

Dress as a site of multiple selves: Address and redress in Judith Mason's *The Man who Sang and the Woman who Kept Silent* and Wanja Kimani's *You Have Not Changed*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore dress as mediator or interface through which multiple surfacings of the self are activated. I examine the types of address that artists Judith Mason and Wanja Kimani make through the motif of a dress, focusing on Mason's triptych, *The Man who Sang and the Woman who Kept Silent* (1998) and Kimani's installation series, *You Have Not Changed* (2012-2014). I suggest that the artists negotiate personal sufferings by way of dress as both address, and an act of redress. I argue that the dress in each artist's work is a site of tension where narratives of artist, addressee and viewer come into play. I put forward a personalised approach to analysing dress and the stories it surfaces, instead of understanding it in terms of the macro-political (gendered, cultural, racial and socio-economic) identities it might evoke. This strategy is introduced with reference to Julie Botticello's (2009:132) notion that, 'the nuances of identification in dress' are lost when 'a focus on the macro-politics of dressing' is maintained. I critique the limits of Barbara Russell's (2006:179) reading of Mason's blue dress as a signifier of femininity. Instead, I demonstrate the subtle manner in which Mason uses the dress as an address and act of redress to herself, rendering it a 'web of narratives' through which many 'tales' are 'told' (Benhabib cited by Coullie, Meyer, Ngwenya & Olver 2006:3). I carry this idea through to an analysis of Kimani's series and consider the personal and collective encounters that emanate from her dress. I contrast the manner in which Kimani's dress resonates with collective experiences of the African diaspora to Sarah

Kaiser's and Sarah McCullough's (2010:363) approaches to the diaspora through dress. Regarding dress with reference to the selves that each artist surfaces, I offer a fresh understanding of what seems to have become a tired interpretation of the macro-politics of dress..

Keywords: dress, macro-politics, address, redress, interface, web of narratives, Judith Mason, Wanja Kimani.

Introduction: Analysing dress as a mediator

'By maintaining a focus on the macro-politics of dressing, one tends to lose the nuances of individual identification in dress as addressed to the collective' (Botticello 2009:132). Julie Botticello points towards the potentially singularising effect of taking a semiotic approach to analysing dress as a signifier of culture, race, ethnicity, nationhood or gender (see Dogbe 2003; Kaiser & McCullough 2010; Tulloch 2010). She argues that dress can be read as a mediator between 'an individual and her community', rather than a direct signifier of the community to which the individual belongs (Botticello 2009:131). I relate Botticello's argument to a reading of two artists' works in which a dress, in the form of what might typically be thought of as a woman's "frock", is the central motif — Judith Mason's triptych, *The Man who Sang and The Woman who Kept Silent* (1998) (Figures 1-4), and Wanja Kimani's series *You Have Not Changed* (2012-2014) (Figures 5-8).

In the triptych and the series, the viewer is confronted with an un-embodied woman's dress. Mason's triptych incorporates a mixed-media installation of a dress, sewn together from a range of multi-hued, at times transparent, blue plastic bags, and two paintings in which the image of this same dress is at the front. Unlike Mason's artwork, Kimani's work is not fashioned into a dress from found objects, but rather the found object itself — a childhood dress belonging to the artist — is rendered an artwork via strategies such as embroidery, its display, and the contexts in which it is displayed. Both Mason and Kimani inscribe the dresses with an address directed towards a particular individual. Whereas Kimani embroiders an address onto the bottom half of her dress, Mason uses the same area of her blue dress to pen (paint) her own words. In this sense, both dresses appear to function as a canvas onto which an address is projected, and a conversation is imagined. The absence of a body to occupy the dress, together with the fact that were these garments to be taken down, they could be worn and could adorn the figure of a living person, points towards the possibility of these artworks functioning as sites into which different individuals might insert themselves. While Mason and Kimani may have directed their inscriptions towards specific individuals,

the imagined insertion of a viewer's body into the dresses activates further conversation between artist, addressee and viewer. I reveal how each (ad)dress is charged not only with the artists' ideas of self, but also with the selves that viewers may read into the artworks. Thus the interactions between artist, addressee and viewer render each dress a mediator between the 'individual and her community' (Botticello 2009:131).

Beginning with Mason's blue dress, I establish the idea of dress as a canvas in to, and on to, which an artist might inscribe personal narratives and notions of selfhood. I critique the limits of only analysing Mason's blue dress with regard to the gender constructs it may invoke or perpetuate - in other words, as a signifier of femininity. Rather, I describe the subtle ways Mason treats the dress as a mediator through which she can negotiate her identity as an "a-political" artist, or as she (Mason 1997:7) describes herself, a 'cowardly old lefty ... slipping around on the side-lines and surviving when [others] didn't'. I nuance the discussion of Mason's dress as a mediator through the key terms "address" and "redress", and the artist's use of the dress both to make an address, and to perform redress.

