

Returning the Gaze: African Interventions in Global Fashion

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Opinion

African fashion designers have struggled to widen the parameters of African fashion and to escape from global or western paradigms that have sought to define what should be African fashion and the materials African designers should utilize. Despite a long history in Africa of the production of textiles and the significance of clothing, colonialism erased these vibrant traditions, turned Africans into producers of cotton for European textile manufacturers, and redefined Africans as a people without fashion. Samples of African textiles and clothing collected in the nineteenth century by colonial officials, missionaries, and ethnologists ended up in European museums as traditional African clothing, informing the confining European perceptions of African fashion that persist into the present.

Gavin Rajah is a fourth generation South African Indian whose ancestors found themselves on these shores as indentured labourers working in coalmines and on sugarcane farms in Kwa-Zulu Natal, a province in South Africa, still known as the 'last colonial outpost'. My foray into studying was to pursue a degree in law, possibly a response to the rather harsh apartheid context I was placed in for more than half of my life. Raised in a vulnerable community during the time of civil unrest meant that education was not always accessible nor consistent, coupled with the fact that poor socio-economic circumstances brought with them other issues to contend with like domestic violence, gangsterism and substance abuse. For more than half his life Gavin was a subject of an apartheid government and defined by the colour of his skin. His decision to study law at the university seemed like the perfect antidote to what he considered an untenable situation. Challenged by overwhelming financial difficulty in his dream to pursue law at the University of Cape Town, Gavin as a law student took two part-time jobs, one of them was a job assisting in the alteration of clothes. This reconstruction and repair of worn garments became the very fabric that crafted his foray into fashion design. It helped him piece together a career in fashion, though his interest in law and social justice would shape his practice as a fashion designer.

Working with women of colour altering clothes offered Gavin insight into their lives and gave him the emotional support that he lacked from being away from my parents and also supported me being a young gay man in a new city. These women taught Gavin to face adversity with humility but instilled in him the importance of pursuing his dreams fearlessly. These women taught him that his past did not have to define his future and his skin colour was a constraint only in the gaze of others. They taught Gavin that law and morality were not to be confused. Gavin's work in fashion turned him into a visual and social activist fueled by the women that helped him craft his collections. Straddling dual cultural heritages created access to various traditional cultural skills and Gavin began using this in his collections and

teaching the women around him to hone these skills. He sought to transcend stereotypes that 'Westerners' had of clothes made on the continent. Gavin reflected on this process: "I wanted to remove the bazaar/curio bazaar perception that they had. African designers are forced to produce collections and products that must entrench an 'African' identity, once again imposing traditional cultural costume and motif as the only source of inspiration. I refused to allow my studio to constantly reference cultural backgrounds in our work or put forward stereotypic viewpoints to play into a Eurocentric narrative." This positioning had consequences and resulted in many instances in Gavin's collections being excluded in exhibitions, editorials and shows because the work was not 'African' enough. The work from Gavin's studio rises above these tropes and tries to depict work that can hold its own in an international arena; it focuses on refined craftsmanship and entices people to look closer at how things are fashioned, to draw their gaze beyond commonly held perceptions.

Gavin opened his atelier in Cape Town in 1999, five years after an ANC government was elected to power. Starting up was a mammoth undertaking and no funding existed for black entrepreneurs and loans required a huge historical record of trade and financials. Gavin started the studio by reaching out to the women that he had encountered in his work on domestic violence and who needed to work under civil and ethical conditions. They followed him on the premise that they would earn better, and he promised to help them carve out a safe place for themselves and their dependents. Gavin's vision to create a world class brand with exacting standards lead to his atelier being invited to show in Paris in 2006. The couture collections are always about the finest traditions in making clothing and the selection process is rigorous. There was no better testament to the work they were producing and continue to produce. Sixteen years after the Paris debut, Gavin's atelier has trained thousands of women and men to sew and craft garments and soft furnishings. This outreach has culminated in the Whitelight Movement, a non-profit charity that is now solely dedicated to assisting victims of gender-based violence with medical interventions, legal counsel, and education.

Gavin has worked with victims of gender-based violence, and taught these women how to sew, weave, dye, bead and embroider and this has created economic transformation in communities and financial inclusion. Fostering this type of independence has enabled women to make empowering decisions for themselves and their families. The showing in Paris in 2006 at the invitation of the Federation Française de la Couture was a seminal moment for Gavin and South Africa. Despite not being included on the main

calendar they still managed to receive huge accolades and perhaps one of the most exciting reactions was that people were shocked that a collection with an exemplary standard of craftsmanship and aesthetic value came out of South Africa. It confirmed for Gavin that "made in Africa" could go global.

Climate change has heightened questions of biodiversity and sustainability. Cape Town was perhaps the first modern city whose taps almost run dry of water in 2018 after three years of drought. For Gavin and his collaborators, fashion must be sustainable and the future of fashion on the continent will need a new community of practice if Africa is to impact global fashion. To enable this community, they have created Future wear, in association with South African retailer Pick n Pay, an immersive program that assists creatives to navigate the complex fashion ecosystem not only from a practical standpoint but that also creates a platform for listening to communities of practice-engaging with diverse communities, and actively listening to the perspectives and experiences of those who have been marginalized or excluded by dominant Eurocentric narratives. Environmental protection and sustainability have become key issues and the designer cohorts for 2022 have managed to design and produce sustainable collections for Pick n Pay, a major first in South Africa.

The focus in 2023 and beyond is looking at the impact of the global water deficit and the impact it will have on the production of natural fibers as well as how to reduce waste. Many of the designers who have been part of Future wear have produced work that has sought to challenge the perceptions of what defines South African fashion. Katekani Moreku has re-fashioned traditional shapes of Basotho hats made from waste and his collections have taken discarded clothing and maize meal sacks, and re-purposed the fabrics creating modern, deconstructed silhouettes. He has taken these sacks and created a luxury prêt à porter whilst addressing environmental sustainability. Julia Buchanan, a member of the cohort, designs prints that urges protection of the abundant flora, endangered plant species and sensitive coastlines in South Africa. Her use of fabrics for swimwear using recycled marine plastic debris has been key in her collections. Both collections act as a form of visual activism. An activist-fashion tradition is emerging in Africa, innovative in its use of materials, exquisite in its craftsmanship. For a continent that will account for a quarter of the earth's population by 2050, its fashion can no longer be ignored.

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