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#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

Decolonising Fashion Education with Athol Fugard's

Boesman and Lena

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Abstract

At undergraduate level, research design and methodology was never a formalised part of the fashion education curriculum. Furthermore, fashion-related modules tend to comprise content predominantly of a Western nature: for example, the 'history of fashion' is often presented from a European perspective. In comparison to the vast, multi-disciplinary discourse relating to Western fashion, literature on African fashion is limited, which poses challenges for teaching, learning and curriculum transformation. The call for decolonisation has established a need to narrow this gap.

This paper responds to this call in a two-fold manner. Firstly, at third year level, research design and methodology was introduced as a formal semester module offering. Secondly, the authors integrated performance art into the first year theory of fashion and third year research methodology modules. The iconic South African play by Athol Fugard, Boesman and Lena (1969), was incorporated at first and third year undergraduate level because of its relevance to the South African political climate. This culminated in a collaborative fashion teaching and learning initiative with the institution's Arts & Culture Centre. Including performance art, in particular Boesman and Lena, within fashion education created an opportunity to contextualise fashion in a localised manner and align with the call to decolonise education.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, the authors explore students' views with respect to incorporating Boesman and Lena in first year fashion theory and third year research. Secondly, the authors explore how predominately 'born-free' students experienced the play from a personal perspective given its political underpinning. To achieve these aims, the authors deployed a qualitative research approach. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect data and explore the views and experiences of first and third year fashion students. A content analysis method was applied to analyse and categorise the raw data.

The paper is structured such that it begins by first narrating and contextualising Boesman and Lena against the backdrop of the South African social and political climate. The paper then shifts toward contextualising the scope of the teaching and learning initiative for both first year theory of fashion and third year research. Finally, the authors discuss students' views concerning the integration of Boesman and Lena within teaching and learning and their

experiences as predominately 'born-free' students. The authors conclude by offering their reflections from an educational perspective regarding the teaching and learning initiative.

By including performance art within fashion education an opportunity was created to contextualise fashion in a relevant, localised context thus aligning with the call to decolonise education. As such, this paper contributes to the larger discourse on fashion education which, at times, is considered superficial and frivolous. However, teaching and learning initiatives such as this demonstrate that fashion education could indeed address complex issues such as decolonisation.

Keywords:

Boesman and Lena, born-free student experience, decolonising education, fashion education

Introduction

In professional fashion design practice, research is seen as the application of tools such as literature reviews, market surveys, direct and indirect observation, visual images, and Likert scale questionnaires to collect information (Keiser & Garner 2012; Selvwright 2007; Tullio-Pow & Strickfaden 2015). In addition, Ezinma Mbonu (2014, p.9) argues that fabric experimentation, photographs, sketching and touring or travel are all forms of primary research, while secondary research is undertaken through consulting books or the internet. These research tools then inform the generation of design ideas.

Fashion education mirrors the aforementioned professional practices regarding the formation of design ideas. However, from a South African undergraduate perspective, research design and methodology has not been formally included in fashion education curricula, despite the fact that students are generally expected to engage in research. The result has been that students receive insufficient support to assist them to conduct research in a formal, academic and systematic manner, which poses challenges for their articulation into further studies. This is further compounded by the fact that there has generally been a 'colonial' approach, within South African institutions, to the theoretical underpinnings linked to fashion education, with theoretical module content mostly drawn from a Western context. For example, the 'Theory of Clothing' module presented at first year level, traditionally, and alarmingly, excluded any African fashion. From an international perspective, Ian Griffiths (2000, p. 69) indicates that fashion education underpins fashion theory in historical and linear chronologies or what he refers to as "hemline theories", but from the perspective of Western theorists. Mirroring these western counterparts, fashion education in South Africa traditionally underpinned fashion theory in the "chronology of dress based in a historical paradigm" (Smal & Lavelle 2013, p. 197).

One of the authors of this paper was assigned to teach the 'Theory of Clothing' module for the first time in 2016 and found the lack of theory relating to African fashion concerning. When attempting to address this problem, the large literature gap in respect of African fashion became evident. Moreover, existing literature seemingly focuses on well-known ethnic groups but discusses these in the context of cultural practices, rather than from a fashion perspective. This lack of literature has meant that African fashion is completely overlooked in terms of design and trends, and is treated as 'other' to the Eurocentric fashion world.

