**Object-centred Live Methods: Three Manifesto Provocations, Material Culture and the Topography of Sociological Inquiry**

# **Abstract**

Notwithstanding the “material turn” as an attempt to foreground objects in everyday life, sociology is either ambivalent about or neglects objects in social theory. This article sets up a theoretical discussion to address three provocations from Back and Puwar’s live methods manifesto. The first regards a multi-sensorial attentiveness, which, I argue, any consideration of textiles, their histories, and uses necessitate. I illustrate this with a discussion on the scholarship on African print textiles. Secondly, exceeding textiles’ materiality, this article discusses the ideological, normative-political and, therefore, ethical concerns that research into African print textiles surfaces.Finally, woven into and as an important segment of the engagement with textiles’ methodological aliveness are the temporal traversals that textile research activates and through which researchers can “avoid the trap of the now”. The guiding question around which I thread this article’s argument is how we use and what we discern (and can therefore seek to explain) about the social world through object-centred inquiry. Accordingly, and as one engagement to these live methods provocations, this article offers the notion of topographic hermeneutics to demonstrate the vibrant analytical breadth of material cultural objects. This topographic hermeneutics attends to surfaces (including cloths themselves) and the structural conditions of textiles’ production, circulation, and uses. In essence, the concept illuminates objects’ methodological aliveness in social scientific inquiry, enabling us to unlock textiles as forces, sites, and portals in the research process to grasp and make sense of social relations across time and place.

# **Introduction**

At its publication, Les Back and Nirmal Puwar’s *Live Methods* was a departure from the ascendant formulaic manualism in contributions to social research methods. Rather than a how-to guide on how to methodologically operationalise prevailing paradigms in the course of doing social research, their provocations were precisely that: incitements and proddings away from the formulaic in favour of the experimental, dynamic, and methodologically vibrant (Dobson 2014). In taking this opportunity to reflect on and revisit Back and Puwar’s provocations, this article participates in longer discussions within visual studies regarding the relationship between objects, discourse (including its visual form), and the cultural and political economies from which symbolic meaning is constructed and conveyed visually. Specifically, it attends to three provocations from Back and Puwar’s live methods manifesto, namely: 1) (multi)sensorial attentiveness, 2) political and ethical concerns in sociological inquiry, and 3) avoiding the trap of the now. I explore these provocations against the backdrop of my research on the history and visual cultures surrounding the cotton textile, seshweshwe (but concerning African print textiles more broadly). Woven out of my research project on the seshweswhe textile in conjunction with scholarship on African print textiles, I succinctly elaborate what I refer to as a topographical analytical approach to sociological inquiry. My contribution to the current volume offers the topographical approach evident in my research project as an example of a live sociological sensibility. It shows what an historically informed, object-centred approach to sociological inquiry might offer sociology regarding the scales and vantage points from which we see or analyse the social world. Thus, using these textiles, it extends their call on methodological aliveness to the vibrance of material cultural objects as forces, sites, and portals as much for the research process as for the experience of social life.

However, even as I do this, I am mindful that centring objects in post-independence moment is a close and problematic skirting with a post-humanist sociographical agenda, which tends to subordinate, indeed often negate, the importance of human agents – particularly the historically and contemporaneously subaltern (see critiques by queer humanists of colour). As Jinthana Haritaworn (2015, 212) astutely observes, within the burgeoning posthumanist tradition, “[t]here is a certain temptation to scapegoat critical race theorists as anthropocentric, correlationist dupes of the species binary with an irrational investment in humanity.” Indeed, centring objects over human subjects runs the risk of elevating – and some may say valorising – the status of non-human subjects at the expense of restoratively fostering the humanity of black subjects. Granted, as Zakiyyah Jackson (2020) insists, a characteristic feature of black diasporic literary and visual culture is a “plea to [human] recognition”. However, although legitimate, she argues provocatively, some black diasporic cultural visual and literary practices resist the temptation to beg the world’s affirmation of black humanity. Instead, Jackson demands that we read these resistant narratives as unique “worlding” strategies by those who have been rendered bestial and animalistic; theorising and intervening from the position of their assigned bestiality.[[1]](#footnote-1) To be sure, these “ontopoetics” are seductive – indeed persuasive - imaginal interventions.

Nevertheless, against the immediacy of centuries’ old biopolitical onslaught, these poetic interventions strike me as grossly inadequate for the task at hand: one that must be woven as the substantive correlates of imaginal worlding strategies. The danger of the post-humanist turn is not just that it recreates the epistemic conditions of subjugation to which mainly black women have been subject and in response to which a restorative epistemic response has yet to be fully affixed and institutionalised. It also too readily dismisses the significance and urgent necessity of political-economic rejoinders. I therefore proceed with this caution very centrally in mind.

