A Borrowed Language

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Recommended Citation
Osei, Yvonne, "A Borrowed Language" (2016). Graduate School of Art Theses. ETD 61. https://doi.org/10.7936/K7B56H0J.
A Borrowed Language
Outsider Artist, Insider Art

A thesis presentation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts from the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis

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2016

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Abstract

Art has the potency of mediation: bridging human differences, questioning voids in historical trajectories, negotiating spaces of relevance, and most importantly, being signifiers that embody the absent. I speak in a borrowed language, a multilingual visual tongue, inspired by a culmination of Western and African Art modes of practices to create charged platforms for multicultural communication.

My art presents visual portals that allow for intercultural and interracial mingling as issues of colorism, present-day colonialism, gender inequality and the politics of dress are foregrounded for collective deliberation. The essence of the work is often activated and brought to its full potential by public viewership, participation and collaboration.

This document can be thought of as the voice of a lioness (myself) ushering in untainted accounts of a proverbial story of a hunt that defines global worth. The validated accounts have long favored the hunter over the lioness. However, A Borrowed Language: Outsider Artist, Insider Art presents new assertions for the unseen to be seen and the unheard to be heard.
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“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

Nelson Madiba Mandela

Introduction

As a Ghanaian female artist, my decision to travel to the West to pursue an art education is in no way to indicate a lack of potency in art practiced on the African continent. My decision has nothing to do with a mistrust of the substance and quality that traditional African Art holds, and neither was it merely to seek greener pastures. I came to the West primarily to acquire fluency in the Western Art language, and to find strategies that allow for African Art to be well understood and effectively incorporated into a global art world made unidirectional by Western dominance.

I consider myself an outsider artist making insider art. To proclaim that I am an outsider artist making insider art is in some respect to disassociate myself from Western Art. It is to reaffirm my connection with traditional African Art without denying my active participation in the study and practice of Western Art. Being an outsider artist describes a hyperawareness of my position as a non-Western, black, female artist in the art world, knowing that I fall on the extreme opposite end of the art world’s spectrum of typical achievers: the Western Caucasian male. Additionally, making insider art references my ability to make art endorsed by insiders. This is due to my knowledge acquired from long years of Western art education studied through a Western colonized art educational system in my home country, Ghana, as well as in the United States.
As an outsider in the Western dominated art world, it is my fluency in Western Art that has enabled me to adopt an ‘insider’ status. Gaining a platform on the inside affords me the ability to express issues that relate to outsiders (that relate to me), which under normal circumstances would not have made their way into the minds of insiders. My embodiment of the role of an outsider making insider art is to proclaim a mediator status, negotiating and exchanging boundaries, as well as ensuring cordiality, respect and fairness among all people irrespective of culturally structured territories. As an African, my devotion to study and deconstruct the Western Art language is to speak directly to the heart of Westerners. My intention is to create simultaneous multilingual visual communications that possess Western and African Art linguistic syntax, allowing for multi-cultural dialogue and multi-cultural meanings.

There is a difference between a borrowed language and a borrowed language. The overstrike ‘borrowed,’ is an implementation of Heidegger’s sous rapture. This literary device is a marker of ‘under erasure,’ a deconstructionist technique used to show a direct and necessary reference to a word, yet a complete contrast and disassociation to that same word through an overstrike. ‘Borrowed language’ is in itself a reference to the limitations and relativity of language as it depends on the presence of the ‘borrowed language’ to derive its contradictory meaning.

To use the word ‘borrow’ is to acknowledge that Western Art is a visual language which is not my own. The borrowed language is the
Western Art language, in which I have developed a fluency to express creative ideas and thoughts. However, the condition of the borrowed language comes to being, when Western language is deconstructed and reshaped into a new language. My intention to use this borrowed language is to expose, question and criticize systems that dominate and oppress. Although borrowed language is its own unique visual language, it is heavily referential of the adopted Western Art 'tongue' and its make up remains inherently Western to allow for Western interpretations.

Deconstructing the Western Art language is strategically subverting power structures in a familiar language, allowing for reconsidering and rethinking the status quo in the art world and in society. I strive to use this borrowed language to visually articulate tensions that exist between Western exploitation and the misrepresentation of Africa and Africans on the African continent, across the diaspora and in the world at large. In my practice, I scout for pre-existing predatory notions of Africa created by the West to marginalize and reduce. And I reverse its insidious intentions and colonizing ambitions by exposing its problematic and exploitative trends in a direct and familiar way. The borrowed language allows for a reconsideration of domination and the premise for it.

There is a critical evolution to my studio practice. My 'studio' is not an isolated physical space, but rather public spaces I use that are the apparatus and palette for my creative work. The trajectory of my art practice is research. The work evokes new realizations that serve as springboards for future creative explorations. Governed by a socio-political conscience, I create artistic platforms for discourse
that unify individuals from very different backgrounds. Driven by the potential for art to unite individuals and communities, my work is characterized by collaborations and public engagement that allow for viewers to be active participants of art making and ambassadors that embrace human difference. Art in this form serve as portals that allow participants to rethink and reconsider flawed notions that corrupt and separate us from one another.

My thesis will reveal evidential and progressional explorations of color and color symbolisms, complexion and body politics, and clothing as evidence of present-day colonialism to evoke critical dialogue using both African and Western understandings of art. My hybrid identity and hybrid art practice enables me to address complexities of diametrically opposed ways of being: between the hunter and the prey; the colonizer and the colonized; the authentic and the fake; and the nude and the naked. My thesis will discuss in depth various processes and projects I have been engaged in from August 2014 to May 2016. It will explain how my role as an outsider artist making insider art has empowered me to implement the borrowed language. I will reveal creative ways to unlearn and decolonize my very own understandings, the understandings of the oppressed and most importantly, that of the oppressor.
CHAPTER ONE

An Art Suppressed by Another

It is important to note that definitions and representations of Western Art have and continue to be embedded, imposed and superimposed onto traditional African Art practices. However, I hold the belief that traditional African Art cannot be defined in the context of Western Art. This is because Western Art and African Art are separate sets of practices, although they can, and have, informed one another. In the Ashanti culture of Ghana, art was experienced, embodied and utilized as a verb to facilitate the continuity of our heritage; whereas in the West, art is heavily based on object making, historical dialogue and archiving. Traditional African Art is NEVER solely for aesthetic pleasure. It is NEVER secured or kept untainted in white cubes; neither is it glassed off or boxed away from ‘polluted’ human contact.

Contemporary African Art is evidence of artists of African descent operating in the Western Art language. Traditional African Art is one that does not have the indoctrination of Western Art. In the context of the Western lens, traditional African Art is seen as an ethnographic object, and in the lens of the many African people, art in the Western sense does not resonate. All African Art is not the same because they are made and used by different cultures. Each African culture’s idea of the cosmos and philosophies surrounding art is enshrined within their own practices and systems of belief. Ashanti traditional artistry is represented through kingship,
chieftaincy and family structure through which heritage, identity, and cultural relevance are preserved.

In the larger context, traditional Art on the African continent is an integral part of complex visual language systems. It is more than an object and more than a noun. It is a verb, an action, as the art is enunciated through specified activities. Traditional African Art in the words of Robert Farris Thompson is always in motion. It extends the individual as traditional African art is thought of in a collective completeness. Traditional African Art is the entire embodiment of levels of execution, experience, pageantry, participation, and camaraderie. There is no categorization or lines of separation that define art from its inception, making, and reception, as it merges and continuously forms a rich tradition. In my Ashanti culture, art marries the belief systems, the politics, and the society.

In Western Art museums, traditional African Art is subjected to the designated artist name: “Unknown.” This is evidence of disrespect due to a lack of understanding of the collectivity that shapes traditional African Art making and ownership. Assigning a singular name to an artist does not fit into the traditional African Art rubric. This consequently proves why countless traditional African objects stripped of their ability to create art within their vibrant contexts, are suffocating in glass boxes in Western museums.

An Ashanti chief sits on the wooden stool made by an artisan, however, it is not until this chief on the stool is brought into public space to be viewed that the stool fulfills its purpose. The stool on its own is not activated as a participant in the cosmos of the Ashanti
culture. Colloquially, the stool, in that instance, is considered ‘asleep’. When we superimpose the structure and definition of Western Art onto the African continent, then the art is in the public witnessing of the chief on the stool.

In the West, art is measured through virtuosity, which inherently is associated to individualistic notions of ‘the genius’ based on the measurements of quality and quantity of skill sets that one possesses. An artwork’s value is reinforced and validated by placing it in a sanctioned museum with a high insurance value. Western Art has its own world, its own history, and its own movements, detached from societal systems. However, traditional African Art moves away from this rubric of individual prowess to communal significance and shared ownership. Traditional African Art gains its legitimacy and its measure of ingenuity by its embodiment and viewership by the public. Without the public, this art loses its essence. Therefore, the public act of viewing the work is also a means to embody it and a form of sharing in the artist’s ingenuity. In the traditional African context, virtuosity is NEVER an individual gain.

As a contemporary African artist, I identify strongly with the Western imposed artist label ‘Unknown,’ both literally and metaphorically. To be labeled unknown reveals conditions of otherness as well as extreme levels of exoticism. Being cognizant and taking ownership of conditions within oppression, I engage with ideas of ‘the other’ and ‘the exotic.’ They are foundational elements that anchor my art practice. Being ‘the other’ evokes a sense of repulsion while being the ‘exotic’ evokes that of allure. Although both ‘the other’
and ‘the exotic’ are alienating and objectifying, the former has the viewer wanting to be distant, and the latter leaves the viewer wanting to be dazzled in an idealized admiration.