Complicating the notion of dress as a mediator, I explore Kimani's installation series with reference to the relationship between dress, personal narrative and collective experiences. I analyse Kimani's use of a dress, as the central motif in her series, to evoke personal memories and encounters. I then examine the ways Kimani's dress, as both an artwork and evocation of events in the artist's life, resonates with collective experiences of displacement that relate to the African diaspora. In this sense, the dress itself is not treated as an explicit signifier of the diaspora, or the macro-political conceptions of nationhood and cultural identity that accompany the debates associated therewith. Instead, I extend the use of the terms address and redress, as discussed in relation to Mason's work, to look at how Kimani's dress performs an address of the artist's self, and the times during which this may intersect with broader macro-political arguments about identity. Tracing dress through the notions of address and redress in relation to Mason's and Kimani's work, I evoke dress as a site of tension, where various interpretations of the self intertwine. As such, I offer an alternative approach to dominant discourses on dress as a surfacing of, or challenge to, racial, gendered and socio-economic identities (see, for example, Dogbe 2003).¹

1. For example, Esi Dogbe (2003:379) posits that dress, and specifically Ghanaian women's dress, is too often analysed in terms of cultured and gendered norms. However, Dogbe (2003:393) maintains a focus on the macro-political, as she unpicks how dress communicates Ghanaian women's socio-economic status.

Etymological considerations: dress, address, and redress

An etymological consideration of the words “dress”, “address” and “redress”, and the ways in which these words are understood, or might link and overlap, is important in framing this discussion of dress as a site of multiple selves. In English, the verbs “dress”, “address”, and “redress” all point towards the action of setting something straight, directing, and arranging:

dress (v.): From Vulgar Latin *directiare* “make straight”, from Latin *directus* “direct, straight”.

redress (v.): From *re-* “again” and *drecier* “to straighten, arrange” (see *dress* (v.)).

address (v.): From *ad* “to” and *directiare* “make straight, direct” (see *direct* (v.), and compare *dress* (v.)) (Online Etymology Dictionary 2017:[sp]).

Individually, each verb carries a string of associated meanings: while dress most commonly means to put on clothes, it might also refer to decorating, cleansing or bandaging a wound, as well as treating, decorating and/or preparing something in a particular way. Address links to writing, or inscribing a location onto a letter, for example. It can also mean to speak to someone, or to grapple with and think about an idea. Although redress signifies to remedy or set straight an unfair situation, to re-dress can be to (ad)dress again, but this time doing things differently. On the other hand, “dress”, as a noun that signifies a woman’s garment, carries with it ‘overtones of “made not merely to clothe but to adorn”’ (Online Etymology Dictionary 2017:[sp]). The nouns “dress”, “address”, and “redress” nuance the way in which I approach Mason’s and Kimani’s work. Transforming the verb “address” into a noun denotes a speech directed at someone, an inscription, a location or place where someone lives. Redress speaks to the remedy or compensation that is offered to set straight a wrong or grievance.

While I have introduced the claim that, through careful analysis, Mason’s and Kimani’s dresses can be seen as canvases of address, it is important to establish the foundation from which I approach them as types of redress. Redress surfaces with particular potency in Mason’s work, and the problematic implications of creating the blue dress as a gesture of atonement for the wrongs experienced by the *uMkhonto we Sizwe* cadre to whom the inscription on the dress is directed - I unpack this in detail below. I also look at the different stories that have been ascribed to Mason’s work, and the ways in which the blue dress has been dressed, and redressed with conflicting meanings. In Kimani’s work, redress operates on the level of the artist setting straight, or remedying her father’s conception of her identity - a project which then necessitates multiple acts

of redress, as the artist negotiates, and re-negotiates, through a series of three artworks, different conceptions of who she is.

Engaging with dress through these terms allows for the subtleties of personal narratives to be revealed. This responds to Botticello's (2009:131) argument that a personalised reading of dress and 'its ability to embody meanings dependent on context but also on the perspective from which it is viewed, [renders] dress able to be read in many ways'. Susan Kaiser and Sarah McCullough (2010:362) describe these multiple readings using a theory of "knottedness", which I adopt and adapt to suit a discussion of dress in Mason's and Kimani's work, as 'a web of narratives' (Benhabib cited by Coullie, Meyer, Ngwenya & Olver 2006:3).

A symbol of femininity

Barbara Russell (2006:198) explores the ways in which the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 1996) hearings prompted media, authors, politicians and artists to represent anti-apartheid activist, Phila Ndwande's torture through 'an idealised model of womanhood'. Russell (2006:179) analyses Mason's triptych as a re-enforcement of 'conventional feminine moulds ... without particular regard for the lives and activism of individual women'. She argues that Mason's selection of a dress to narrate Ndwande's story concretises Ndwande's popular representation as an idealised maternal figure, resembling Mother Mary. Russell (2006:191) asks why, rather than a dress, did Mason not 'fashion plastic bags into a military uniform, to express Ndwande's role as a soldier'?² Russell proposes the dress is a fashion statement that forces a feminine identity onto the cadre. In this sense, she reads the dress against, for example, former Constitutional Court judge, Albie Sachs's argument that it is one of post-apartheid South Africa's most poignant and significant evocations of 'an African woman guerrilla' (Sachs cited by Russell 2006:193). Russell's contribution is important because it unpicks a myth of womanhood, fragility and beauty that has been constructed from Ndwande's experience. However, her analysis of what 'appears from media reports to have been renamed *The Blue Dress*' is limiting - I contend that she opts for an obvious and arguably tired feminist approach to reading the dress (Russell 2006:193). Russell (2006:194) locates the blue dress within a feminine-mother, masculine-soldier dichotomy, acerbically commenting that, '[t]he Blue Dress is an empty symbol, silently waiting for the interpretations of those who deserve it'.