## Object Biography as Sensorially Attentive Live Method

Increasingly, one of the key controversies surrounding African print textiles is their authenticity. This controversy is heightened by the proliferation of cheaper Chinese-manufactured “fake” print textiles that have usurped long-dominant African and European textile networks (Sylvanus 2016). In this shift, as the Anthropologist and cultural studies scholar, Nina Sylvanus has demonstrated in her research on West African textile circulation and consumption, a new generation of women textile traders has not only disrupted and short-circuited the historical Europe Africa trade networks. Importantly, in reorienting Africa’s textile trade networks to the far East, this new cohort of traders has sensitised Chinese manufacturers to the sensory experience that wearers of wax-print cloth expect vis-à-vis the cloth’s smell, colour intensity, and texture. The intermediation and agency of generations of African women textile traders must therefore be understood in the context of the continent’s deep histories not just as a “captive audience” for foreign-manufactured textiles but as an active “partner in the development of textile production”, not just in West Africa but in the eastern littoral, too (Clarence-Smith 2014).

While these might be the sensory hallmarks that consumers seek out in authenticating the quality and provenance of their cloths, these are also the same markers that are relevant to any scholarship on material cultural objects more generally and textiles specifically. Indeed, methodologically, African print-textiles’ distinctive visuality beckons a similarly visual approach. This approach is particularly relevant given the wide-ranging literal and figurative deployment to which textiles’ optical and aesthetic power is deployed for communicative effect. These textured and textural visualisations are essential starting points to unlock what textile users, producers, wearers, and institutions seek to solicit and communicate. My research therefore takes African print textiles’ as proxy’ subjects through whose historiographical and visual analysis we can glean, among other things, the postcolonial present in a cosmopolitan global.

In the past, visual studies scholars may not have been directly concerned with visual constructions of objects’ authenticity per se and objects’ reciprocal authentication (legitimation) of the institutions with which they are affiliated. However, earlier research on visual media’s relationship to ideology, power, and the constitution of social categories, such as class, gender, and race, has laid the foundation upon which my work on the history and contemporary uses of the seshweshwe textile build. In his chapter on social research and its futures, Les Back rightly noted that contemporary digital culture opens new methodological possibilities for social researchers. As Mehita Iqani’s work has demonstrated regarding global south social media influencers and how they shape northern brands’ visibility on Instagram, social media is more than a site of representation. Crucially, it is also a potent site of social action. Sociologists can therefore trace African fashion designers’ and consumers’ ideological commitments (such as afropolitanism) by analysing how they represent and mediate African print clothing on social media platforms. Beyond how the textiles might be deployed and mediated online, their very iconicity is indexed with symbolic cuing some idea of Africanity; indeed, exposing and materialising it.

It is therefore surprising that even humanists attentive to questions of cultural legitimacy have paid little attention to material objects and artefacts as essential resources (visual, cognitive epistemic, and tangible) for signalling normative political commitments. While not suggesting that objects and material culture have not featured in considerations of culture and society after Apartheid. Instead, scholars have not explicitly (and sustainedly) theorised these accounts as concerns with or having implications for cultural legitimacy claims. While commentary around competing African epistemes and epistemicides abounds (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014 and 2021), less discussion has been expended on the growing adoption of purportedly indigenous – or at least indigenised – materialities to portray a burgeoning Africanist disposition. These two movements, one knowledge-centred and the other African object-oriented while distinct, are nonetheless related having been spurred during the presidential terms (and in its aftermath) of South African politician, Thabo Mbeki, under the auspices of his vision for an African Renaissance (Green 2009). In its collision with Western scientific knowledge regimes (Sesanti 2018), the rhetoric of the African Renaissance, particularly regarding Africanizing science, was shaped around biomedical prospecting and an attempt to bridge pharmaco-scientific exploration or “bioprospecting” (Reihling 2008) with so-called indigenous knowledge systems. The reclamatory tone of this bridging; anchoring (while simultaneously materialising) an African or Africanised science in biomaterials represents a similar thread at African cultural recovery and re-assertion that is discernible in African print textiles’ authenticatory mobilisations.

Notwithstanding the sensorial apprehension involved (touching, seeing, smelling, even tasting), to grasp textiles metaphorically may begin with but is undoubtedly never solely a matter of the physical experience of the cloth alone. Indeed, this metaphorical grasping neither requires nor relies on the *in situ* physical apprehension of the textile. I therefore turn to their normative-political and philosophical contextualisation as a way of navigating these metaphorics.