My work capitalizes on the dichotomy that exists between repulsion and allure; the work flashes mesmerizing exoticness, overtly emphasizing the clichés and stereotypes familiar to viewers with the aim of pulling them in. This pull is facilitated by a visual trickery mechanism that capitalizes on the viewers’ levels of comfort and familiarity to strategically usher in aspects of otherness and realizations of discomfort. Elements of ‘the other’ and ‘the exotic’ work hand in hand in my creative practice to critique, question and expose problematic systems that have become commonplace today. ‘The exotic’ functions to confirm biases and problematic norms, and allows ‘the other’ a platform to directly confront the viewer.
CHAPTER TWO

The Lioness Has Learned to Write

To expect this thesis to be grounded solely on Western Art philosophical work and historical trajectory is in a sense to enter into my work with a limiting and defeated purpose. This is because one cannot perceive traditional African Art under the terms and conditions of Western Art, and neither can one perceive Western Art in a traditional African Art way.

As a product of a blend of both traditional African Art and Western Art, it will be treacherous to beckon with the norms that continue to colonize and suppress what is more true of the experiences and observations I have encountered in Sub Saharan cultures, especially Ghana, and the West as they offer more precise accounts of my artistic hybridity. For this reason, I beseech you—hear my proverbial stories of African wisdom, often considered by the West as unsophisticated and unlearned.

The quintessential proverb that reflects the challenges of language and the importance of sovereignty is grounded in the Ashanti proverb, “the narrative will always favor the hunter until the lion learns to write.” This proverb unpacks complex relationships between a hunter and a lion, speaking volumes about the privileges that language and familiarity grants one over another. The proverb is about the control over history, emphasized by the words ‘narrative’ and ‘write.’ It speaks of control of the preservation of history in a particular format, the Western format, where reading
and writing is paramount. In Ghana and other African cultures, history is built and disseminated through visuals and verbal communication such as totems, lampoons, storytelling and proverbs, for which even this proverb in discussion forms a part of. In the Ashanti culture, for example, history is very much present and in direct relationship with the present. It is not written and stored in books.

The relationship between the hunter and the lion in the proverb is that of the historical voice of the acknowledged versus the historical voice of the unacknowledged, the present versus the absent, the familiar versus the other. What the proverb portrays is how language can set forth unfairness and shallowness, favoring the hunter’s accounts over that of the lion’s untranslatable roar. When a hunter returns to his community after days of hunting for a lion, regardless of whatever happened in the jungle, the story told by the hunter will be the order of the day. Since the lion does not get a platform to tell his side of the narrative, the premise of the hunter is left unquestioned. The familiarity of the returned hunter, his people never ask for the lion’s story.

When we think of the relationship between the lion and the hunter, we are quick to assume that just because the hunter pursues the lion, the lion in turn becomes the prey, the object, the unknowledgeable, and the primitive. To think of the lion as prey is a false assumption, because in the game of hunting, both the hunter and the lion have equal chances of being bait. Considering that the hunter treads in the territory of the lion, the king of the jungle, the hunter is an intruder where upon the lion must protect his
domain. It is important to note that the disparity is that both the hunter and the lion have the same capacity to speak fluently in their respective languages. The hunter is fluent in a language familiar to the crowd that accounts the story and the lion is fluent in the language of the jungle where he reigns as king. In the world of the jungle, the hunter will become ‘the other’.

As informed spectators to this proverb, how can dismissing the voice of the lion and basing the narrative solely on the words of the hunter be a critical, and legitimate account of the hunt? Robert Plant Armstrong describes this phenomenon as the “tyrann[y] of ethnocentrism.” Many times, as viewers of the Western dominated art world, we become like the crowd that is in total agreement with the hunter without ever wondering about the story of the lion, ‘the other’ incapable of speaking the language of the West, and inherently incapable of baring Caucasian male features. Even more blatantly, Nigerian novelist and critic, Chinua Achebe personalized the proverb by saying "until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

In the work, When the Lioness Learns to Write (Fig. 1), I embody this proverb through the medium of video. The title When the Lioness Learns to Write alludes to my personification as the Lioness, taking ownership of the full dilemma in the relationship between the hunter and the lion in the proverb. Additionally, the title shortens the proverb and introduces the element of time in a phrase beginning with ‘when.’ When the Lioness Learns to Write puts an optimistic and inevitable twist onto the original proverb, implying that the Lioness will eventually learn to write, as it is only a matter of time.
When the Lioness Learns to Write presents the viewpoints of both the hunter and the lion for a reassessment of the hunt. The performance begins by revealing a wooded landscape predominantly browned by dying foliage. I take on the character of a Mythical Woman In Yellow. She is introduced into a stationary camera frame as she acknowledges her viewers, and then she heads off into the woods. The camera frame becomes a mobile character in the video seemingly to follow or chase her. The hunt begins.

Fig 1. Yvonne Osei, photographs from performance, When the Lioness Learns to Write, 2015

Like a pendulum, the camera angle swings, dancing between two viewpoints in seamless transitions: the viewpoint of the Mythical
Woman In Yellow symbolizing the lioness and that of an unknown presence symbolizing the hunter. It is my intention that the viewers come to understand themselves as the unknown presence that follows and pursues the Mythical Woman In Yellow. Unlike in the inspired proverb where the account of the lion is discounted, the video reveals the entire activity of the hunt. *When the Lioness Learns to Write* accounts for both the viewpoints of the lioness (seen as first person point of view) and the hunter (seen as third person point of view) (Fig. 2). Additionally, the viewers of the video alternate between the lioness’ view and that of the hunter, embodying both of their presence, pacing and struggle.

![Fig 2. Yvonne Osei, *When the Lioness Learns to Write*, stills from video, 2015](image)

There is uncertainty in the role of the Mythical Woman In Yellow as she moves from a state of confidence to that of being fearful, from following to being followed, from pursuing to being pursued. The climax at the latter moments of the video is established through the
rapid pacing of the cuts in the video editing, and the introduction of sounds of sirens from police vehicles passing by the location. The landscape, which seemed distant, dreamy, and of a different era becomes situated in the now; the wilderness, is interrupted and the video becomes more real, and more familiar. Through the amplified sounds of the sirens, the pace and struggles of both the hunter and lioness become unified and their footsteps against the dried falling leaves become difficult to separate. Sounds of exhausted breathing also build on the tension and suspense that carries through the work.

The constant exchange of roles collapses the binary positions of the hunter and the lioness. In this way, the apparatus of the hunt is revealed to viewers in an authentic and democratic way. The power dynamics between the unknown presence of the hunter/the viewer, and the lioness/the Mythical Woman In Yellow, is questioned, alternated and most importantly, integrated into each other. It is this unification of the lioness and the hunter that confirms that the lioness has indeed learned to write.
CHAPTER THREE

“...it is time that the biological concept of race was sunk without trace.”

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Irrepressible Whiteness

Utilizing myself, as an archetype is one of the most effective signifiers I possess. My physicality ushers in direct indication of ‘the other’ and ‘the exotic’. As an African female, I am a visual symbol; I represent complex layers of stereotypes, assumptions, and exploitations because my physical appearance elicits unjust treatment under white supremacy structures that are forced on blacks, females, immigrants and others. I am a catalyst of both oppression and empowerment. Understanding this impetus to make me powerless ironically becomes a powerful tool of expression.

Burden of the White Balls, 2015 (Fig. 3) is in the same series as When the Lioness Learns to Write. To establish an immediate relationship between the two works I reintroduced my archetype, the Mythical Woman In Yellow. The yellow dress is a signifier of colonialism. She finds herself on a snow trail at a ski resort in Eureka, Missouri, and she carries a large aluminum pan filled with balls of snow. Additionally, she wears ski boots to aid her in the task of climbing to the top of the steep ski hill while balancing her white goods on top of her head. In this performance, the Mythical Woman In Yellow embodies a Kayayo girl in the Ghanaian community, whose day-to-day
occupation is to work in the local markets as “porters, carrying heavy loads of goods on their heads.”

Fig 3. Yvonne Osei, Burden of the White Balls, still from video, 2015

Kayayos are often young girls that come from the poorer more rural north to the more urban and prosperous southern part of Ghana with the hope of having better living standards and escaping from village life. They invest in big aluminum pans to assist buyers that shop in the markets by transporting purchased goods. For a small fee, the Kayayos often engage in backbreaking labor throughout the entire market day carry extremely heavy and enormous loads (Fig.4). They are at the bottom of the economic scale, living in extreme conditions, subjected to defilement, rape, and robbery. In Burden of the White Balls, the Mythical Woman In Yellow embodies the tasks of a Kayayo girl, transporting white snowballs in a landscape covered with snow.
During my six years of living in Missouri, I have developed a fascination for snow, its inherently white color, and its ability to level a landscape by uniformly spreading its cold sheet of whiteness. Its temporality and ephemerality melting from solid to liquid, evaporating as gas and then transforming again as snow through a process of condensation. This characteristic speaks volumes of the presence and yet absence of the metaphor of man-made systems of ‘whiteness’. As a Ghanaian artist, snow is a reflection of foreignness; it represents a geographical specificity relating to Western culture. I utilize snow as a symbolic representation of societal ‘whiteness,’ primarily because its white color and coldness
is a reminder of black alienation. Additionally, I am intrigued by its continuous cycle of transformation as it mimics the notions of ‘whiteness’ via packaging, camouflaging, presenting and representing various insidious ways to naturalize one accepted way of being.