2. As the story goes: 'Phila Ndwande was shot by the security police after being kept naked for weeks in an attempt to make her inform on her comrades. She preserved her dignity by making panties out of a blue plastic bag. This garment was found wrapped around her pelvis when she was exhumed by the TRC' (Constitutional Court Art Collection 2015:[sp]).

Interface: Judith Mason's address to Phila Ndwande

It is in the very emptiness, which Russell critiques, that I propose the complexities of the blue dress lie. Mason's selection of a dress is a particular form of address in which her own conflicted identity competes with, and is projected onto Ndwande's. In the triptych, Mason surfaces pain through specific symbols of violence. The triptych comprises two oil paintings flanking a blue dress sculpted from plastic bags (Figures 1-3). In Figures 1 and 3, the dress is depicted as floating in mid-air, foregrounded by a barbed wire fence and a snarling hyena in the background. In Figure 1, the hyena tears away at a strip of the dress. In Figure 3, the hyena approaches the violent red glow of a brazier in front of him and three more burning braziers positioned at the forefront of the work. Refining Russell's (2006:192) statement that, 'the enormity of the violence overwhelms all else', Stacey Vorster and Kent Williams (2016:57) pinpoint the hyenas and braziers as signifiers that render the work a 'richly evocative example of a representational language of violence and trauma'. Upon first viewing the painting of the hyena attacking a strand of the dress, Sachs (cited by Mason 1999:[sp]) was overcome by a sense of harshness and devastation. Indeed, in the opening address for her exhibition, *A Prospect of Icons* (2008, Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg), Mason (2008:[sp]) expresses that her *oeuvre* is predicated upon a 'fundamental belief in the democracy of pain'. In contrast to the symbol of a dress, the artist tends to conjure pain through religious imagery and mythological creatures, such as the hyena. In fact, very little of her work deals with dress - *Goya's Hat* (c. 2010) and *Wardrobe* (2008) appear to be her only other two, somewhat veiled, references to clothing.

3. Douglas Ainslie (2016) traces the story of the blue dress and the plastic bags that Ndwande reportedly used to fashion a pair of panties for herself. Ainslie (2016:8) shows that, according to the original TRC report detailing the discovery of Ndwande's body, the plastic bags were not used by Ndwande as a pair of panties, but rather by her captors in an attempt to conceal her grave, after having shot her. An entire paper could be dedicated to the implications of debunking this element of the popular legend. Nonetheless, for the argument I construct here, the importance rests upon Mason creating a dress from plastic bags as a reference to the story she heard - Mason (2016) writes that when she created the dress she was only aware of the plastic pantie story. Therefore, for Mason the plastic bags arguably symbolised Ndwande's safeguarding of her dignity, and resistance to the inhumane torture inflicted upon her by the security police.

Although Sachs (cited by Mason 1999:[sp]) found the first painting too harsh, the second painting - which he commissioned in response to the exaggerated pain he experienced upon viewing the first - he thought was 'too soft ... too kind ... too reconciled'. Sachs and Mason decided that the two paintings together with the sculpture achieved the right balance of violence and reconciliation. The blue dress triptych hung in the Constitutional Court from 1995 until 2015 (Figure 4). The two paintings were positioned on a white wall one above the other. The painting depicting the row of braziers was positioned beneath them, while to the left of the top painting, the mixed-media sculpture of the blue dress was suspended in a plastic cylinder to preserve the flimsy plastic material from wear and tear. Because the triptych was created in response to a story that surfaced during the TRC hearings, this renders the dress more than an address to Ndwande, but a gesture of redress for the pain and humiliation she experienced at the hands of the security police.³ Mason appears to perform an act of redress through the words inscribed upon the blue dress - she speaks to Ndwande through this inscription in a way that calls upon the cadre's



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Judith Mason, *The Man who Sang and the Woman who Kept Silent I*, 1998. Oil on canvas. 190 x 160 cm. Courtesy of Judith Mason Estate; Constitutional Court Art Collection; and Dramatic, Artistic & Literary Rights Organisation (DALRO).



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Judith Mason, *The Man who Sang and the Woman who Kept Silent II*, 1998. Sculpture (dress). 200 x 70 x 45 cm. Courtesy of Judith Mason Estate; Constitutional Court Art Collection; and Dramatic, Artistic & Literary Rights Organisation (DALRO).