## Seeing the Terms of the Philosophical and Normative-Political

Typically concerned with their symbolic and the economic relations underpinning their global circulation, scholarship on African print textiles is slowly waking to their invigorated status as the expression of postcolonial Afrocentric cosmopolitanism. Although not elaborating a singular vocational line vis-à-vis grand politics and ethics (Back and Puwar 2012), sociology can help us excavate philosophical and the normative-political concerns underpinning social phenomena. Moreover, while Back and Puwar stressed the discipline’s “performative capacity” (15) as the its foundational political impulse, I would argue, drawing on the work of Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand (2011) that, preceding the performative is the “imaginal”.[[2]](#footnote-2) For Bottici and Challand, the imaginal denotes a radical, philosophically and ideologically imaginative capacity to envision alternatives to the status quo. While it precedes the performative, it is only as meaningful as the images, activities, and performances it activates and through which its proponents embody and give tangible visual form to their politico-ideological commitments. Images reflect but also chart the ideological, political, and social possibilities, what philosopher Chiara Bottici (2014) conceives as imaginal horizons (metaphorical-aspirational and actual visual depictions). Thus, visual and rhetorical imagery are powerful tools for visualising and articulating emancipatory possibilities. Recognising that, in methodological terms, we are more than just “an ‘interview society’”; in fact highly visual (Spencer 2011), visual depictions of and with African print textiles suggest a powerful resurgence of the visual-material commitment to Africanity. For example, in looking at seshweshwe and its appeal to AFROTHREADS®, a US-based African fabric retailer owned by Ghanaian-American sisters, we see the fabric in its cross-continental, trans-Atlantic appeal. This speaks precisely to an Afropolitanism materialised by and expressed through African print textiles. As the sisters elaborate on their website:[[3]](#footnote-3)

The [African] prints have always been valuable in our eyes—they are heirlooms in our family and they are a tangible way to connect to the Motherland and a representation of her art … We support and advocate for ownership opportunities within the global textile and fashion industries [based on a] recognition of our immense historical contributions: raw materials, cotton production, trends and more. The goal: equal access to legacy-building within our communities. Respectfully indulging in different cultural arts. Listening to other people tell their stories, and helping to keep those stories alive. Recognising our similarities and differences. Enjoying our multi-cultural society. Respectfully.

To fully grasp the meanings and normative-political imagery embedded in the contemporary proliferation of African print textiles, we need to attend to two concepts often invoked in discussions of African-print textiles: Afropolitanism and Africanity. However, these concepts’ invocation tends to be cursory, their meaning and relation to African print textiles and, specifically, what the textiles symbolically convey, as self-evident and uncontested. Numerous other concepts capture the cultural and political dimensions of affirming, Africa-centred, emancipatory philosophies and practices. These include black consciousness, negritude, and pan-Africanism. For famed student leader and anti-Apartheid activist, Steve Biko, the notion of black consciousness denoted “an attitude … a unique approach” to illuminating and counteracting two forms of black alienation. The first in classical Marxist terms referring to alienation from the means of autonomous (and adequate) self-subsistence. The second and, for Biko, more crucial form of alienation manifests as self-rejection under conditions of settler-colonial dehumanisation (1984, 15). The underlying tremors of black consciousness are certainly discernible in contemporary South Africa. These tremors are visible, for example, in how Steve Biko’s ideas and visual iconicity have been mobilised by leading black-owned South African fashion labels such as Stoned Cherrie. Additionally, even before the 21st century reclamation of a black conscious sartorial aesthetic, Shannen Hill (2015) contends, black consciousness had not only benefitted from the circulation of but had also contributed to the trans-Atlantic visual cultures of pan-Africanism and negritude in the 1970s.

Although descendant from and influenced by aspects of pan-Africanism and negritude, proponents of Biko’s black consciousness ideology tightly connected (and continue to connect) the ideology to the rejection of South Africa’s settler colonial experience and, specifically, the rejection of Apartheid’s ethno-nationalist statecraft. Accented thus, the philosophy has tended to remain tightly bound to and geo-located with South Africa and the specificity of its 20th century colonial project ad while its proponents proudly adopted African print textiles, this was not necessarily an expression of a broader continental and Afro-diasporic aesthetic-political project. Therefore, I conceptualise African print fabrics’ proliferation in Sub-Saharan Africa and the black diaspora as expressions not of black consciousness but as expressing afropolitanism. A practical philosophical stance, afropolitanism proceeds from understanding Africa as having always been a site of cultural exchange and global connection with the rest of the world. The concept has arguably received its most detailed elaboration in literary scholarship and aesthetics (Mbembe 2005[[4]](#footnote-4), Selasi 2005 as its early proponents). It is with reference to the ideas of these writers that I elaborate its meaning in relation to the use of African prints. Indeed, part of the reason for the concept’s literary-aesthetic alignment is its association with Taiye Selasi, the British-American novelist and creative non-fiction writer and photographer of West-African (Ghanaian and Nigerian) heritage. Beyond its dominance in literary scholarship, the concept has also been deployed to define the cultural orientations of cosmopolitan African sonic expression (see for example (Lawrence 2019; Skinner 2015). Explored in her essay in the now defunct, *The LiP Magazine*, Selasi (2005) defined Afropolitans as:

the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes

In this sense, afropolitanism references a distinct generation of diasporic Africans who, like their cosmopolitan counterparts, enjoy a level of social, cultural, and actual mobility that was hitherto denied Africans in prior waves of migration.