*Burden of the White Balls* utilizes snowballs to address the commodification of ‘whiteness’ as desirable goods in society. Whiteness is not simply being Caucasian, it extends tangible indications to speak of various intangible and unattainable man-made measures that become societal norms. In the performance, the snowballs become the weight that burdens the Kayayo immersed in a literal and metaphorical white land. In the West, skiing is a recreational activity or a sport. However in Ghana, the job of a Kayayo girl is a survival activity driven by necessity and desperation. *Burden of the White Balls* superimposes the pleasurable act of skiing with the painful act of carrying white balls of snow. During the climb, some white snowballs fall out of the aluminum pan the Mythical Woman In Yellow carries (*Fig 5*), and some are consumed out of exhaustion.
Upon getting to the top, there are few balls left in the pan. *Burden of the White Balls* ends on a tragic note as the Mythical Woman In Yellow is left with significantly fewer white balls than she began with. Similar to the Kayayo girls who believe that life will be better in the south than in their villages, many African immigrants come to the West believing of a better life.

*Burden of the White Balls* can be thought of as a contemporary visual proverb. We live in systems governed by an unattainable condition of ‘whiteness’. Even white people have a hard time. Regardless of being extremely black skinned or extremely white skinned, societal ‘whiteness’ is beyond reach because race, in the words of Stuart Hall, is a “floating signifier”.

“Race is more like a language than it is like the way we are biologically constituted.” Hall explains that race ‘floats’ because it
cannot be affixed to one meaning as it has constantly transforming nature in a sea of relational differences. ‘Whiteness’ is a white supremacist construct that establishes selected facts that become recorded human history. This one-sided account continues to disfigure, cripple and constrain the potentialities of millions of the world’s dispossessed and subjugated.

Today, the media is the leading proliferator of negative images of black culture. It especially establishes black men as violent, criminal, and drug abusers. These falsities have been the justification for the recent killings of many young African-American men by the State. In July 2015, The Guardian, a British newspaper has an ongoing online database, The Counted. It collects information on every death caused by law enforcement in the United Stated. They reported, “black people are being killed by police at more than twice the rate of white and Hispanic or Latino people.”

Freddie Gray, Maryland, April 2015; Walter Scott, South Carolina, April 2015; Tamir Rice, Ohio, November 2014; Michael Brown Jr., St. Missouri, August 2014; Eric Garner, New York, July 2014; Trayvon Martin, Florida, February 2012; Raheim Brown, California, January 2011; Aaron Campbell, Oregon, January 2010; Victor Steen, Florida, 2009. As of December 31, 2015 these names are nine, out of a total count of 1,134 victims killed because of racism and police brutality.11

The absurdity of commodifying ‘whiteness’ by the metaphorical use of snow was also famously explored by African-American artist, David Hammons. In his temporal performance at Cooper Square, New York titled Bliz-aard Ball Sale, 1983 (Fig. 6), David Hammons expresses the commodification of white snowballs so eloquently by borrowing marketing strategies of selling. Not only did Hammons
have a meticulous layout of displaying his snowballs, he also made various sizes of snowballs allowing for a broader spectrum of potential buyers with different needs. One can afford ‘whiteness’ in various sizes, but only for a moment as the snowballs life span as solid is a fleeting one.

In *Burden of the White Balls*, I extend Hammons’ artistic activity of selling snowballs in my intrinsically Ghanaian, female artist voice. Being Ghanaian cannot be separated from being female, being female cannot be separated from being an immigrant living in the West, and my residence in the West cannot be separated from my artistic voice. They all influence my being and thus the title *Burden*
of the White Balls, which unpacks issues of gender, alienation and colonialism.

I have explored in other works, where I have capitalized on the fleeting nature of snow to address socio-political issues. Soluble Solutions, 2015, is a performance between two men, Ghanaian and African-American. Together they rely on their strength to hold a pile of snow and they each stand in demarcated regions of salt and sugar on the floor respectively. The essence of the work was about endurance. The two men were reliant on each other to face the challenge of holding ‘whiteness’ (Fig. 7).

![Fig 7. Yvonne Osei, still from video documentation, Soluble Solutions, 2015](image)

My first instinct coming to Washington University, was to use whiteness and the color white in a formal and symbolic way. In a sketch entitled Do You Accept Me Now?, 2014 (Fig. 8), I engaged my Ghanaian friend in creating a series of photographs. I whitened
his face and chest region with white talcum powder as an attempt to blend his physical identity into my studio wall. The work poses a rhetorical question, suggesting a clear mismatch of a black complexion against the white wall. Do You Accept Me Now? is a direct reference to David Hammons’ How Ya Like Me Now?, 1988 (Fig. 9), and a precursor for a series titled The Other conceived in fall 2014.

Fig 8. Yvonne Osei, photographs, Do You Accept Me Now?, 2014

Fig 9. David Hammons, How Ya Like Me Now?, 1988
The Other series, 2015, as the name straightforwardly declares was my intent to dissect how people are subjected based on their physicality to the condition of otherness in the United States. I constructed photographs and videos of people that are possibly seen as ‘the other’ or ‘the invisible.’ I listened to their experiences of alienation and created still images. My intent is to humanize ‘the other,’ promoting dialogue around issues of exclusion of immigrants, refugees and African-Americans.

In The Other I, a Ghanaian man, gave an account of his numerous unpaid traffic citations that resulted in bench warrants. In a frustrated tone, as he flapped a hand full of official papers, he said, “Look, look at what they’ve done to me. How can I afford all of this?”

This man had accumulated enormous fines. The original ticket of $25.00 in 2011 is now $1750.00 in 2014. He had refused to pay because he believed that his only offense was ‘Driving While Black.’ We collaborated on the idea to construct his photograph in a particular car junkyard downtown (Fig. 10), because he had lost a vehicle he owned through police impoundment. He added that one-day, he visited a junkyard to pick up a spare tire for a friend’s car and noticed his impounded car at the junkyard years after, deformed by its missing parts. During the shoot I use white talcum powder as a formal yet conceptually layered way of whitening the man’s face. He stands in front of an enormous pile of compacted cars.
A Bangladeshi woman shared her story. She lost a part of her identity to Western standards of fashion she refuses to wear her native Saris in public in fear of being stared at during her daily rides on the bus (Fig. 11).
All photographs in *The Other* series shared one thing in common; the subject always wore a facial mask created using white talcum powder. In Ghana, talcum powder on the body is used in various spiritual rituals such as rights of passage and traditional festivals. It is a substance used as mediation between the seen and the unseen world. It is used by ordained practitioners to uphold the well-being of a community.

In the West, the powdered faces in *The Other* series references and revisits blackface practices in the painful history of minstrel shows developed in the 19th century. Blackface was a term that described white entertainers in black theatrical facial makeup with the aim of ridiculing and demeaning black people. This mockery
established many of the stereotypes of black people we continue to see in the media.

In Spike Lee’s movie Bamboozled, the lead character Pierre Delacroix is a black Harvard graduate working for a NYC television network. He has endured disrespect from his boss who in general marginalizes black people on his TV shows. In Delacroix’s attempt to get fired from his job, he creates a problematic script that features a black person that performs in blackface. Contrary to his expectation and to his horror his boss agrees to actualize his script and it becomes a huge success.

It is significant to consider the tragic end of Lee’s film in reference to my premise of the borrowed and borrowed language. Delacroix’s revolt was passive and did not deconstruct and transform the borrowed language of ‘blackface’. It only facilitated it with the effect of the show being mistakenly endorsed by white and a large majority of black people. The dissenting black people saw Delacroix’s show as an act that destroyed their cultural relevance. Lee poetically emphasizes the layers of death through the cancelling of the show, the death of Delacroix and the killing of all of the black performers leaving the one white performer alive. In my opinion, Delacroix suffered repercussions from the mistake of borrowing a language without transforming it—borrowing it.

For the Western audience, The Other series uses whiteface to negate and contradict the language of the blackface as a political and liberating statement. This appearance of whiteface is a clear articulation of the borrowed language with reference to Western
history, yet it represents a new realization. The roles of mockery and disrespect are swapped with empowered individuals that confront the camera. The Ghanaian audience sees the whiteface as an indication of empowerment. It is a ritual of purging bad omens and sicknesses, as well as a way to communicate with the ancestors and forefathers.
CHAPTER FOUR

“It has been 128 years since the last country in the world abolished slavery and 53 years since Martin Luther King pronounced his I Have a Dream speech. But we live in a world where the color of our skin not only gives a first impression but a lasting one... that remains.”

Angélica Dass

When Color Speaks Back

One late afternoon in spring 2015, I made a trip to The Home Depot, a home improvement and construction store in St. Louis, in search of a quart of paint to represent my physicality, my skin color. In the painting department, I approached a worker on duty and this is what ensued:

Me: Hello.
Home Depot Employee: Hi. How may I help you?
Me: I’d like to buy paint the color of my skin?
Home Depot Employee: Puzzled look... quietness: Uh umm... I’m sorry. We don’t do that here.
Me: I understand how this may be construed as a joke. It is not. I am an art student and I would really appreciate you generating the color of my skin.
Home Depot Employee: More quietness... thinking... awkwardness: Please give me a second. Let me get my manager.