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Judith Mason, *The Man who Sang and the Woman who Kept Silent III*, 1998. Oil on canvas. 166 x 122 cm. Courtesy of Judith Mason Estate; Constitutional Court Art Collection; and Dramatic, Artistic & Literary Rights Organisation (DALRO).

bravery, and in a tone so tinged with reverence and sorrow that Mason seems to be attempting to set straight the suffering that Ndwanke experienced by addressing her as one would a hero:

4. Upon whose part does Mason perform this act of redress? While I go on to discuss the manner in which the dress might act as redress for the artist's own lack of political engagement during apartheid, Mason seems, from a superficial reading of the inscription, to be speaking on behalf of history, and perhaps those who survived, or did not endure, history's brutality.

Sister, a plastic bag may not be the whole armour of God, but you were wrestling with flesh and blood, and against powers, against the rulers of darkness, against spiritual wickedness in sordid places. Your weapons were your silence and a piece of rubbish. Finding that bag and wearing it until you were disinterred is such a frugal, common-sensical, housewifey thing to do ... Memorials to your courage are everywhere; they blow about in the streets and drift on the tide and cling to thorn-bushes. This dress is made from some of them. Hamba kahle. Umkhonto [sic].⁴

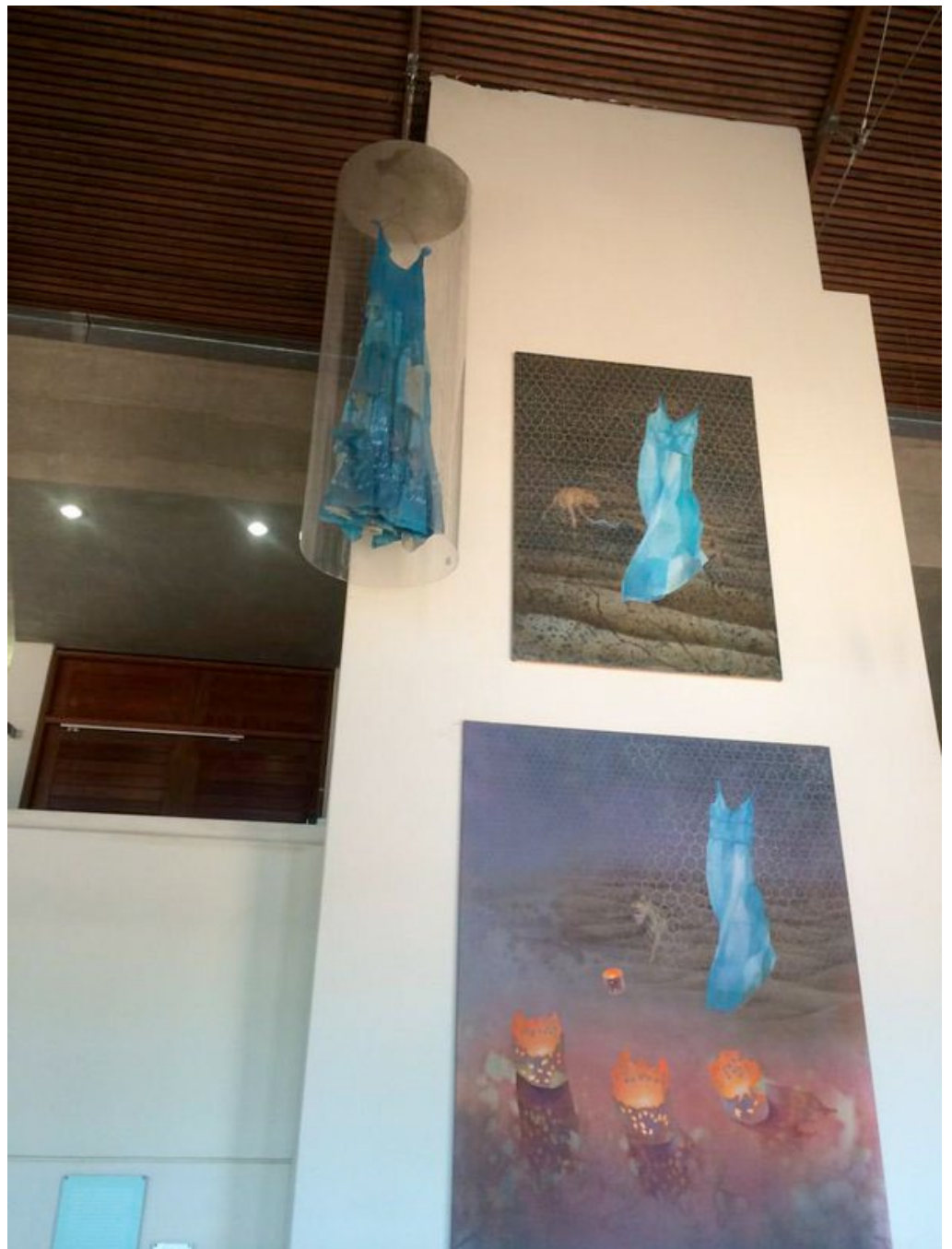


FIGURE **Nº 4**



Judith Mason, *The Man who Sang and the Woman who Kept Silent* (triptych), 1998. Constitutional Court, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy of Judith Mason Estate; Constitutional Court Art Collection; and DALRO.