For Achille Mbembe (2005), the notion of afropolitanism was intended to update and fundamentally transcend the three dominant theoretical paradigms that have framed Africa and African identity: namely, anti-colonial nationalism, African socialism, and Pan-Africanism. He argued these were ossified intellectual traditions unable to explain Africa (and its diaspora’s) 21st century realities. Instead, Mbembe locates afropolitanism in the context of two related phenomena: unprecedented mobility and a “bio-racist”, nativist reflex that draws firm boundaries between “autochthons and non-natives” as much in Africa as in other parts of the world. afropolitanism represents a poetic aesthetic response that recognises and celebrates the former while acting as a necessary antidote to the latter. Furthermore, unlike Pan-Africanism and negritude, both at times seen as its predecessors, afropolitanism, Mbembe asserts, does not emerge from a position of victimhood and victimisation, which is foundational to Pan-Africanism and negritude. Instead, as a radical confrontation with and attempt at dismantling this victimisation, Pan-Africanism and negritude often invoke a universal “Negro” essence on whose basis to build transnational black solidarity.

Furthermore, while not explicit, the aesthetic poetics of Mbembe’s conception of afropolitanism suggests an aversion to (if not a complete rejection of) Pan-Africanism’s implied politico-institutionalism and bureaucratisation of a form of solidarity in which only Africans can participate. Finally, while there is a commonality to Selasi and Mbembe’s definition of afropolitanism, which centres on new forms of cultural, economic, and demographic mobility in a globalised world, there is a temporal difference in the emergence of afropolitans. For Selasi, it is a manifestly 21st century phenomenon while for Mbembe, it is a core feature of Africa and Africans as hybrid and formed, over many centuries of encounter, at the intersection of cultural multiplicities.

In this regard, Mbembe rejects an essential African core that predates cultural intermixing, readily retrievable and capable of exclusive embodiment by contemporary Africans. Furthermore, historically but especially in the 21st century, the hybridity that characterises African identities is a characteristic feature of all societies. That Africa never managed to erase their linguistic, religious, and ethnic pluralism as happened with the rise of the modern nation State in Europe, afropolitanism’s proponents contend, marks the continent’s boon (Balakrishnan 2017). In a context of global cosmopolitanism, the argument suggests, African societies enjoy a head start. By contrast, longer established European Nation-States now confront multi-cultural influences and their implications for long-held assumptions about the nation’s necessary homogeneity (let alone the desirability). While its proponents argue that afropolitan presents both an empirical and a moral challenge to the Nation and nationalism (Eze 2014), there remains the urgent task of elaborating on the philosophy’s political-bureaucratic and institutional implications.

The concept has been critiqued for its apparent elitism and ambivalence to still existing and pervasive structural oppression between Africans and their Western counterparts and among Africans themselves. Rightly, for Amateritsero Ede (2016), the nuanced position of African identity and culture as hybrid obscures the stratified benefits that accrue between and among Africans, particularly in the diaspora. He argues that middle-class, upwardly mobile Africans in global metropoles have benefited from cosmopolitanism’s implied and actual mobilities (economic and other). By contrast, poorer, undocumented African migrants do not share in the Afropolitan dividend, whose symbolic capital these migrants neither possess nor claim given their subordinated political and economic position (see also Adjepong 2018 and Telep 2021). Other scholars have critiqued the concept’s identitarian qualification of the more universalist concept of cosmopolitanism (Toivanen 2017). From Ruth Simbao’s (2018) interrogation of cosmopolitanism’s urbanist bias, we can transpose a critique of Afropolitanism that is similarly urbanist in focus, which not only undermines urban-rural linkages in the formation of cosmopolitan African identities, but fundamentally fossilises these in ways that do not reflect the fluid spatial imaginaries that underpin contemporary African (cultural and spatial) realities.