After about 5-minutes, the manager approaches me.

Manager: Hello
Me: Hi, I am Yvonne and I’m a student at Washington University. I’m working on a project on identity politics and would appreciate it if I could have a quart of paint matching my skin color.
Manager: Without hesitation: Not a problem! I think I can help you. Come with me.

Manager walks me to a tabletop machine.

Manager: This is a spectrometer. It reads colors. We would usually insert a pantone swatch in-between this area and close the reading area. It will then generate the paint based on that particular color that was put in it.

Me: Wonderful!

Manager: Now, because your skin is not one color, the machine will read all the tones that are in the body area we put in the spectrometer and merge them into one color. This will not be a perfect reading of your skin and it will be truly generated from your skin tones.

Me: That’s great! Let’s go ahead with it.

The manager proceeded to stick my lower arm in the spectrometer, and a dark brown color was generated. He stuck my elbow in the spectrometer and an even darker brown was created. I stuck my left foot in and the spectrometer generated a lighter brown with a warmer tone. Then I proceeded to stick my hair in and a rich dark brown color close to black was resulted. I walked out of The Home Depot that day feeling fulfilled. Five shades of my skin color in five quarts of exterior paint, all generated from skin tones of parts of my body.

My intent was to use the two-dimensional materiality of the paints generated from my body to create three-dimensional forms of my complexion. I wanted the paint to become a physical representation of my being. The result was that I constructed a bodysuit. My American Self Portrait, 2014, uses the dried paints embodying three-dimensionality to construct a bodysuit. The work
was fragments of dried paints sewed into a skin suit, flattened, hallow, and pinned to the wall.

My intention was to create the work as research to gain understanding of the systems of race in the United States. This was my reaction to how in the United States, my limitless and multifaceted ways of being had been reduced by the general public to be limited, flattened by my dark skinned complexion. I grew up in a society were color was never the first definer of one being. In Ghana, identity is deciphered through combinations of your family name (surname), tribal markings, hometown, behavior, and the symbols and totems one upholds.

In the Brazilian artist, Angélica Dass' ongoing project, Humanae (Fig. 12), she takes up “the lofty goal of recording and cataloging all possible human skin tones.”15 Her work frames human subjects in pantone colors that match their complexion. She extracts the particular color of representation from the nose of the subject.16 Humanae can be thought of as a photographic taxonomy that references histories of 19th century human classifications that were used to establish different types of social control of power still present today.17 Additionally, amidst this explicit societal critique, there is a celebration of diversity and individuality that concurrently happens in her work.
In a Ted Talk filmed in February 2016, Dass mentions how she uses the mass media and public spaces as open portals to popularize and expand her work. She said that when her work exists in a public space it “fosters popular debates and creates a feeling of community.” Dass utilizes the very methods that solidify our understandings of race and systems of oppression to address realizations of commonality and universality.

In a formally and conceptually similar way Dass work relates to that of Byron Kim’s Synecdoche, 1991–present (Fig. 13) which was first shown in the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Synecdoche is a grammatical term, which means “a part standing for the whole.” This work emphasizes the reduction of human beings to boxes of color. Kim concentrates on the micro as he references the color of a person’s ear, to the macro when addressing issues relating to colorism and diversity within humanity.
Without understanding the content, the work relates in the Western dominant art world as Minimalist Art of the 1960’s. Kim uses a borrowed language of Western Art to address relevant global issues of race.

![Image of Byron Kim's Synecdoche installation](image_url)  
**Fig. 13** Byron Kim, Synecdoche, photo documentation from The Museum of Modern Art’s website, 1991–present, oil and wax on 275 panels, 2008

In my work *Close Enough*, a painting installation, January 2015 (Fig. 14), I further Dass’ and Bryon Kim’s explorations of race through formalist techniques. I engaged the St. Louis public in *Close Enough* during the Sam Fox graduate Open Studios, because *Close Enough* is a work activated by interactions and conversations with the audience as participants. The work was in response to the racial
tensions in St. Louis, a city that suffers from its segregated neighborhoods and in the wake of the August 2014 shooting death of Michael Brown.

Smedley and Smedley article, *Race as Biology Is Fiction, Racism as a Social Problem Is Real*, highlights how human physicality—our complexion and other physical markers—was used in the 18th century as bases to create human taxonomies in North America to validate slavery. The article approaches race from anthropological and historical perspectives revealing that “racial distinctions fail on all three counts—they are not genetically discrete, are not reliably measured, and are not scientifically meaningful.”22 The title lends to the idea that race is a social construct which has been legitimized for specific oppressive motives. Also, humorously established in
Smedley's and Smedley's work is the lack of scientists to expand on real genetic findings that humans are 99.9% more alike than we are different (0.01%).

Across the world and more prevalent in the United States, minds have been polluted by years of so-called scientific research from the West that have compelled us to believe in hierarchies of human inferiority based on race. The existence of racial segregation continues to be a critical and global problem that stifles human development and collective growth.

As humans, our sense of sight fails us. We have become heavily reliant on the immediacy of our vision, as it deceives us to think that people are as simple as they look. At the nucleus of Close Enough is an attempt to provide a platform that addresses these stubbornly persistent racial divides while bringing together diverse individuals for meaningful dialogue.

My interest in the nomenclature assigned to colors also influenced Close Enough. Why is a tone of red associated with Mexican Chili Pepper and a shade of brown to English Coffee? These colors that we associate with human cultures speak to our perception of color and labels we place on them. To create Close Enough, I engaged faculty and students of Washington University by extracting one color from seven participants. The colors chosen were based on a set of Behr® pantone colors. Using the resulting seven skin tones, I made vertical stripes of colors from the ceiling of my studio to its floor. The work implements similar strategy in Kim’s Synecdoche, as
it resembles a Minimalist painting. The colors represented symbolic portraits.

During the Open Studio event, the individuals that participated in this creative research stood in front of their respective colors. The columns of color were separated by thin white stripes created by a blank studio wall. These white stripes are symbolic of systems of ‘whiteness’ that separate our spectrum of diverse complexions into sections of racial classifications.

Intrinsic in the work, Close Enough, I asked the participants not to leave their designated spot in the painting installation unless they found someone who was willing to replace them in their confined column of color. The participants were asked to identify someone whose skin tone related to the pantone color they stood in front of, be it literally, metaphorically or even emotionally. The act of enlisting others to participate made each new participant complicit to systems of racial color hierarchies and conversely to diversity. Some defied the classifications of race, and others tried to match. Part of the work was about the fluidity of patterns of human behavior toward complexion politics. More importantly, it was the importance of the role of viewers to activate and deactivate the artwork. For me, Close Enough unified my studio practice with the Ashanti and the Western Art philosophies.

The revolutionary aspect of Close Enough is that even though the work serves as reminders of racial categories, it also provides an avenue for multi-cultural dialogue. In Close Enough, the imposed categorical columns of color interact (Fig. 15) through conversations, and the stripes of white metaphorically disappear.
Close Enough was a turning point for me as I realized that people are willing to actively participate with artwork in order to make an impact on social issues. In later works, I capitalize on mobilizing individuals of different backgrounds and ethnicities to break what Audrey Smedley and Brain Smedley refer to as “the folk ideas of race”\(^{24}\) that constrain us all in boxes and frames.
CHAPTER FIVE

Lost in Translation

My people! The ancestral Africans suffocate! Visit any African Art collection in the West and you will see them with burdened eyes. If you have ears, you will hear their cries for help.

Today, international trade, neocolonial initiatives and centuries of Western slavery have stifled the cultural relevance and artistic contributions of Sub-Saharan cultures.

As a Ghanaian artist, my sense of urgency intensifies when I witness crudely documented ‘histories of Africa’ in Western books. I am incensed by the counterfeit consumer goods of West African kingship relics, littering the aisles of Western shops.

When I witness the maiming of young men in St. Louis with complexions much ‘lighter’ than mine, it is disheartening to see that they have been reduced to nothing but a black body. These are all signs of the fast, and continuing declining conditions of the African continent and diaspora, a victim of global gang rape, and modern slavery. Our time is limited! ‘Sankofa...’ A need to rectify past injustices. Globally.

The 1984 exhibition, “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern held by The Museum of Modern Art in New York, was “the first ever to juxtapose modern and [so-called] tribal objects in the light of informed art history.” The Museum of Modern Art’s stated intent was to reveal that the exhibition was to highlight clear relationships between Modern Art and traditional Non-Western Art.

The exhibition featured approximately 150 modern Western artworks from renowned artists and 200 Non-Western traditional artifacts pejoratively labeled as ‘tribal objects’ from Africa, Oceania and North American ‘tribal cultures.’ Modern artist such as Matisse, Max
Ernst and Pablo Picasso, were shown as being invested in and influenced by collections of masks and sculptures from Non-Western cultures. A perfect example is Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, 1907 in which two female figures are directly modeled after African masks.27

Within the same year, a critical analysis of “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinities of the Tribal and the Modern by Thomas McEvilley resulted in outcries within the art world. In the Artforum article, entitled Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief, McEvilley exposes that the exhibition problematically positions Non-Western Art as inferior to their Western counterparts.