On the surface, Mason seems to be apologising to Ndwande for the “wickedness” to which she was subjected. She sees Ndwande’s act of covering herself with a plastic bag as a ‘house-wifey thing to do’, which begins to explain the artist’s decision to represent the cadre’s story with a dress - and, following Russell’s reasoning, the dress is an evocation of the mother, or in Mason’s eyes, the housewife. However, the words “sister” and “*umkhonto*” [sic] suggest that a subtler form of redress is at play. “*uMkhonto*”, meaning “spear” in isiXhosa, evokes one comrade’s way of addressing another - so Mason is aligning herself with, and further adopting the identity of, a comrade. The ethics behind this specific term of address are questionable - Mason was a white female artist, not known to have been involved in acts of opposition to the apartheid government, or as a member of *uMkhonto we Sizwe*.⁵ She, by her own admission, did not paint politicised images. While, particularly during the 1980s, Mason’s white contemporaries - Paul Stopforth, Robert Hodgins, Penny Siopis, Sue Williamson and William Kentridge, to name a few - were creating art with an anti-apartheid message, Mason (1999:[sp]) states that she has always had

a problem with political art in that I think that artists ought to perhaps pay their taxes or do other things that are more advantageously politically ... [However] I’ve always had a great regard for heroic art that commemorates grand gestures. In these two stories I came upon, the two gestures were so grand. Two people are allowed — just because of other people’s bad behaviour – to exhibit superhumanly beautiful, courageous behaviour, and that’s what attracted me there.⁶

5. Translated from isiXhosa as “Spear of the nation”, *uMkhonto we Sizwe* was the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC).

6. As the title of the work suggests, Mason created the triptych in response to a story she heard about ‘the execution of two liberation movement cadres by the security police – Phila Ndwande and Harold Sefola’ (Constitutional Court Art Collection 2015: [sp]). However, the inscription on Mason’s blue dress indicates that the work is addressed to Ndwande, much more so than being connected to the story of Sefola. I therefore focus on the story of the woman who kept silent, and the notion of the blue dress as an address to her.

7. Although I argue that the emptiness of Mason and Kimani’s dresses is fertile ground for different individuals to inhabit, the idea of multiple selves surfacing and interacting through dress does not singularly relate to artworks of un-embodied dresses. Especially under the lens of dress as redress, one might extend this discussion to works by artists such as Mary Sibande, Zanele Muholi, Zamaxolo Dunywa, Nomusa Makhubu, Senzeni Marasela, Nandipha Mntambo and Yinka Shonibare to name a few.

Although Mason evokes the dress as a grand gesture that stands somewhat aside from “political art”, her address to Ndwande implies otherwise. Suddenly, an openly “a-political” artist adopts politicised terms of identification. To what extent is Mason addressing Ndwande or herself – that is to say, is the artist in fact trying to make amends for her own lack of political activism through the grand gesture of the blue dress? Less obvious than the dress as an expression of femininity are the levels on which it operates as an address, and a form of redress, by the artist to herself. Rather than being completely representative of Ndwande’s story, the dress seems to be a medium through which Mason finds herself capable of identifying with Ndwande, a site that Mason can inhabit to negotiate her own pain. So, instead of trying to make amends for the pain Ndwande experienced at the hands of her captors, might Mason more pointedly be attempting to heal, or make right the guilt she feels for her own lack of resistance, through her art, to the apartheid government? Thus, what appears to be an empty dress is rather an interface through which Mason’s a-political self, and imagined “comrade” self, surfaces and intersects with Ndwande’s perceived role as mother, housewife, victim, and hero.⁷ Seyla Benhabib’s (cited by Coullie 2006:3) exploration of storytelling is pertinent in this regard: ‘From the time of our birth we are immersed in a “web of narratives”, of which we are both the author and the object. The self is both the teller of tales and that about whom tales are told’.

Re-dressing the blue dress: Multiple meanings assigned to the artwork

8. Kaiser and McCullough (2010:363) use a similar knot metaphor, however they do so to 'describe the entanglements of fashion' – in other words the focus is on fashion rather than dress as a site of knottedness. By aligning the knot metaphor more closely with Benhabib's (cited by Coullie *et al.* 2006:3) 'web of narratives', I focus on personal narrative and the selves that surface through the gesture of a dress.

9. Jacob Dlamini (2014:225-228) develops the idea of mythology in relation to Mason's blue dress. His comment, 'Ndwande did not die in silence' (Dlamini 2014:227), exposes the mythology of silence that has been constructed around the blue dress by critics and artists, and through titles such as *The Woman who Kept Silent*. On the other hand, Stephanie Marlin-Curiel (2005:54) notes that, 'Mason's art, however, is not silent. She fills the void with the words of others, displacing testimonies of the perpetrators as the only living memorial'. Marlin-Curiel's (2005:56) analysis creates a kind of bridge between Russell's, Dlamini's and mine, as she examines 'the imagined bond of feminism and mythological sisterhood' through which Mason identifies with Ndwande.