Notwithstanding these critiques, it is in the vein of Mbembe and Selasi that Nina Sylvanus (2007) deployed the concept of Africanity vis-à-vis African print fabrics. In discussing the Africanity of wax print fabrics, Sylvanus does not employ Archie Mafeje’s (2011) polemical use of the concept. If afropolitanism as imagined by Mbembe rejects negritude, so too does Mafeje’s notion of Africanity, which sees in both negritude (and, by extension, afropolitanism) the intellectual and epistemic displacement of the experiences and ideas of African scholars as much by European anthropologists as by their Afro-diasporic counterparts in North America and the Caribbean. As he insists (36): “… the idea of Africanity … is considered the essence of Africa, as opposed to distorted images that have been imposed by on the continent (meaning Europeans and Americans)”. Taking this even further, he explains (37) that:

Africanity is an assertion of an identity that has been denied; it is a Pan-Africanist revulsion against external imposition or a refusal to be dictated to by others… In our view, it should not be confused with black solidarity in the original Pan-Africanist sense, which included blacks of African descent in the Diaspora… Culturally, socially, and historically, the African-Americans and the West Indians have long since seized to be Africans, unless we are taking biology, which itself is highly hybridised

There is, therefore, an apparent contradiction in Sylvanus and Mafeje’s conceptions of Africanity. On the one hand, it can seemingly imply coherent essences, inherencies, and inner cores that are African and distinguishable from the non-African (Mafeje). These, of course, are not defined by outward, phenotypical characteristics but by location in and political-philosophical commitments to building endogenous knowledge about Africa. If according to Mafeje there is an Africanist essence, it is in spatial and temporal terms: being in the place that is Africa right now and writing from within these two coordinates. Thus, for Mafeje, whites (including settler-colonial descendants) working and writing in Africa about Africa to build endogenous rather than extroverted knowledge embody Africanity in the same way that blacks in the same place do. For Sylvanus, in keeping with afropolitanism’s and transcontinental diasporic locations, origins (in this case of textiles) need not be endogenous to Africa to quality within the frame of Africanity. If there is an African essence, it is in the assimilated practices (including those of consumption) when encountering the external or foreign. My position is not so much to delineate the boundaries of African print textiles’ Africanity (or not). Instead, it is to discern the visual-discursive gestures made to materialise and visualise some idea of Africanity (whether cosmopolitan, Pan-Africanist in Mafejian terms or the terms of negritude; hybridised or purist). It is to study the underlying politico-, philosophical, and moral commitments from which these visualisations have emerged and to which they seek to give tangible expression. In this way, my research can identify (and indeed it sympathises with) the post-Apartheid search for an Africanist philosophical position but problematise its expression through shweshwe and the authenticatory (and at times ignorantly nativist) terms of its mobilisation. Correctly, Senegalese humanist and philosopher, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, recognises in Mbembe’s Africanist poetics a new formulation of authenticity as “an anticipatory attitude towards the world” (Diagne 2002).

Critiquing Yinka Shonibare’s[[5]](#footnote-5) refusal to accept African wax fabrics as authentically or inherently African, Sylvanus insists that European-manufactured wax print textiles are African and a legitimate signifier of Africanness. For her, it is their successful assimilation into “African consumption structures and identity constitution” that renders them African since, to borrow from art historian and shweshwe scholar, Juliette Leeb du Toit (2017), they have been “indigenised”. Sylvanus’ idea of Africanity implies precisely the Afropolitanism envisaged by Selasi and Mbembe, which is founded on a rejection of consecrated, untainted racial or biological essences, favouring hybridity (Mbembe and Balakrishnan 2016).

Sylvanus’ critique of Shonibare and her insistence on an unqualified acceptance of these fabrics’ status as African suggests a normative and empirical equivalence between, for example, the European processes of assimilating of *Indienne* or East Indian calicoes into Europe (notably England) and those that attended wax-prints introduction and circulation in Africa. In this, she takes her cue from Jean-Loup Amselle’s (1998, x) assertion that all cultures are ultimately hybridities, exhibiting “originary syncretism” that belies singular, untainted, and primordial distillations. Of course, in translating Amselle’s specific theorisation drawn from a comparative study of a few West African ethnic groups to her work looking at Western consumers’ consumption of “African” paraphernalia, she does not entirely – if at all – interrogate the cultural and processual equivalences that she draws. Nevertheless, this approach is immensely seductive in its promise of cosmopolitan universalism premised on a seeming “spatial egalitarianism” (Mbembe and Balakrishnan, 2016) against the backdrop of violent conquest and its instruments of racial formation, segregation, and stratification. The characteristic optimism of this affirming universalist logic is, at best, premature and, at worst, dangerous for too speedily glossing over material and symbolic asymmetries between the West and the rest. Nevertheless, even without this global aesthetic asymmetry, the details of these connected histories matter in that they reveal, particularly in the South African context, the knot of imperialism and racial segregation that entwine seshweshwe’s multiple threads. I have illustrated this point in my presentation of shweshwe’s history in South Africa.