The article further describes the exhibition as toxic and demeaning, adding that the mere reference of Non-Western art forms as ‘tribal’ is enough proof of the exhibition’s pejorative notions. McEvilley wrote that the exhibition “shows Western egotism still as unbridled as in the centuries of colonialism and souvenirism. The Museum pretends to confront the Third World while really co-opting it and using it to consolidate Western notions of quality and feelings of superiority.”28

McEvilley’s act to speak up against colonialist curatorial practices, sparked a political action in curatorial work and Non-Western Art representation in the art world, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. An essay by Dr. Jordana Moore Saggese enforces that the curators, Kirk Varnedoe and William Rubin neglected their curatorial duties of presenting “significant political, ideological, and social contexts of Non-Western objects.”29 The curators failed to acknowledge
authorship, use, and accurate presentation of the Non-Western works. They left viewers with insufficient information preventing an accurate and full understanding of the rich and multilayered purposes of Non-Western Art.

Today, many curatorial practices of the West continue to frame Non-Western Art in superficial ways. This is because, there is limited substantial research being done to remedy the void of knowledge that stifles the growth of these artistic spheres. When traditional African Art, or any other non-Western Art for that matter, is made to conform to the rubric of Western orchestrated exhibition spaces, they lose their relevance and awe.
CHAPTER SIX

The Politics of Bodies and Dress

As an artist, grounded and heavily influenced by traditional African Art, I take particular interest in analyzing Western established frames of negativity and inferiority that are associated with Non-Western art. I am compelled to understand depictions of the continent of Africa by the West. My work aims to offer a dimension that charges the viewer to perceive ‘everyday’ objects, especially ones that beckon to be associated with the continent of Africa, with criticality and skepticism.

Quite recently, my interests have been focused on the politics of bodies and the politics of dress. I am interested in the act of clothing and clothes as items that reflect status and concurrently indicate levels of cultural exploitation. My research has been reflective of how clothing critically addresses issues relating to nudity and nakedness, gender inequality, international trade and complexion politics.

My understanding of the potency of clothing is to evoke critical dialogue was first ignited when I returned to Ghana in December 2014. After only five years away, I was quick to notice the drastic change in the cultural landscape of the capital city of Accra, where I lived for nineteen years. The cab I rode home from the airport was fully decked out with what resembled Louis Vuitton’s Damier Signature patterns: the steering wheel, the interior including the seats, and even the lining of the trunk.

When I visited local markets, I noticed how second hand goods and imitation cloths had saturated little kiosks and shops of textile and apparel
traders. These knock-off fashion products cheaply adorning the bodies, homes and cars of many Ghanaian citizens. Traditional garments were seldom seen in their rich fullness; instead, Western styled knock-offs and shabby oversized hand-me-downs from parts of Europe and the United States had replaced them all. I thought to myself, if clothing can noticeably change the cultural landscape of Ghana in less than six years, then it is a medium and a phenomenon worth exploring.

It is not a new occurrence that the infiltration of Western second hand and knock-offs has saturated the continent of Africa. With its roots in the colonial times, clothing was a key factor for ‘civilizing Africans.’ In Jean Comaroff’s *The Empire’s Old Clothes*, she explains how colonial intruders and missionary workers utilized clothing as way to “incorporate African communities into a global economy of goods and signs”. Parallel to the maiming of African psyche, she exposes that the ulterior motives of colonialists’ attempts to “cover African nakedness”—“redress Africa”—was anchored in encouraging the discerning consumption of European fashion commodities.

Western monetary interests, thirst for global power and greed have and continue to fuel the destruction of African visual and cultural systems to date. During my visit to Ghana in 2014, I interviewed traders who deal in the second hand and knock-off goods in Makola, Accra and Kejetia, Kumasi (Fig. 16). These are two prominent regional markets in the country. Through my findings, I was made aware of the environmental and health threats that secondhand and imitation goods pose for African economies.
A large amount of imported Western secondhand and imitation goods end up in landfills on Ghanaian soil (Fig. 17). In other words, unbeknownst to the African traders who pay duties on large bails of clothing only to find two-thirds unsalvageable—trash! Africa has long suffered from being the dumping grounds of waste materials including Western branded defective fashion products, and so-called donated goods.
Unlike in Venice, Italy were police officers chase illegal venders daily, and in many parts of the West where there are serious consequences for selling and buying imitation and pirated products, in Ghana, these ‘fakes’ are sold in the open. They have infiltrated into the Ghanaian fashion sense, becoming accepted forms of expression.

In Kedron Thomas’ book titled *Regulating Style*, she speaks of how countries subjected to the production and consumption of ‘fake’ Western branded apparels develop new systems of authenticity. She states that in Guatemala, [similar to Ghana] imitation and pirated clothing from brand names like Tommy Hilfiger, Nike and Echo are commonplace; what is
‘real’ and ‘fake’ is assessed with different criteria. It is hardly assessed by its worth or originality; instead, value is awarded when attaining a desired look. This desired look is often determined by the individuals’ varied taste on color, pattern arrangement, logo positioning, dress cut or shape and so on.

My series *Insidious*, 2015, was created as a response to the overwhelming presence and serious implications caused by imitation and second hand fashion goods in Ghana. These works were actualized in Ghana, highlighting the drastic transitioning of Ghana’s vulnerable culture from handmade materials to mass-produced knock-offs. The *Insidious* series used fashion items to address contemporary issues of colonialism and exploitation prevalent in Ghana. In creating *Insidious III*, I remember approaching one young man in the town of Elmina.

**Me:** Hello, I am Yvonne, an artist and I would like for you to be in my project.

**Young Man:** What is the project about?

**Me:** Imitation

**Young Man:** What is in it for me? Money.

**Me:** No. You will get this shirt. (I lifted up an original Nike shirt I had bought from Foot Locker for $35.)

**Young Man:** This... (He laughed at me). I have over six of them at home. [Referring to his knock-off collection.]

The Western translation of what is ‘original’, ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ were lost. That phenomenon fascinates me.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Weighted by the Frame: Living Sculptures

In the *Insidious* series, I present carefully curated sculptural installations of human beings, which I refer to as Living Sculptures. Similar to artists, Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore (commonly known as Gilbert & George) who first used the term “living sculptures,” my installations feature human beings as art object. I frame them and place them on display. Gilbert states in a South Bank documentary that when you make yourself the object of art, you become more complex than any other sculpture because you have an inner soul.

The difference between my use of the term “living sculptures” and that of Gilbert & George’s is that the individuals that participate in my installation do not permanently remain as sculptures. Contrary to intentions of Gilbert & George who proclaim that even their urine, semen and feces must be considered as art, individuals in my installations are subjected to the immobile characteristic of an art object as an act of activism and an endurance of an established picture frame. They draw relationships: between the marginalized and the privileged, between the mobile and the immobile, between the viewer and the viewed. Their presence as Living Sculptures is but for a fixed moment. For me, Living Sculptures are humans frozen in a symbolic act. My intention for constructing Living Sculptures is to purposefully objectify humans and humanize objects to make highly prevalent the complexities of the human condition.
Time is an important element in my Living Sculptural installations. The work references an aspect of Western Art education by operating on a similar schedule of a still-life or figure drawing class where objects or a human figure are meticulously arranged or placed with consideration to formal and spatial relationships and students are allowed to practice and build their skills in drawing through observation. In my installations, the individuals are activated as sculpture for twenty to thirty minutes and deactivated as humans for ten to fifteen minutes establishing unavoidable relationship between Living Sculptures and humans.

During the time of activation, the individuals are purposefully framed. In a personal conversation about my Living Sculptures, Professor Richard Kruger states, "suddenly the mobile becomes immobile for the sake of a carefully constructed convention of representation. It is the tension between knowing that a person is burdened with a frame that reduces him to a stereotypical and problematic image, and the familiarity to that stereotype and the conditions in which the person is carefully framed that creates the build up of the tension."37

It is within the framing—that stillness, that immobility—that creates platforms of negotiations for the viewer. The presence of the Living Sculpture, the individual subjected to lifelessness creates as increasing tension between our expectation of the representation and the actual being, as people—distinct and particular. In Kumasi, Ghana, I created Insidious I (Fig. 18), a video documentation of a Living Sculptural installation that engages the Ghanaian public by displaying the drastic difference between the mobility of viewers
and the immobility of the Living Sculptures.

Fig 18. Yvonne Osei, Insidious I, stills from video, 2015

Fred Wilson, whose practice is invested in scrutinizing the role of museums and using its context as his apparatus for questioning and revealing issues within the museum's framework. Comparable to the Wilson's practice, my apparatus is that of aisles of North American grocery stores, fabric shops and West African markets as I use items as props to scrutinize the North American society. I term them 'objects of evidence.' Insidious III (Fig. 19) forms both literal and conceptual relationships with Wilson’s Guarded View (Fig. 20) as both works address the absence of marginalized individuals through the very display of their presence.
Fig. 19  Yvonne Osei, Insidious III, still from video, 2015

Fig. 20  Fred Wilson, Guarded View, Wood, paint, steel and fabric (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Peter Norton Family Foundation)
CHAPTER EIGHT

One-Lumped-Together-African-Culture

Vibrantly colored cloths with portrayals of the savannah as if lifted from the scenes of Disney’s animated movie, The Lion King.

