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Frequently Unasked Questions

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Beyond Identity: *Excessive Identities in the work of three contemporary African Artists*

Anthony Downey

In his reading of select work by Samuel Fosso, Aimé Ntakiyica and Yinka Shonibare, Anthony Downey argues that the game of identity can be both played and yet simultaneously enlisted to question the demands of identity formation and the cultural politics surrounding it

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Yinka Shonibare, MBE, *Dorian Gray*, 2001, 11 black and white resin prints, one digital lambda print
122 x 152.5cm each
Courtesy artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London
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Samuel Fosso, *Le chef: celui qui a vendu l'Afrique aux Colons*, (Autoportrait from series *Tati*), 1997, colour print, 102 x 102cm
Courtesy artist and Jean Marc Patras / Galerie, Paris

In 1855, Herman Melville published 'Benito Cereno', a short story that has since been somewhat overshadowed by his other more famous works such as *Moby Dick* (1851). Melville knew more than most about the psychology of the sea and those who made a living from it. In 'Benito Cereno' that knowledge is focussed on the so-called Middle Passage that was forcibly undertaken by slaves as they were transported from Africa to the Americas. The intricate narrative recounts the tale of a band of slaves who, having killed most of the crew and subjugated the rest, have taken over the San Dominick and attempted to chart a course back to Africa, from whence they had originally set sail. The only problem, we later learn, is that the erstwhile crew have been sailing around in circles so as to deplete the ship of its supplies and thereafter force its entry into a port where they might be saved. Led by Babo, who until recently had been enslaved to the captain (the eponymous Benito Cereno), the San Dominick attempts to enter port but before she can do so is boarded by one Captain Delano, whose appearance (as protagonist and de facto narrator) elicits a series of interesting and fraught performances from the captain, crew, and slaves alike.

What follows is an exquisitely choreographed performance of roles and mimicked subterfuges as the mutineers attempt to evade Delano's suspicions while simultaneously taking on supplies from his whaling boat moored nearby. Babo has ordered Cereno and the rest of the crew to 'perform' their original roles upon pain of death; while, for his part, he and his cohort must reassume the very roles that they were attempting to escape. The conceit is so good that the oblivious Captain Delano – who does not realise he is witnessing a performance until much later – is so envious of Babo's devotion to Cereno that he half-jokingly offers to purchase him. Even after Babo has nicked Cereno's neck while shaving him, effectively his way of saying that he will cut his former master's throat if he attempts to divulge details of what has happened, Delano still cannot see the situation for what it is: the relationship between master and slave has been not only inverted, but Babo's identity has been masked beneath an excessively elaborate performance of enslavement. Babo's restaging of identity, moreover, not only conforms to Delano's expectations but employs those very expectations in his attempt to escape his present predicament.

It is with a certain sense of regret that I relate, albeit in truncated terms, the gist of 'Benito Cereno' insofar as anyone who has not read it will be aware from the outset, unlike Captain Delano and the reader, of the immanent masquerade that underwrites the tale; however, and despite my spoiler, it is not only an intriguing read but points towards debates that are still prevalent in discussions of identity politics. We could, for example, run a checklist of recent concerns in postcolonial theory that would include issues such as imposture, masquerade, victimhood, parody, the carnivalesque, and the spectre of hybridity – Babo being both master and slave at one and the same time. While all of these issues could be productively discussed in relation to various cultural practices, including film, video and performance art, I am particularly interested in what happens to identity in the moment when it not only identifies with another role, an act of excess or over-identification, but foregrounds the very notion of identity formation. I raise the question of excessive identification here so as to highlight the degree to which contemporary African art has been consistently read in terms of its relationship to the vexed paradigm of identity.

"All identity construction is a form of re-enactment. You are playing a role and to do so you have to construct that role."