## African Print Textiles and their Imprinting of the Normative Political

The 21st-century reinvigoration of African-print textiles, particularly in South Africa but evident across the African continent and its diaspora (Edoh, 2016), represents, among other things, the visual-material expression of a deepening Africanist orientation. According to the historian of West Africa, Sarah Balakrishnan (2017), this reinvigoration took shape amid and perhaps necessitated by the globalism and cosmopolitanism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, where the negative stereotypes of Africa’s pluralism were unshackling under media-fuelled optimism around the pluralistic futurism embedded in the continent’s diversity. This observation parallels other scholarly conclusions regarding the political mobilisation of objects and material culture’s representational power, particularly as identity anchors in a global context (King 2004; Sklair 2011). Not surprisingly, nationalism and ethnonational identity expressed through distinct objects and their consumption occupy a central place in the work of contemporary cultural sociologists (see, for example, Benzecry 2017; Kuruoğlu & Woodward 2021; Vale 2011; and Zubrzycki 2013 & 2017). However, on the African continent, notwithstanding the lively philosophical and moral debates on the substance of African identity and the meaning of Africanity (more on this later), much of the scholarship on material culture, particularly African-print textiles, is silent on these philosophical debates. For their part, the cultural, philosophical, and literary treatment of these concepts (see below) hardly discuss how social actors (whether individuals or institutions) materialise these normative-philosophical commitments, let alone the desirability and precise strategies through which an Africanist or afropolitan selfhood – as grounded in an Africanist consciousness – is expressed visually. Furthermore, while scholars interested in the urban built environment and postcolonial material-architectural expressions have tried to think about the substance of the postcolonial African city (see Matsipa 2017; Rogerson 1989), their insights have hardly penetrated the scholarship on African print textiles in postcolonial Africa.

In their indexical capacity, African textiles allow us to read the commodification of identity in real time and the convergences (or divergences) between corporate and consumer commodification of ethnic identity. Speaking specifically of a cosmopolitan African ethnic identity and aesthetic, Christine Delhaye and Rhoda Woets (2015), noted how designers and marketers at Vlisco, the Dutch textile design company, increasingly portray the textile brand as global, cosmopolitan, post-ethnic (and possibly even post-African) while simultaneously seeking to retain its historical African consumer base. It is interesting to note how Delhaye and Woets set up their argument to suggest that African (ethnic) identity is inimical to or incommensurate with chic cosmopolitanism; a position that may well reflect Vlisco’s condescension of the African consumer and not necessarily a position that the scholars advocate. Their observations, however, uphold this cleavage. As they note, contemporary Ghanaian designers leverage Vlisco textiles as a resource with which to fashion “an ‘Afro-politan’ aesthetic … [in which their designs] transcend national boundaries” (86).

In highlighting, for example, that the site for the design and production of Dutch wax print fabrics is the Netherlands, Melissa Edoh reminds us of today’s persistent “politics of place” (Edoh 2016, 258). Despite European textile designers’ conceptualising their work in apolitical (non-identitarian) terms, subtly political dimensions are discernible. Based on interviews with and ethnographic observations of the predominantly Dutch (or Dutch-trained) textile designers employed by Vlisco in the Netherlands, Edoh shows how the designers’ insistence on “good design” (266) as their guiding ethos subordinated any sustained interest in or consciousness of Africa and Africans themselves. According to Edoh, the designers resisted – indeed vehemently rejected – any suggestion that their work has colonial and neo-colonial implications as Dutch or Dutch-based, non-African designers hoping to sell “African print” textiles”. However, the global setting of political, cultural, and economic relations structure the relations between the African consumer market and the European sites of production; distributing economic and cultural value asymmetrically between the two. In this sense, the textiles serve as an index of political-economic asymmetries between Africa and Europe. It also indexes specific changes to or erosions of past internal asymmetries while highlighting new axes of inequality within the territory of South Africa post-1994.

Furthermore, Edoh stresses the mediating role of wax fabrics between their European-based designers and their African consumers. This mediation, she shows, is affectively charged, where the designers see the mass consumption and popularity of textiles with their designs as an affirmation that they have succeeded at effecting good design. They also see their designs as forging connections with an otherwise unknown, foreign, and socio-culturally distant “other” and, if only momentarily, reversing the cultural hierarchy between Europe and Africa. However, this equalising and redistributing vision, in which the African consumers’ voice – as expressed through their purchase of specific designs – is the ultimate arbiter of success or failure at good design is not without problems.

Long taken for granted as unequivocally African, critical commentary on African print textiles’ symbolic meaning (in scholarly and artistic form) has proliferated. Both artists and scholars increasingly take seriously the East and South Asian historical roots of cotton print techniques (particularly wax prints or batik) and their cultural-economic appropriation and diffusion, particularly in Africa, through Western European colonial conquest. The fault line regards whether it is adequate to regard these textiles as authentically African, since much like seshweshwe, past and contemporary African communities have assimilated them into their particular cultural and social fabric. However, unlike shweshwe, wax print (whether in its authentic or inauthentic guise) was manufactured and continues to be manufactured outside the continent (whether in the Netherlands or China). Given the dominance of wax print fabrics in the scholarship on textiles on the continent, this fault line is not surprising. The case of Da Gama and shweshwe redraws the contours of the debate by bringing into view processes of European print-fabrics’ industrial embedding in Africa through European missionary influences in the 19th century and, in the mid-20th century, local production in Zwelitsha township in South Africa’s Eastern Cape. In fact, in more recognisably political terms, the mid-20th century making of seshweshwe (specifically plain calico) in South Africa was political in the ways that the then Union government invested in the establishment of The Good Hope Textile Corporation (Minkley 1990).