Motifs made from representations of Nigerian and Senegalese masks deformed by East Asian and Western cultural translations of an imitation traditional cloth.

Ashanti Adinkra symbols problematically combined with other symbols and patterns that vaguely represent the cultures of Mali, Senegal and Burkina Faso haphazardly decorated with borders in the flag colors of Jamaica.

All these items described are evidential products of disrespect that reduce, deface, reauthorize and attempt to collapse the multifaceted richness of African identities on the African continent and in the diaspora as a whole.

That one-lumped-together-‘Africa’ cultural stereotype, seen in these cloths, I believe, was first established during the Berlin Conference of 1884 where the continent of Africa was discussed at a round table meeting. Partitioned like a chocolate cake among Westerners who had their eye filled with greed and desperation for riches.

The presence of the African continent continues to be tainted and controlled by Western markets. Clothing and fabrics sold in the aisles of apparel shops in the West expose the misconceptions and skewed associations that global communities have about the continent of Africa.

The rippling effects of such cloths circulating on the global market, especially in the United States, cause tension between Africans and African-American, which Boatema Boateng speaks of in her article, African Textiles and the Politics of Diasporic Identity-Making. She explains that “East Asian textile factories, without the payment of
royalties” to any African culture, imitate traditional African textile designs, reproduce them in large quantities, and are sold as genuine in North American markets.\textsuperscript{38} The issue, for me, is that through this misinterpretation, what is representative of African cultures get lost and insidious derivatives are consumed globally.\textsuperscript{39}

As a country that is at the forefront of International Property Rights and copyright laws, the United States fails to protect the rights of African goods and African history by allowing cheap East Asian derivatives on their shelves. I perceive this as a ‘racial loophole’ that continues to disfigure identities and increase the historical gap between Africans and African-Americans precipitated by the barbaric slave trade. I implement the use of these derivative fabrics in my works to expose their evidence of their deceptive claim as ‘African.’ When in actuality, East Asian and North American textile factories and shops exploit African identities for economic gains without regard to authenticity and cultural ownership.

\textit{Chiefs of a Dead (trickery) Liberty,} 2015 is an example of a Living Sculpture that references the negation of American liberty to enslaved African Americans and contemporary African immigrants. The installation polarizes a Living Sculpture wearing derivative cloths, a tourist African object, with a Living Sculpture wearing authentic Kente cloth and accouterments to signify present conditions of exploitation.

\textit{Chiefs of a Dead (trickery) Liberty} is a storytelling work that engages the viewer. It is a frame burdened with heavy symbols and items that marginalize the content relating to Ashanti chiefs. These two
figures have been literally and metaphorically moved out of the Ghanaian context into a Western gallery space. Mimicking traditional African objects at museums the two men in the work, are still—immobile (Fig. 21).

![Fig. 21](image)

An important trope used in the work is that of the Aunt Jemima corn meal mix, which is held in the hands of the Living Sculpture wearing derivative cloths. He pours the corn meal mix wastefully. The Living Sculpture adorned in authentic Kente cloth is positioned to witness the pouring for the corn meal mix, yet he cannot intervene because his lips are taped shut. The Living Sculptural installation does not allow the two men the option of interacting, yet they stare at each other. The installation reflects life of people of African decent living in the United States, the land of ‘abundant opportunities’ and yet there is a systematic deprivation that disallows the dark skinned individual to tap into such benefits. This pain of witnessing wasted abundance can be described as a child having a slice of cake yet not being allowed to consume it. That is the trickery—a malicious tease.
Our names, our faces and our recipes have all been taken from our control. No benefits to us (Fig. 22).

Our understanding of ‘Africa’ is shallow and contaminated by an imposed Western lens.

Fractured understanding of ourselves, unsettled, shamed.

Fig. 22 Yvonne Osei, Chiefs of a Dead (trickery) Liberty, photograph displaying Aunt Jemima corn meal mix, 2015
Return to Sender

“I went to Brixton market [in London] and found some fabrics there. I always imagined the fabrics were authentically African. And I was told that the fabrics are Indonesian influenced fabrics procured by the Dutch...”

Yinka Shonibare, MBE

As an artist invested in the global dynamics and trade roots of textiles in West African countries, Yinka Shonibare’s work is an unavoidable reference to my practice and rightfully so. Shonibare, a British-Nigerian artist living in the United Kingdom, is the first recognized African artist to launch conversation of the authorship and authenticity of African fabrics to the forefront of the art world. He brought to light the colonial conditions of exploitation and has paved a solid foundation for me to extent that conversation.

Yinka Shonibare, MBE is known widely for his use of “brightly colored ‘African’ batik fabrics” inspired during the colonial era by Indonesian textile designs. These design processes were copied and mass-produced by the Dutch to be sold to colonies in West Africa. “In the 1960s the material [cloth designs] became a new sign of African identity and independence” and continues to be today. Dutch wax prints have become commonplace in African cultures and are patronized by many West Africans.

Yinka Shonibare employs these Dutch wax prints in his photography, film, painting and his most widely acclaimed sculptures. His work
“uses wry citations of Western Art history and literature to question the validity of contemporary cultural and national identities.”

Similar to my creative explorations, Shonibare uses the politics of clothing to address issues of cultural identity construction, race, colonialism and class, while constantly considering the relationships between African and European economic and political histories.

On many levels, the works of Shonibare and I are in direct relationship as we are artists of West African decent driven by common interests in the politics of clothing, the presentation of bodies as well as exposing the Western economic ownership of ‘African’ cloths. On a deeper level, I expand Yinka Shonibare’s trajectory by introducing my unique Ghanaian female artist voice, addressing issues of sexuality and gender inequality as well.

Additionally, Shonibare situates his works in past historical references. Consider his work, The Swing (After Fragonard), which is a three-dimensional recreation, the Rococo painting by Jean-Honoré Fragonard, The Swing created in 1767 (Fig. 23). Shonibare operates in the confines of Western Art, making objects of art that use the same cloths that bastardize African identity. His work then become commodities that are sold on the art market. To an extent, the work promotes the selling of Dutch wax prints, and aid in of the system of Western Art exploration that it exposes.
Contrary to Yinka Shonibare’s practice, my work is situated in the present, as I enlist participation with individuals from various backgrounds and cultures in my artistic process. My work is activated by public viewership and participation. I am focused on the ‘verb’ qualities of art—the activity—the experiences that transcend physical objects of art. Driven by a socio-political conscience, my work aims to bring diverse individuals together for a common artistic cause.

I employ not only references to Dutch wax fabrics but also other ‘African’ textile derivatives circulating in the African continent and across the globe. I am also invested in the content of the fabrics, what they portray to be ‘African’ and how they become evidence of shallow and stereotypical portrayals of African continent in our world today. My work moves away from Shonibare’s dummification of bodies, to presenting viewers with the actual individuals themselves. My intent is not to maim the individual but to create a
platform for confrontations and deliberations.

In the summer of 2015, I travelled to six countries in Europe: Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Italy and Greece. My intent was to use my Ghanaian female identity and artistic voice to create a body of work that engages directly with Caucasian males in Western countries.

*Mama Brought Back My Duku, Mama Brought Back My Ashoke* utilizes bastardized and knock off ‘African’ fabrics sold in Western shops, to clothe Caucasian men in a particular manner. This style of dressing references that of West African women. The work introduces my role as artist, but also significantly, as ‘mama’ to the Caucasian male participants. I become the caregiver that returns two items: the Duku and the Ashoke. Duku as reflected in the title refers to Ghanaian female head wrap where as Ashoke refers to female head wrap used in Nigeria. However, the Ashoke is often larger and more elaborate than the Duku and both head wraps are used for day-today activities and special occasions (*Fig. 24*).
I went around Europe enlisting white males in the artistic process of using two matching pieces of cloths to create garments for participants. One cloth was made into a head wrap and the other into a waist wrap (Fig. 25). The work reveals a connection between Caucasian males with West African culture, specifically West African women.
Mama Brought Back My Duku, Mama Brought Back My Ashoke consists of a series of photographs and videos that use tropes of fashion to frame the Western male participant in a stylish and appealing manner (Fig. 26). Borrowing the aesthetics of fashion, allows for the viewer to gain familiarity with the imagery. The mode of presenting the work is a Western one, whereas the content of the work unpack a West African issue of Western and global exploitation.
Through framing the Caucasian male, he is seen as being in one accord with the bastardized ‘African’ fabrics attained in the West. In a literal and metaphoric sense, *Mama Brought Back My Duku, Mama Brought Back My Ashoke* is a return of these so-called African cloths to their rightful owners.
CHAPTER TEN

“To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude.”

