interview sessions (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) will be undertaken in Adelaide/Tarntanya, Sydney/Warrane, and Melbourne/Naarm and will engage with 20 everyday First Nations peoples, activists, and fashion industry figures. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis will open dialogues on cultural clothing, decolonising Western fashion, cultural appropriation, and the impact of fashion on wellbeing and identity. With a focus on synthesizing and building upon the existing information on fashion, art, and dress practices, a mixture of secondary research (narrative review) and archival will also be utilised. The aim is to translate and communicate the themes and findings through multiple formats to First Nations communities, the public, industry, and academia. These include a book, academic texts, a website and Instagram account, university lectures, guest speaking, media opportunities, workshops, exhibitions, and conference contributions.

Pre-1788 colonization

Prior to the late eighteenth century colonisation of what is now known as Australia, First Nations fashion, art, and dress were guided by climates, regions, trades, cultures, spiritualities, lineages, and stories. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lived in multifaceted and diverse groups, numbering around 500 Nations/Countries (Sherwood, 2013) and were involved in the trade of materials over vast and distinct areas (Balme, 2019). In colder regions, cloaks were made from animal skin and plants, including seagrass and possum skin. As cloaks were highly personal and individualised to the person, their family, their community, their clans, moiety, and totems, many were buried with it. The design of fit and functionality of animal (and plant) cloaks were straightforward, the designs on the skin side reflected the person's identity, with panels being added when needed, for instance for the inclusion of hoods or pouches (Couzens and Darroch, 2012; Riley, 2016). In various warmer regions, animal fat was smeared over the body to protect from the sun/heat and soften the skin (Brock, 2007; Clarke, 2008). Grease and ochre were also used in hair styling (Karskens, 2011).

Items such as shoes, headbands, head ornaments, necklaces, bonnets, belts, bands, and bags would have been made from the different and available plant and animal materials (Akerman, 2005; Gilligan, 2008; Jones, 2010). Body modifications and alterations for ceremonial and decorative reasons included painting, scarring, and piercing, for instance, scarification to mark the death of close kin and celebrate the birth of children (Jones, 2010).

Resisting invasion and colonisation

From the commencement of colonisation in 1788 in Sydney/Warrane, Western clothing, such as military jackets, were at times worn as acts of rebellion and resistance during the Frontier Wars between First Nations peoples and the settlers (Karskens, 2011). In this early period, colonial paintings, drawings, and records portrayed Western clothing and cultural embodiment in different levels of dress, for example complete Western outfits with traditionally gummed and dreadlocked hair and unbuttoned military jackets with the scarification exposed (Karskens, 2011). From the 1800s, the draconian policies of segregation, protection, and assimilation enforced many First Nations peoples to live in reserves, missions, and stations and abandon their cultural practices and languages (Menzies, 2019). Clothing and blankets, in lieu of animal/plant skin cloaks, were often used as a form of control and were managed through a system of blanket lists (Maynard, 2002). Blankets were a poor source of warmth and were imposed on First Nations peoples as a replacement of cloaks during cold weather, to cover the bodies, identities, and sex identification, and a tool of cultural genocide (Maynard, 2002). Non-descript Western clothing was often used as a form of payment and movement in and out of the reserves, missions, and stations dependant on the cleanliness of the clothing (Martinez, 2007; Maynard, 2002). Many women were also trained in sewing to assimilate to Western ideals and to produce clothing for the other residents (Scott and Laurie, 2007).

First Nations art and fashion

While cultural implements, hats, bags, baskets, jewelry, and rugs were being made for various intercolonial and international exhibitions and tourists trades in the 1800s (“Melbourne Exhibition”, 1888; “Opening of the Exhibition”, 1866; Clark, 2015; Melbourne Exhibition, 1854), the 1930s advocated for culturally appropriated First Nations inspired designs (and racist designs, by way of the noble savage trope) by non-Indigenous textile artists and fashion designers (“Aboriginal designs for dresses”, 1937; “Artist starts new industry”, 1931). These included motifs such as boomerangs, shields, and hunting First Nations “stick figures.” From the 1940s, First Nations created and designed textiles, clothing, and accessories were prominently featured in newspaper reports (“Exhibition of crafts by Aborigines”, 1941; “Native craft work”, 1949; “Needlecraft Exhibition”, 1941) and by the mid 1960s, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander craft centres and community organisations had initiated fashion design and clothing production (“Sewing and Printing Projects”, 1967). Mass produced and promoted First Nations designed textiles were being created in northern Australia’s tropical Tiwi Islands/Ratuwati Yinjara from 1969 (the label Bima Wear) and central Australia’s desert Ernabella/Pukatja community from the early 1970s (Hamby and Kirk, 2014; Maynard, 2000;

Ryan, 1998; Young, 2017). From the 1980s, First Nations women designers flourished as artists, particularly from urban areas, and showcased both their textiles, fashion designs, and traditional practices of animal skin cloaks and jewelry. Today, numerous First Nations designers showcase in the various major fashion shows in Australia and a select few internationally. The continued practice of cultural appropriation remains to be rectified through theory and practice on First Nations Traditional Cultural Expressions and Cultural and Intellectual Property rights (Blak Business, 2021; Indigenous Fashion Projects, 2022; Janke, 2021). This will hopefully be strongly pursued and advocated through the two main First Nations fashion bodies, Indigenous Fashion Projects (IFP) and First Nations Fashion Design (FNFD).

Shaping political and cultural clothing

The fashion choices of the early 20th century were consistent with conservative dress and many First Nations peoples would invest in a good outfit, and wear that one good outfit to important events, meetings, rallies, and protests. Within this dress constraint, there were instances of communication through creative wear, with a notable example occurring in 1928. Anthony Martin Fernando, an Aboriginal man from Sydney/Warrane, challenged and protested the conditions and treatments of Australian First Nations peoples outside of Australia House in London by attaching tiny toy skeletons to his cloak and chanting, ‘This is all that Australia has left of my people’ (AIATSIS, 2022). By the end of the 1960s, First Nations dress started incorporating political art, slogans, colours, and cultural motifs, evident from the many images taken on April 29, 1970 (the bicentenary of Captain James Cook's landing in Sydney/Warrane) (Briggs, 2021).

In 1971, the Aboriginal flag was created (the Torres Strait Islander flag in 1992) and by the 1980s, the decade had become highly symbolic of Aboriginal flag protest fashion (Maynard, 2006). In recent decades, our cultural and political leaders have adopted aspects of First Nations style. In 1996, Lowitja O’Donoghue, the inaugural Chairperson of the now defunct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission wore a custom-made suit of (possibly) Tiwi Islands/Ratuwati Yinjara designed fabric when meeting Princess Diana in Australia. In the new millennium, Australian Labor MP Linda Burney’s official 2019 portrait, as the first Aboriginal woman elected to the House of Representatives, showcases a ring of the Aboriginal flag on her right-hand finger and Labor Senator Pat Dodson’s consistently wears his statement hat with Aboriginal flag band.

Conclusion

From the epochs of pre- and post-colonisation to shaping political and cultural clothing, First Nations fashion, art, and dress have been used to express and communicate cultural pride, healing, and decolonisation. There is far more to learn, and as First Nations histories have been silenced, more research is essential in recognising fashion as an active agent in First Nations peoples' resistance, cultural resurgence, social change, and self-determination. Well-being in fashion research and practice is becoming increasingly important, and through this project, more can be learnt about Australia's dark history, stories of First Nations peoples' survival and well-being, and the holistic practices of First Nations fashion design, art, and style.

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