10. What would happen, on the other hand, if, hypothetically, Ndwande were to wear the dress? Here, Dlamini's observations might form the basis of an interesting analysis – Ndwande, a woman who did not in fact keep silent, would come into conflict with the mythologised "silent" version of herself. Dlamini (2014:227) explains: 'when Ndwande was interrogated she gave the police new information about MK operations and confirmed details already known to the police'. He argues that Ndwande 'responded to her torture in the best way she could, telling her captors some of what they needed to know. But she would not, did not, take that final step and become a traitor' (Dlamini 2014:228). Would imagining Ndwande into the dress, in this light, perhaps allow her voice to be heard louder than those of the commentators who have spoken through her story?

Read together, Mason's, Sachs', Russell's and my understandings of the blue dress, and its different functions, reveal the web of narratives from which it is sewn.⁸ This web of narratives might similarly be linked to redress, in the sense of the artwork being dressed and re-dressed with varying meanings. Mason's address, and act of redress – with specific reference to the inscription written upon the dress – is communicated with a tone similar to that which one might adopt to narrate a myth. In this regard, the artist arguably re-dresses Ndwande's story with her own disposition towards the mythological, towards a pre-occupation with the types of pain that recur throughout history.⁹ The decision to create an un-embodied dress then further invokes the idea that Mason re-dresses this garment with the desire to be able to inhabit the same space as Ndwande, a comrade and anti-apartheid activist. Sachs (cited by Mason 1999:[sp]) then re-dresses the blue dress by positioning it as 'one of the great pieces of art in the world of the late 20th century' – clearly emphasising the mythological significance with which Mason imbues the work, and its function as a heroic gesture. Russell, on the other hand, critiques the dress itself for misrepresenting and manipulating Ndwande's identity to suit a story of the idealised woman. Yet, in both cases, Mason is regarded as the "teller of tales" and Ndwande as the person "about whom tales are told".

In contrast, I have thus far intimated that Mason, perhaps under the surface of telling another's tale, is in fact narrating her own. It would be superfluous to the aims of this article to trace the body of Mason's work, and the moments in which the artist seems to be using certain images or motifs to express her own story. However, it is worth noting that the blue dress is the only one to appear in the artist's *oeuvre*, and the only artwork that the artist would be able to physically embody. The blue dress could arguably have been worn by Mason, and Ndwande's resistance to the apartheid state – expressed directly through the plastic bags that she, according to the legend, used to cover herself – impressed upon the body of Mason herself.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Mason's body is visibly absent from the dress – a factor that possibly indicates her non-existence in related acts of resistance to the apartheid government. Regarded in such a manner, Mason could be seen to simultaneously embed and evoke her own story of a desire to have resisted the violence of the apartheid state, coupled with a guilt for not having done so.



FIGURE **Nº 5**



Wanja Kimani, *You Have Not Changed*, 2012. Installation. Dak'Art Biennale, Dakar, Senegal. Courtesy of the artist.

A web of narratives

I extend and refine the idea of a dress as a 'web of narratives' by looking at Kimani's series *You Have Not Changed* (Figures 5-8), which shares structural and visual similarities with Mason's. In a series of three artworks, one specific dress is repeated. The first two artworks (Figures 5, 6) were displayed at the Dak'Art Biennale in 2012 and the last (Figures 7, 8) in 2014, in the Arthouse Window, a Wits School of Arts exhibition space, situated at the University, and visible from Jorissen Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg. The dress is made of duckling-egg yellow material, accentuated and embellished with a top layer of embroidered lace (Figures 5). It is dainty and petite, reminding the viewer of a dress that a young girl might wear to her first holy communion. Like Mason's dress, it hangs without a body to fill it, suspended from a washing line. Where Mason inscribes an address to Ndwanke at the bottom of her dress, onto the front of her own dress, Kimani embroiders the following words that are both snippets from, and a response to a conversation with her father: 'you have not changed, a father is there to give his children what he has, don't forget me, don't neglect me'.

In the first instance, the embroidered words render Kimani's dress an address to her father. The dress is a way for Kimani to evoke herself in relation to the image of an eight-year-old girl beyond which her father cannot see. Through an installation of a dress that she wore the last time they saw one another, Kimani invokes her father's memories of her as a girl in Kenya, before she moved to the United Kingdom, and later Ethiopia, and the two became estranged. The eight-year-old's dress, together with the embroidered address, sees her adult self occupy the same space as, and stand in conflict with, the childhood self onto which her father hangs. Her words "don't forget me, don't neglect me" are charged with poignancy – they underscore the wound inflicted by her father's absence and by the callousness of his statement that, after over 16 years of separation, she has not changed. Kimani (2012:[sp]) writes that the dress, as an artwork, negotiates 'the vulnerability of remembrance and longing for intimacy' with her father.