Unlike what Edoh highlights, the sense of the political in mid-20th century South Africa is not merely a function of asymmetrical geo-political and geo-cultural relations between Europe and Africa. Rather, the Union of South Africa’s 1940’s attempts to set the country on a path of export-substitution industrialisation was formally political and, indeed, politicised (Minkley 1990). State-backed by the country’s newly founded Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) and the Native Affairs Department in collaboration with foreign, Lancaster-based capital, the recruitment of factory labor was gendered, racialised, and discriminatory. For the soon-to-be apartheid state, calico became the context for elaborating a new political vision of “constructive apartheid” (Minkley 1990: 71): an attempt to construct and drive industrial development based on the apartheid state’s racial enclave policy of the black homelands. Plain calico, produced in the Eastern Cape but destined for printing in Lancaster, provided the context for the Union and then the Apartheid state’s social and economic engineering: the politico-material setting for experimenting with race-based model of industrialisation in South Africa, and as far afield as the Zambian Copperbelt (Berger 1974; Schumaker 2008). Dominated by white women textile workers in the 1930s, the recruitment strategy of the then newly formed calico-weaving entities of the 1940s (in Johannesburg and the Eastern Cape) shifted to an increasingly young, black male workforce dispossessed of land in the Native reserves. In the final three decades of the 20th century, the labor power in the textile industry was vested almost exclusively in black women (Mager, 1989).

In focusing on West Africa’s wax fabrics to the exclusion of other historically assimilated European-made fabrics, Sylvanus pays inadequate attention to the violence that these assimilations entailed. Not just that, but as evidenced by shweshwe’s industrial production in South Africa, cultural transfer (in material and aesthetic terms) was linked to problematic histories of a deepening and widening colour-bar in South Africa elaborated through the Apartheid state’s industrial policy. Bringing shweshwe into the exciting field of African-print fabric scholarship allows us to see and interrogate these historical processes. In so doing, to nuance contemporary uses and mobilisations of popular material artefacts and read in them (rather than occlude or ignore) the moral burdens that their histories impose on the present. Thus, even as we think about African print textiles collectively, we must pay attention to each type of fabric (and print cultures) and their distinctive histories and trajectories.

# Topographic Hermeneutics: Spaces, Surfaces, and Time

The symbolic meanings appended to objects, in this case, African print textiles, emerge out of locatable cultural-economic, political-economic, and normative-philosophical settings. Consequently, any intellectual and scholarly endeavour relating to African print textiles can (and must at least be able to) comment on their technical, technological, cultural, economic, political, normative-philosophical and ideological, as well as global historical dimensions. In explaining what they are as concrete, material objects and as mobilised symbolic ones, we can track them analytically from multiple spatial locations and at different scales of analysis. For instance, from the cloth itself as micro-scale and space that is woven, coloured and texturised using wax or some other medium for resist-dying, to the scale of the human body and its adornment. Specifically with regards to bodies and adornment, there is an important relationship between the specific bodies that are associated with the textile and its meanings or acceptance as autochthonous. For example, in the multi-year exhibition, *The Isishweshwe Story: Material Women?*,[[6]](#footnote-6) which constructed a 200-year history of the seshweshwe textile, it was clear that the textile’s association with black women’s modes of dress, particularly for significant cultural occasions like weddings and funerals, are entwined with the textile’s visuality and vibrance. It is this embodied association that props up the textile’s cultural and symbolic salience, anchoring the textile as autochthonous and therefore materialising Africanity. Still further, given the proliferation of digital media sites, we can consider textiles in terms of the global scale of circulation and consumption, represented on, and mediated by social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Finally, we can track them from the scale of the politico-philosophical and the imaginal, linking them, for example, to prevailing ideas regarding the meanings and performative embodiments of an affirming African identity. In one example of my research, I surfaced seshweshwe as a discursive-symbolic object whose one strand of representational synonymities relates to past and contemporary black presence in urban South Africa; thereby contesting the association of authentic Africanity with ostensibly “traditional”, rural society (see (Mokwena forthcoming)). The multi-layered histories of African print fabrics are rich, lively portals to see the conceptual, theoretical, and analytical elements for a theory of postcolonial cultural legitimacy. Esther Naa Dodua Darku and Wilson Akpan (2020) make a similar point about African print textiles were mobilised towards the ends of cultural-political legitimation in post-independence Ghana. So too Nina Sylvanus’ work on wax print textiles and post-independence nation-building in Togo.