John Berger

Fabrications of Nudity and Nakedness

Africa Clothe Me Bare, 2016 (Fig. 27) is an ongoing series of performances, characterized by redefining and recontextualizing outdoor nude female sculptures in Western countries. I utilized the medium of dress to address issues of gender inequality, contemporary residues of colonialism and oppressive international trade laws as it pertains to both Western and Sub Saharan cultures. The work literally and metaphorically addresses relationships of nudity and nakedness. Africa Clothe Me Bare establishes new ways of seeing the phenomenon of the nude, while stimulating conversations associated with colonialism and gender inequality that are still prevalent in our hypocritically ‘post-colonial and equal world.’
One late afternoon in June 2015, I planned a performance with a free-standing nude female sculpture entitled Jeannette (1986) by French artist, Paul Belmondo. Jeanette was created to commemorate the “centenary of the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works in 1986 (Fig. 28).” She stands facing the headquarters building of the World Intellectual Property Organization in Geneva. I took two pieces of cloth into the façade of the World Intellectual Property Organization, Geneva, with the intention of clothing and unclothing Jeannette.
I proceeded to cover Jeannette (Fig. 29), draping her cold bronze body with one of the highly decorative pieces of cloth to create a traditional Ashanti styled form of wrapped attire, and the other elephant patterned cloth was fashioned into a headpiece (Fig. 30). Jeanette stood clothed for a few hours. People passing by the sculpture and I were often curious. Later, I gently removed the clothing, revealing Jeanette’s naked body.
Fig 29. Yvonne Osei, *Africa Clothe Me Bare*, still from video, 2016

Fig 30. Yvonne Osei, *Africa Clothe Me Bare*, detailed photograph of clothed Jeanette, 2016
There are countless female nude monuments like Jeanette often erected to commemorate buildings, decorate architectural façades and become mere extensions of water fountains and museum fronts. The act of draping Belmondo’s Jeanette is a transformative process where the work questions Western standards of beauty, which has been captured widely through the genre of Western Art, and admired globally for its mastery. In the performances, old monuments of ‘nude’ female sculptures are seen anew as ‘naked’ female bodies through the act of clothing and unclothing. The work exposes an inherent exploitation of female bodies as objects of possession. The act of clothing and unclothing transforms their status from mere objects of viewing-pleasure to subjects of heightened humanness.

The most charged element in *Africa Clothe Me Bare* is the temporal presence of the cloth, which allows for a ritual of concealing and revealing. Through the medium of cloth, a new understanding of nudity is formed. Its presence questions ownership, identity, authenticity and hints at modern forms of exploitation of West African cultures. The cloth presents residues of colonialism, as they are examples of derivatives that feed a global economic trade.

Boatema Boateng, the author of *The Copyright Thing Does Not Work Here* reveals how intellectual property rights protect Western standards of individual virtuosity, leaving West African forms of creativity characterized by collective thinking and ownership unprotected from public use. Boateng explains how copyright laws have allowed for Ghanaian traditional cloth designs, specifically Kente and Adinkra cloths to be plagiarized,
cheaply printed, and mass-produced as global textile commodities that circulate both in the West and Sub-Saharan countries. Western dominant international trade and copyright laws allow for bastardized textile derivatives to pollute local African markets. Their proliferation and low price values also usurp the legitimacy of locally produced cloths.

The overwhelming existence of internationally imported derivative cloths is harmful to Sub Saharan cultures because they cloud and muffle the functionality of traditional African cloths. Imitation cloths also affect African market economies because they dominate to collapse local and traditional fabric making industries on the African continent. In Ghana for example, the making of textiles is an art form that fosters communication. This is because traditional designs of garments are embedded with local symbols such as the Adinkra symbols to form complex systems of visual communication. In the Ashanti culture of Ghana, some of these cloths have proverbial titles and folkloric attributes that convey specific meanings and yield specific responses. When these textile art forms are translated into Western culture they lose their potency as art to the world of fashion; they become labeled and reduced to mere ‘global’ prints, ‘ethnic’ prints and ‘tribal’ prints that litter the aisles of fabric and apparel shops.

Today, “African governments are pressured by global financial institutions to liberalize their markets, as a condition for international aids and grants.” This allows for cheap imports of several items, including Western and East Asian produced cloths, which misrepresent and wrongly depict symbols of African cultures.
therefore paralyzing local industries and jeopardizing rich African cultures for that matter.⁴⁹ These products also stereotype multiple distinctive cultures on the African continent, reducing them to a one-lumped-together-African-culture. The derivative cloths become purely decorative objects on African markets, losing their previous art values imbued with meanings and usefulness. The imported cloths lack the ability to communicate to various African cultures as visual objects of art that function in traditional African systems.

In Africa Clothe Me Bare, I adopt the use of so-called ‘ethnic’ cloths that beckon to have relationships to the African continent yet are produced from a non-African source and purchased in Western fabric shops to unpack issues of exploitation (Fig. 31). The cloths represent unifying factors between the West and Sub-Saharan cultures, while maintaining an ambiguous association with the two regions. The cloth is both a foreign and a familiar object to both Africans and Westerns. My draping of Western sculptures in cloths that illustrate Western projections of what Africa should look like is in a way to reveal the cloths appropriated Western associations. The performance of clothing and unclothing is carried out as a way to make known the complexities associated with the history of such cloths, their present production processes, and their exploitative effects, especially on the African continent.
In the words of Dave Sim, “Once a profound truth has been seen, it cannot be ‘unseen’. There’s no ‘going back.’” Africa Clothe Me Bare operates on the idea of perception and how that alters our understanding of both the old nude female sculpture and the new naked female sculpture. It is important to note that in these ongoing performances, my dressing and undressing of these sculptures is a transformative process. In this process, the nude female sculpture loses its nudity to gain a level of nakedness that did not exist prior to the performance. In Africa Clothe Me Bare, the establishment of a borrowed language exists within the borrowed language itself, the nude female. The transformation from borrowed (nude) to borrowed (naked) happens through the temporal act of dressing and undressing. Although the sculptures do not physically change, our perceptions of them do.
As a signifier of a colonial subject—clothed, African, a female, an immigrant—my presence in the performances is key as I contrast that of the Caucasian-featured nude female sculpture. In Jean Allman’s *Fashioning Africa*, she highlights that “throughout the colonial period the binary of the “naked” and the “clothed” invigorated colonial discourse.” She adds that “the woven cloth served as a barometer of the success, or failure, of the British “civilizing mission” in Ghana.” Allman explains further that there were massive efforts during the 1930s and 40s by British colonizers and missionaries to clothe the ‘wild men’ and ‘wild women’ of Ghana. In *Africa Clothe Me Bare*, I return to the West, reciprocating the “civilizing mission” through my act clothing and unclothing nude female sculptures hyper exposing their nakedness in public spaces. My artistic gesture also reveals a level of hypocrisy and reversal of power, as issues of nakedness and clothing have been shown to exist in many Western cultures.

Unlike the norm, colonizer having control and offering assistance to the colonized, I take up the role of power and responsibility, as I carry out these somewhat guerilla acts that scrutinize Western Art and culture with care and kindness. *Africa Clothe Me Bare* also raises questions about my historic white male counterparts in their indulgence of the female gaze and use of female bodies as ‘symbols of aestheticism.’ The title uses the word ‘bare’ to reference both nudity and nakedness. Most significantly, the title reflects the act of exposure by me, a signifier of Africa (as if it were one big country)—the stereotyped and exploited colonial subject.

In “Ways of Seeing,” a 1972 British Broadcasting Corporation four-part television series, John Berger explains in depth the disparities
that exist in gender identity and representation in the media and within the art world. He further explains that men are portrayed and gazed at as having the ability to act and exude power, whereas women are objectified by their physical presence. Thus Berger emphasizes this relationship by establishing that depictions in European artistic and cultural traditions prove that “men act and women appear.”

In the second episode specifically, Berger mentions the significance of the “eye of the beholder,” the one who creates and first gazes at the nudity/nakedness of depicted female bodies in European oil paintings.

Berger makes the claim that in the nudes of European paintings, the male voyeur depicts, shapes and frames how females are expected to look and be looked at, and not who they are as individuals and what they can offer. Often, most of these artworks made by Western male artists, including Belmondo’s Jeannette, have a dense history in portraying stylized female features based on set impossible Western standards of beauty. In the history of European art, nudes (predominately female nudes) were seen as “visual culminations of Renaissance idealism and humanism.” In Berger’s series, he analyzes these visual culminations in Western Art and Western social norms, which often depict females as languid, vulnerable, and submissive subjects, to challenge histories of representation that subjugate and demean women. His analysis also proposes a contemporary hypocrisy, which is embedded in the offering of women’s ‘vanity’ as a way for men to continue taking pleasure in looking (at the female body).
In making known the various levels of objectification and complexities in Africa Clothe Me Bare, my act of clothing can be perceived as the artist preparing a new season of clothes for a group of display mannequins. In that instance, the cloth for covering the female sculptures share in a similar deception of set exploitative systems. As Western female nude sculptures rely on imitation African textile cloths for clothing, they are also displaying and revealing Western relationships with the identity of these very derivative cloths. Africa Clothe Me Bare is a visual proclamation of a Western association with cloths that exploit African identities for global economic gains.

As emphasized by the performances, the cloths are presented as though they were gifts to adorn the bodies of nude female sculptures and to preserve their sacred nakedness. However, the unclothing of the female nude heightens the nakedness of the figure—the exploited female, while establishing a realization of an exchange between the colonizer and the colonized within the Western borrowed language itself. The work unpacks complex historical and current relationships between West African and Western civilizations.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Visual Tautology: From Utopia, With Love.

The use of tautologies in the English language is to say something twice in different ways—to make bold, to italicize, to underline. Ghanaian language, when translated in English is often redundant. From the English point of view, Ghanaian languages may seem to have ‘unnecessary’ repetitions. In the Ghanaian sense, when a particular idea is expressed in a repetitive or tautological way, the expression carries with it an emotional energy and an investment in whatever is being proclaimed.