While this is not necessarily the place to exhaustively recount the interpretive ramifications of this relationship, it is perhaps sufficient to note how western discourse compels African artists to wear, if not the fixity, then the fixture of their national, political, social, and artistic identities on their sleeves. In a globalised art market, ever on the look-out for that which is new and therefore commodifiable, the further problematic for African artists is the cultural demand that they play the identity game: that is to say, use their 'difference' as a sign of an exotic (and often spectacularised) otherness. It has nevertheless become increasingly apparent that any appearance of the exotic or the spectacle of difference in the work of contemporary African artists would seem to be questioning precisely the assumptions and gratifications behind such a demand.

The British-based, Nigerian-born artist Yinka Shonibare first came to prominence for the use of Dutch wax fabric in his work. Long seen as a signifier of 'authentic' Africaness in the west, Shonibare's research revealed to him that it was a colonial invention, produced and marketed by European merchants for sale in Indonesia and thereafter Nigeria and parts of western Africa. In *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* (1998) and *Dorian Gray* (2001), Shonibare performs a portrait of the artist as a Victorian dandy that likewise draws upon issues of authenticity and the fabric, if not fabrication, of identity. Both of these works have attracted a considerable amount of attention, presenting as they did an exotic form of identity and a simultaneous instance of visual disruption: a black subject appearing in a role more commonly associated with a white subject, that of the Victorian dandy.

The origins of dandyism were bound up with the politics of the French Revolution insofar as the dandy dressed in an aristocratic style so as to distinguish himself from lower class Parisians, the sans-culottes, the latter being, literally, "without-breeches". From the very outset we see how politics and the aesthetics of dress and appearance make for opportune bedfellows. In striving to imitate an aristocratic style of life despite being of middle-class background, the dandy was not only involved in an early form of social mobility but did so through enacting a series of excessive over-identifications. Writing in the 19th century, the poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire was to observe that the dandy "is blase, or *pretends* to be so, for reasons of policy and caste... He is a master of that only too difficult art... of being sincere without being absurd".

In the figure of the dandy we find not only pretence but also the performative excess in the moment of identification. *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* and *Dorian Gray* are not, it should be observed, about historical revisionism, although black dandies did of course exist; rather they are about re-staging the pretence of identity and the politics of aesthetics vis-à-vis the figure of the dandy. Speaking of the role of the dandy in his work, Shonibare has noted, "all identity construction is a form of re-enactment. You are playing a role and to do so you have to construct that role. The dandy is a figure who not only lives out this fact but he is also both an insider and an outsider who disrupts such distinctions." The performative figure of the dandy personifies identity formation and foregrounds its constructedness; it is a category of identity that is ultimately in excess of itself and thereafter a figure of disruption. Like Babo, the dandy employs performance so as to negotiate and ultimately usurp any simplistic forms of identification, nowhere more than on behalf of the viewer.

Leaving his mother behind in Nigeria during the Biafran war, Samuel Fosso first started taking photographs in Bangui, Central African Republic, his photographs sent home as way of letting her know that he was both alive and well. This familial form of visual epistolary later developed into a career that has seen him display his work worldwide.

An intriguing image by Fosso was used recently for both the London leg of the tour and the subsequent catalogue for *Africa Remix*, the latter being one of the largest shows of African art to date. *Le chef: celui qui a vendu l'Afrique aux colons* (1997) depicted Fosso in the regalia of an African chief or traditional ruler set against a backdrop of Dutch wax fabric cloth and holding a bunch of enormous sunflowers. Dressed in a faux loincloth and wearing an array of possibly fake gold jewellery, this image of Fosso is as extravagant as it is exorbitant. I was reminded not only of historical African kings but also of more contemporary incarnations such as Jean-Bédel Bokassa, the self-styled Emperor Bokassa I Emperor of the Central African Republic. The artist's pose, moreover, has an uncanny resemblance to Bokassa's during his internationally ridiculed inauguration in 1977, right down the grandiose ceremonial mace employed by the latter, replaced in Fosso's photograph by the somewhat wilting sunflowers. I was initially surprised by the prominent use of this image in advertising material for the show, appearing as it does to play up to a western stereotype of the atavistic, autocratic, and therefore seemingly 'authentic' African leader; an image largely produced through, and thereafter circulated within, the ostensibly scientific realm of anthropological and ethnographic photography. The dilemma attending the use of this image was largely to do with context and interpretation. Did the artist intend it to be a parody of Africaness? Did the viewer share this awareness? Or was it pure spectacle – not unlike Bokassa's inauguration ceremony – playing to a mindset that consistently sees Africa in terms of exotic spectacle? And yet it is precisely the fact that *Le chef* appears to answer to all of these expectations that makes it so disarming – it both plays to forms of spectacle and simultaneously asks us to question what spectacle actually means in this context. Upon reading the full title of this work, and although there are visual signifiers present, we become aware of its complexity, depicting as is does a chief who colluded in the selling of his own people to the colonisers. Referencing an occasionally elided part of Africa's relationship to slavery, Fosso's image, in its visual excessiveness and excessive form of identification with an historical figure (real or imagined), deconstructs any easy reading of it. Furthermore, as subject, object, and creator of his own image, Fosso subverts any sense of anthropological or ethnographic voyeurism. It is no coincidence that the most significant motif portrayed in the Dutch wax fabric that forms a backdrop behind Fosso is that of a hand-held mirror, one that points out directly at the viewer and our expectations. What exactly, it seems to ask, are we looking at?