The second artwork (Figure 6) in the series is a performance during which viewers were encouraged to interact with the absence of the dress on the washing line – the dress was stolen shortly after the opening of the Dak'Art Biennale. Participants hung clothing items on the line, each with tags to indicate initial ownership. The title of the second artwork in the series, *You Have Changed*, with the notable omission of the word "not", indicates the artist invoking the dress, or the absence thereof, as a way to redress, and set straight the singularising effect of her father's words "you have not changed".

A photograph from the performance (Figure 6) shows three notes attached to the washing line, the one to the far right is an address typed by Kimani to the "Dear Person who has my dress". Juliet Moss (2012:24) explains that in this letter, Kimani asks the person to either return the dress 'with no questions asked', or to send her a photograph of the girl who now wears the dress. Moss (2012:24) argues that,

as a place of reflection, the interaction emphasized our collective human need to move on, each participant bringing with them past experiences of loss, suffering, and healing. The intervention altered her memory of the event itself and soothed the pain of her loss.

"You Have Not Changed" transcends boundaries to an experience common across cultures. Questioning the validity of memory in identity formation, her work reminds us that recollections are ephemeral, taking on false readings and interpretations over time. In addition, the fact that her work "changed" due to the disappearance of the piece itself cements this notion even further.

The absence of the dress in *You Have Changed* (Figure 6) offers Kimani a way to address her father's static memory of her, and to redress this grievance, or seek

healing for it. Moss demonstrates that the intervention refined this search for closure because the absence of the dress, in changing the original nature of the work, signifies a growth that Kimani's father refused to recognise. During the conference, *Sounds of Change* (2014), I listened to Kimani (2014:[sp]) reflect on how the ephemerality of the dress addresses the idea of time and displacement and the fragility of memory, particular to her experience as an artist of the African diaspora. Raimi Gbadamosi (2014:6) contextualises this idea by explaining that for those who form part of the African diaspora, home is a complex, slippery notion as it can be both an intangible recollection of memories, as well as a tangible place of return.

Earlier in this article I claimed to adopt a personalised approach to analysing dress and the stories it surfaces, instead of understanding it in terms of the macro-political identities it might evoke. Associating the ephemerality of the dress to Kimani's experience of the African diaspora might therefore seem contradictory to this claim. However, a brief extension of the term "address", as it links to Kimani's work, and to the idea of re-addressing, nuances this exploration of the diaspora in relation to the artist's self. There is another meaning of address, to which I have alluded through words such as site, location and home – that is the metaphor of "an address" as a place in which one stays, a home address, an abode, a place of "indwelling", or of belonging. The different places in which the series has been exhibited carry connotations that such an "address" might bear. The Dak'Art Biennale, for example, has an "address" and in that "home" one might expect certain types of "homeliness" and "belonging", where artists are perhaps residents, and viewers are seen as guests, or visitors welcomed into that home. When the third artwork in the series was exhibited in Johannesburg, a new address, or home, came to be associated with the work, and thus it was re-addressed. In a similar way to how redress can link to redressing in meaning, the relocation of Kimani's artworks has the potential to resonate with re-addressing place, space, belonging, and so on. When viewed with careful scrutiny beneath the lens of the term address, Kimani's dress starts to evoke experiences of the re-addressing of home that comes with the diaspora.

Complex iterations and collective experiences

Hence, the dress itself is not seen as a direct signifier of cultural identity or nationhood. Rather, it is treated as a medium through which the artist articulates different ideas of herself. These ideas, in conjunction with the contexts in which the dress has been displayed, resonate with sentiments that relate to the collective experiences of artists of the African diaspora. I expose this diaspora-dialectic in terms of the memories and events with which Kimani charges the dress, instead of looking at a particular item of



FIGURE **N° 6**



Wanja Kimani, *You Have Changed*, 2012. Performance. Dak'Art Biennale, Dakar, Senegal. Courtesy of the artist.

11. At the *Sounds of Change* conference, Kimani and I spoke to each other about our individual explorations of ways to negotiate our identities in relation to the idea of "being African". We subsequently engaged in an email correspondence, the result of which was the decision for Kimani to create a third work in the series. In my facilitation of the display on the Arthouse Window in Johannesburg, with neither the artist nor the original artwork present, *You Have Changed II* made concrete the previous two artworks' resonance with displacement and with the slipperiness of identity.

clothing, as do Kaiser and McCullough (2010:363), who, referring to a suit from Michelle Obama's wardrobe, show how it 'intersects with the discursive journeys of the diaspora'. A personal-narrative approach to Kimani's dress responds to Okwui Enwezor's (1997) problematisation of the position placed on artists of the African diaspora in the international art market. Given the varied experiences of these artists, he argues for a complication of the diasporic art category and suggests that singular studies of their practice should be conducted. He posits that, 'the quest then, calls for an open-ended investigation of each artist, since their vision of the world is simply not reducible to the meagre insights that hierarchisation and categories allow' (Enwezor 1997:253).