As an example, the Ghanaian Ashanti Twi phrase “Aben Wo Aha” was made popular by Daddy Lumba in a Ghanaian traditional Highlife song. The translation of the title is “It’s Already Cooked Over Here.” The additional words “Already”, “Over” and “Here,” does not alter “It’s Cooked,” however, the emphatic words carry a feeling of energy that adds to the proclamation “It’s Cooked.” It is this extra—emphatic emotion—that exudes from an expression of redundancy that is the intention of the visual language in From Utopia, With Love., evoking a sense of immediacy and criticality. Aben Wo Aha is also a double entendre and yields plural interpretations to various individuals of different age and cultural backgrounds.

Visual tautology is a rhetorical language device that employs visual redundancy to emphasize various aspects of a situation; it reveals underlying truths that have always been present in the mere
makeup of a situation. I use visual tautology as a conceptual strategy to communicate in a direct and conspicuous manner, to ensure not only clarity, but also, to establish the emotional gravity and significance of the message. *From Utopia, With Love.*, 2016 capitalizes on visual tautologies to pay homage to Ghanaian visual communication systems and cultural lifestyle, and to serve as emphatic, proverbial, metaphorical and symbolic expressions, with multilayered meanings and references. For example, specific Adinkra symbols used on cloth for specific occasions.

*From Utopia With Love* presents skin design patterns. The patterns are compilations of skins: textures, colors, moles, freckles, wrinkles, and tatoos. Our actual skin, the largest organ of the body, is the ‘first skin.’ Clothing, visualized, as a membrane that covers our bodies is the ‘second skin’. The ‘third skin’ is created through photographic renditions of various skin surfaces and body parts of many individuals made into designs printed on fabric. The triple skinned visual tautology is enunciated when the photographic representation of skins (third skin) is printed onto fabrics and constructed into garments (second skin) to be worn as a covering on the body (third skin). There is a redundancy of skin that is made apparent through the layering of skins. Although, the first skin is permanent, the second skin allows for the third to make manifest through the medium of clothing (Fig. 32).
From Utopia With Love exposes the fetishization of complexions and bodies through the language of art and fashion. Within the same body of work, diversity and the unification of people from different backgrounds and ethnicities are promoted. The patterns are first generated from video stills of the bodies of over three hundred people: old, young, Caucasian, African, moles on skin, scared skin, curly hair, afro hair, blue eyes, brown eyes, grown finger nails, unevenly painted toe nails. These body landscapes reveal a wide range of different body features that we all have (Fig. 33).
The assorted stills of body parts and skin surfaces are then designed into patterns for clothing. The various motifs, although evidently are referential as skin, they also read more color and pattern. For example, four toes of an African female is repeated and combined with a finger of an Asian man to create a shape that resembles a flower. All of the designs use that unifying strategy (Fig. 34).
The aesthetics of the patterns reflect both direct and indirect similarities to both traditional handmade and mass-produced derivatives of African textiles. This is because I want the fabrics to have familiarity to both African and Western cultures. In the Ashanti culture of Ghana, for example, textiles and clothing is about being a part of a larger whole community, where as in the West, textiles is about individual self-expression. In the Ashanti culture, clothes contribute to a set system, whereas, in the United States it is seen as a commodity—a product of fashion. My inspiration for From Utopia,
With Love, is based on my research on traditional and derivative fabrics. The designs are made to imitate the very imitation fabrics that plague the Ghanaian cultural landscape with the aim of exposing systems of oppression (Fig. 35).

As a large-scale collaborative work conceived in October 2015, From Utopia, With Love, borrows the formal, aesthetic and proverbial arrangements of Sub-Saharan textile patterns, yet branches away from its literal use. The patterns I generated address the system of hierarchy established in colorism. These patterned designs were printed onto fabrics in St. Louis, Missouri, and the garments were constructed in Accra by Ghanaian seamstresses and tailors (Fig. 36). My decision to have the works made in Ghana was
to establish an intrinsic Ghanaian voice in the works while allowing for a significant portion of the production cost to remain within the Ghanaian economy, contrary to exploitative methods of production often unethically practiced by international companies.

Fig 37. Yvonne Osei, From Utopia, With Love., photographs showing tailors constructing garments, 2015
I create thirty custom made garments for a group of individuals, diverse not only in complexion but in age, culture, profession and physical appearance. Their presence in the garments activated *From Utopia, With Love*. The garments themselves are not to be thought of as art because the ‘first skin,’ the actual human skin must embody the garment in order to establish the visual tautology. In a world plagued with racism, colonialism, and outright human injustices, *From Utopia, With Love*. presents garments—products that allow for viewers to acknowledge the physicality of skin. I use the language of fashion to anchor the idea of the commodification of difference (Fig. 38).

*Fig. 38*  Yvonne Osei, *From Utopia, With Love*, photographs exhibiting fashion tropes, 2015
From Utopia, With Love, collapses hierarchical systems of race by permitting a temporary fluidity of skin and body parts. When a Caucasian female wears a dress patterned with eyes of people of different races, with different iris colors, she makes a personal declaration of embodying another person’s body parts. She also ushers into public her endorsement of confronting issues of race, exploitation and alienation (Fig. 39).

Fig 39. Yvonne Osei, From Utopia, With Love., photographs documenting garment, 2015

In From Utopia, With Love., I bring thirty individuals from different backgrounds for one purpose, to actualize the art. Borrowing tropes from fashion, I use various locations in St. Louis as the
runway for my garment collection. As a city battling with racism, more so reflected in the city’s physical make-up, I used my garments to highlight and address socio-political divides that have marred the city for many decades.

Beyond Living Sculptures, these collaborators are dressed in patterns generated from skin and body parts. Their garments respond to the landscape in which they find themselves. This is often established by color, pattern arrangement or the style of the garment in relation to the background in which they model and interact with (Fig. 40).
Additionally, all the video shoot sessions of the thirty individuals are compiled into one video showing seamless relationships from one environment to the next, one pattern to the next, one complexion to the next, one garment to the next. This video is featured in the 2016 MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum. The video emphasizes similarities that establish human commonalities, yet it makes apparent the many issues St. Louis faces that stifle the cities growth (Fig. 41).
An essential part of the opening of the exhibition, can be
categorized through the Western lens as a fashion show (Fig. 42).
All thirty collaborated that are present in the video being show are
also present in their garment within the exhibition space. Informally,
they model at the opening as guests. The viewer experiences the
collaborators in the past through the video, and most importantly in
the present moment as physical beings.
Fig. 42  Yvonne Osei, *From Utopia, With Love.*, photographs of participants modeling/activating art in museum’s atrium, MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2015
In the Ashanti lens, this physical activity of participation and embodiment is the art. Art extends the colorful garments to include the witnessing, the drumming, the formal and the informal participation of the collaborators and the viewers. It is the festive event itself that completes *From Utopia, With Love*. (Fig. 43).

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**Fig. 43** Yvonne Osei, *From Utopia, With Love.*, photograph of all participants at 2016 MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2015
**Conclusion**

The epitome of the Ashanti culture is the Golden Stool, a symbol of utmost kingship. It is activated by the community, and the community, is in turn legitimized by its ceremonial presence. My inspiration to forge ahead with my creative research lies deeply in the power that can be exerted from this type of art experience. The Golden Stool is a catalyst for empowerment for the entire Ashanti nation. It is my intention to carry forward this charge of self-determination. With my art, I evoke societal change.

My video *Deity*, 2015 (Fig. 44), portrays this charge of self-determination in the power of presence. It bestows the viewer with the transient appearance and disappearance of a young Ghanaian boy. He wears a black oversized Nike shirt with the inscription “Hustle for Kicks” printed bold in white block text. His ‘kicks,’ tattered with knotted polythene bags, reference a leading exported pollutant in Sub Saharan cultures. In *Deity*, the boy stands unshaken—solid—confronting the viewer with uninterrupted attention. His surroundings: austere. His presence: beyond the physical. He becomes what you see and don’t see.
Fig. 44 Yvonne Osei, Deity, stills from video, 2015
What feeling of doubt and powerlessness prompted Audre Lorde in 1984 to utter the words, “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House?” For me, I find the most effective way to dismantle systems of oppression is to do so with subversion through an in depth understanding of oppressive structures. This is because it has the same weight. It is the strategy of creating a new paradigm that questions, critiques and sets different possibilities that make the difference.

Language gives us our reality. The borrowed language in my artworks consist of visual strategies invested in usurping the Western Art language. By recontextualizing, decontextualizing and formulating problematic polyrhythmic patterns in my Ghanaian active voice. These patterns include historical and political habits of isolation, subjugation, and exclusion. My work mediates these territories. My position, which was originally limited by the Western Art language and Western lens, has now become limitless.
Notes

1 Laka, I. (2014, February 03). Mandela was right: The Foreign Language Effect. Retrieved February 6, 2016, from http://mappingignorance.org/2014/02/03/mandela-was-right-the-foreign-language-effect/
10 Ibid.
Artist Angélica Dass’ Official Website


23 Ibid. pp. 19

24 Ibid. pp. 21


26 Ibid


31 Ibid. pp. 20


42 Ibid.

A Borrowed Language


Ibid. pp. 146

Ibid. pp. 147


Ibid