A re-staging of identity that answers to the exigencies of ethnographic representation? Or an identity in excess of what can be said about it and therefore questioning the basis of such easy gratifications? Born in Burundi and now living in Belgium, Aimé Ntakiyica works across different media and examines a similarly broad number of topics. One of these is identity and its performance. In 2001, he took part in an exhibition in Germany entitled *Wir sind die anderen* (literally, "We are the others"). For the show, Ntakiyica produced a series of photographs portraying him in a variety of poses – mimicking African statuary and hieroglyphs – and wearing the national costumes of, respectively, Britain (in the guise of a Scottish man), Spain, and Germany, all being countries that had had territories in Africa at one time or another. Playing to the historical tradition and demands of ethnographic and anthropological representation, Ntakiyica performs national identities in this work. In the colonial era, there would have been an expectation that the African subject perform the 'truth' or supposed authenticity of an African identity, whatever the latter may mean – an expectation that continues to this day. In performing an identity, Ntakiyica would appear to be in line with such demands until we note that he is performing aspects of European identities, albeit in their stereotyped national costumes, while simultaneously adapting the poses of apparently

centre
Aimé Ntakiyica, *WIR* (from set of three), 2003, C-print, 104.5 x 157.5cm
Courtesy artist

facing page, centre
Aimé Ntakiyica, *WIR* (from set of three), 2003, C-print, 104.5 x 157.5cm
Courtesy artist

traditional African statuary.
According to the artist, the series "is a critique of the dualisms that constitute the western tradition which has tended to, at all times, dominate whatever was different, or other, and to use it to reflect its own image". The tables are not so much reversed here as they are inverted so as to look out towards western expectations of African identity, deliver a version of that ethnographic performance of an identity, and yet also usurp any expectation of conformity to an apparent African identity. The images, in sum, play to aspects of our expectations as viewers so as to question precisely those expectations and further negotiate the politics that underwrites the processes of identification.
I earlier noted that the oblivious Captain Delano is effectively the narrator of 'Benito Cereno' – he is empowered to act for and represent the story. He discounts Babo's agency completely and cannot see what is before his very eyes. However, it is Babo who is the agent, in fact the *agent provocateur*, around which the story revolves because it is he who has the power and authority to act, and it is he who drives the narrative and thematic dimension of the story. In playing a role, he masquerades and performs an identity that effectively deconstructs the very role he is supposed to be performing. And this is critical: Babo's identity (agency) is disguised through a form of excessive identification and performance that questions his identity *per se* and the demands placed upon him. Perhaps it is the re-staging of identity – the notion of identity once removed from its source and thereafter in excess of itself – that is the most efficacious way to understand the deployment of identity as a theme in the works discussed here; the inclination, that is to argue, that the game of identity can be both played and yet simultaneously enlisted to question the demands of identity formation and the cultural politics surrounding it. It may appear paradoxical, but perhaps the route beyond identity politics and its demands is through both over-identification and the excessive performance of identity itself.

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