Particularly relevant to a discussion of diaspora, displacement and the fluidity of identity, is Kimani's artwork entitled *You Have Changed II* (Figures 7, 8), which was exhibited for one day in the Arthouse Window.¹¹ A photograph of the original installation (the dress hanging on the washing line) is printed onto transparent vinyl plastic, and adhered to the centre of the window (Figure 7). Kimani's dress is both present and absent – while the photograph suggests its presence, the transparent medium evokes

its transience. The third artwork in the series is a lens and a mirror; although it allows the viewer to look through it and at that which appears behind it, the window on which it rests reflects the buildings and traffic on the street in front of it. The accompanying wall text evokes the journey of the dress in the series:

I've seen this as a new piece because I have worked with alternative modes of display in my practice ... including spoken word walks and performances with individuals. I wouldn't want my work to be confined to specific places in the same way that I wouldn't want myself to be placed in one place (Kimani & Williams 2014:2).¹²

The title of the work prompts the memory of the original dress, whilst referencing its growth and change as it is (re)re-imagined in another context. Perhaps this context forms part of what Homi K Bhabha (1988:21) calls those intervening spaces of 'cultures in between'. As Bhabha evokes the fluidity of identity, so too is the transience of Kimani's original work evident, as it is activated in new contexts via altered iterations of its earliest form (Kimani & Williams 2014:2).

Two years after the Dak'Art biennale, *You Have Not Changed* is exhibited in a new African context, resonating with the constant relocation of home and renegotiation of identity that Kimani has experienced. Yet Kimani embraces the idea that her work, like her identity, is always in flux. A photograph (Figure 8) of the final work in the series visually activates what I mean by dress as a site of multiple selves in Mason's and Kimani's work. In the photograph, I stand behind the Arthouse Window, with the transparent photograph directly in front of me, so that it looks as if I am wearing Kimani's dress. Kimani (2014) describes the photograph as adding 'yet another layer ...' to the series, and to the symbolic potency of the dress. Despite the different backgrounds from which Kimani and I come, I associate with her quest to negotiate her identity in relation to the idea of Africa as home. Gbadamosi (2014:18) captures this sense of commonality, suggesting that although it is important to recognise varying and conflicting interpretations of an "African" identity, it is also 'worth celebrating the idea of family' in order to grow. There is a powerful agency in the way that Kimani's focused engagement with a childhood dress, its disappearance and imagined re-appearance, speaks to the complex experiences that emanate from the African continent.¹³

As with Mason's un-embodied blue dress, Kimani's dress in *You Have Changed II*, as a transparent medium behind which an individual can figuratively "embody", speaks to the many meanings with which the dress can be dressed, and redressed. "Wearing" the dress, as I do in Figure 8, thus points towards two key details around which this article is structured: Firstly, dress acts as an interface through which the artist, and viewer may explore their ideas of self. Secondly, these ideas of self can be seen as the re-dressing of diverse meanings onto the artwork, and by extension, the dress.

12. Both Kimani and I authored the wall text because of the role I played in actualising the display of the artwork on the Arthouse Window.

13. Yinka Shonibare, whose work deals directly with the diaspora, would be an interesting artist to introduce to this discussion. His sculptures often display headless mannequins, clothed in outfits created from Dutch wax printed cotton textile. He explores the macro-political issues of race and class through works in which Dutch wax print, an ironically "African" textile, is central (Shonibare 2017:[sp]). In sculptures like *Mrs Pinckney and the Emancipated Birds of South Carolina* (2017), to what extent could one draw out the personal identities that surface in the work? Would a reading of Shonibare's sculpture through the lens of address and redress nuance and refresh the ways Shonibare's work is described and related to the African diaspora?



FIGURE N° 7



Wanja Kimani, *You Have Changed II*, 2014. Photograph on transparent vinyl plastic. Arthouse Window, Jorissen Street, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy of Kent Williams.



FIGURE N° 8



Wanja Kimani, *You Have Changed II*, 2014. Photograph of the author standing behind *You Have Changed II* Arthouse Window, Jorissen Street, Johannesburg, South Africa. Courtesy of Kent Williams.

Conclusion

The analysis of Kimani's series helps to clarify the claims I make with respect to Mason's dress. I have adopted an approach to dress that focuses not on the nature of the identity that it might express, but on the multiple identities that surface, interact, and become knotted with it. Whereas Russell (2006:194) argues that Mason's blue dress is 'an empty symbol, silently waiting' to be filled by those who interpret it, the final photograph I discuss in relation to Kimani's *You Have Not Changed* series, complicates this critique – I reveal the "empty dress" motif as an interface where the identities of artist, subject and viewer intertwine. Embedded in this approach is how I unravel dress as a form of address and redress. I look at the strategies adopted by Mason and Kimani to activate the dress in each of their artworks as an address to certain individuals. The act of address then becomes a means to redress personal sufferings. By focusing on the individual nature of each artist's address, I offer a renewed understanding of dress, and show that there is a way to look at it beyond an expression of collective gender or cultural identities, and rather as a site of tension where a range of selves surface.¹⁴

14. This approach has further implications for renewed ways in which to understand dress as it appears in the work of artists thought mainly to deal with the macro-political – from Mary Sibande, to Yinka Shonibare, Nandipha Mntambo and beyond.

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