As intimated in the foregoing discussion, to think about and approach fabrics as temporal markers is to think about pasts, emergent philosophical orientations, and their properties contemporaneously, and (imagined or hoped for) futures. Indeed, as conceived by Diagne in his formulation of Mbembe’s contributions on afropolitanism, there is always the implied anticipation of Afropolitanism’s liberatory promise. While a segment of Africans and their diasporic counterparts enjoy upward economic and cultural mobility, the vast majority do not: a situation that the status and future of Afropolitanism uncertain and vexed. Moreover, in mounting visual ethnographies of African print textiles, paying attention to the ends to which various actors mobilise them today, and in excavating some of the threads of their 20th century histories and these histories’ entanglement with racial-capitalism and colonialism, represents a critical history of Africa’s post-independence moment up to its present. Moreover, notwithstanding my liberal use of the notion of post-independence, there is nonetheless evidence of the colonial past’s stubborn infiltration of the present, not least concerning asymmetrical cultural-economic relations. In this sense, African print textiles force us to transcend (and indeed reject) “the trap of the now” as Back and Puwar implored.

These questions, looked at from the prism of African print textiles, their fêted and suppressed histories, their mobilisation for legitimacy-signalling, occasions a multifaceted interrogation of the contours of cultural and economy in postcolonial African societies in a global age. In their visual-materiality, they are essential aesthetic and epistemic principles with which we can interrogate contemporary Africa (and its diaspora) from within a particular historically-grounded narrative. This narrative brings empire, colonialism, as well global cultural contact and contangion into sharp relief . Paradoxically, it is in opposition to these very legacies of imperial penetration and racial-capitalist industrial planning that myriad contemporary social actors use African print textiles; eliding the fact of these textiles as the visual-material conjunction of these complex, troubling historical processes. It is these historical and contemporary backdrops, each inserted into a different expression of the global (one marked, historically, by imperial-industrial and racial asymmetry and, currently, the perceived universal cosmopolitanism of the 21st century) that we can elevate African print textiles as an analytic lens and agitational epistemic affordance. Framed in the above terms, African print textiles transform into a theoretical-analytical construct, straddling the philosophical and material vis-a-vis legitimacy constructions. Thinking with Mbembe and Selasi (together with their respondents’ critiques) therefore marshals considerations of African print textiles towards particular empirical and analytic starting points, namely: materiality and its relation to historically-subaltern subjects, culture and economic dynamics, and global histories. If not a total mapping of social and economic power and their relations (Toscano 2012) then an object-centred topographical approach to social inquiry certainly points to some of the features (and asymmetries – the undulations of a global social field) of social life that our inquiry can (and often must attempt to) bring into view and interrogate.

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1. To give a concrete example from her book: the cover is the photograph of Nandipha Mntambo, Swazi-South African visual artist whose biographical art critiques the boundary between the human and the animal (usually the bull). Mntambo often depicts herself in her art. The photograph on Jackson’s cover, a head-shot with Nandi leaning slightly forward, her penetrating gaze looking up at the camera. The image is particularly arresting in that Mntambo’s head is crowned with two sets of bull horns and her forehead and head seemingly “haired” with cow’s hide. In this photograph, Mntambo is neither bull nor woman but the disturbing combination of both (although only her face really since, from her shoulders and upper bust, her smooth, shiny, brown skin glistens the radiance and vitality of her blackness and – suggested – womanness). As she elaborated (n.d) in an interview about her exhibition, *Nandipha Mntambo / In Her Skin*, “My interest is mainly around the animal/human divide and how we understand it as well as perceptions of attraction and repulsion” <https://installationmag.com/nandipha-mntambo-in-her-skin/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bottici more fully outlines this imaginal capacity in her book, *Imaginal Politics: Images beyond Imagination and the Imaginary*, (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.shopafrothreads.com/about> (accessed March 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The original chapter has recently been reprinted in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* Number 46, May 2020, pp. 56-61 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Yinka Shonibare is a British-Nigerian artist who is most known for his use of ankara (African print) fabrics in his sculptural artwork. Shonibare uses Ankara cloth to assess the material manifestations of European culture in Africa’s past and present. He problematizes the ready acceptance of African print textiles as signifiers of Africanness (see his essay “Fabric and the Irony of Authenticity,” in Nikos Papastergiadis. Ed. *Annotations: Mixed Belongings and Unspecified Destinations,* 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The exhibition was mounted in the textile gallery at the Slave Lodge Museum in Cape Town, South Africa, between 2013 and 2017. A digital version of the exhibition can still be found on Google’s Arts and Culture platform: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/fabric-fashion-and-identity-the-story-of-isishweshwe-south-african-national-gallery/JQVRfVGh0BzHKg?hl=en>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)