To overcome these challenges, the authors responded in a two-fold manner. Firstly, at third year level, research design and methodology was formally introduced in 2015 as a semester module offering within the curriculum. This research methodology offering included theoretical constructs regarding different research approaches, research designs, data collection and analysis methods, as well as the ethics associated with formal research. Data analysis methods included systematic visual and semiotic analysis given the nature of the discipline. Secondly, the authors integrated performance art into the first year theory of fashion module. This was addressed in the module 'Theory of Clothing' by including African fashion history (as well as Eastern and Oceania histories of fashion), and by introducing the iconic South African play by Athol Fugard, *Boesman and Lena* (1969) into the module content at both first and third year level. The inclusion of the play was based on its relevance to the current South African social and political climate. The result was a collaborative fashion teaching and learning initiative within the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) Arts & Culture Centre, who staged the production of the play. Including performance art created an opportunity to locate fashion education within a more relevant and localised context, thus aligning with the call to decolonising education.

In light of this, the purpose of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, the authors explore students' views with respect to incorporating *Boesman and Lena* within the first year fashion theory and third year research methodology modules. Secondly, the authors explore how predominately 'born-free' students experienced the production of *Boesman and Lena* from a personal perspective, given its political underpinning.

The paper is structured such that it begins by discussing *Boesman and Lena* against the backdrop of the South African social and political climate. The paper then contextualises the scope of the teaching and learning initiative for both first year 'Theory of Clothing' and third year 'Research Methodology'. The discussion then moves on to report on the research design and methodology deployed within this study. Finally, the students' views concerning the integration of *Boesman and Lena* within teaching and learning, and their experiences as predominately 'born-free' students is addressed. The authors conclude by offering their reflections from an educational perspective regarding this teaching and learning initiative.

Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*

Boesman and Lena was written by Athol Fugard in 1969. It is set against the backdrop of turbulent apartheid South Africa. The play depicts a 'day-in-the-life' of a middle aged coloured couple, named Boesman and Lena, who take "to the road following the destruction of their shanty home through urban renewal" (Angotti 1971, p. 468). The couple carry all their belongings consisting mostly of discarded items and come to settle on a desolate plain for the night (Angotti 1971, p. 468). Boesman and Lena are plagued by a number of deeply concerning issues, such as racial oppression, substance abuse, gender violence and poverty. Additionally, they live in a permanent state of liminality due to their displacement. Outa, the third and final character, stumbles upon Boesman and Lena during the night. Outa is depicted as an unintelligible, old, ill and homeless African man, who passes away during the night.

An excerpt of one of Lena's dialogues below illustrates the mood evoked by the play:

Look back one day Boesman. It's me, that thing you drag along the roads. My life. It felt old today. Sitting there on the pavement when you went inside with the empties. Not just tired. It's been that for a long time. Something else. Something that's been used too long. The old pot that leaks, the blanket that can't even keep the fleas warm. Time to throw it away. How do you do that when it's yourself? I was still sore where you hit me. Two white children came and looked while I counted the bruises (Fugard 1969, p. 10).

The UJ Arts & Culture production of *Boesman and Lena* cast the characters as black African, rather than coloured. Alby Michaels, the UJ Arts & Culture production designer, explained that black African people were cast so as to highlight that the social and political issues of the storyline are not unique to only one South African racial category but are rather cross-racial and remain problematic in current South Africa.

Boesman and Lena wear second-hand, soiled and tacky garments that resonate with those typically worn by homeless people, even in the present day. UJ Arts & Culture play producer, Grace Meadows, explained that cast members bought new items of clothing which were then traded for clothing worn by homeless people in the Johannesburg area. In doing so, the 'costumes' worn by Boesman and Lena were authentic items obtained from desolate individuals. Lena also wears a baby's cloth diaper on her head to symbolize the baby she miscarried in her past, presumably due to her living conditions. Outa is in an even more dire situation than Boesman and Lena, and wears only black plastic bags and carries a stick to assist him in walking. Like the costumes, the set design includes minimal items, primarily Boesman and Lena's belongings such as an old blanket, a tarpaulin-type sheet, bottles of wine and an assortment of discarded items.

Teaching and learning initiative

With regard to the associated teaching strategies and learning tasks associated with this collaborative initiative, the first year students, as part of the 'Theory of Clothing' module, were briefed on Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*. As a teaching strategy, first year students were introduced to basic semiotics and tools with which to carry out observations. For their learning tasks, each student was assigned one of the three characters and were then required to write a description of the complete 'look' of the character. The description of the character's look was guided by aspects, such as hair, top garments, bottom garments, accessories, shoes, headwear, as well as demeanour and stage setting. Meanwhile, the third year students, in the newly-introduced research methodology module which also included content relating to visual and semiotic analysis, were tasked with analysing and interpreting the costumes worn by the three characters, utilizing semiotic analysis. In line with the principles of semiotic analysis, the costumes required analysis, interpretation and justification by considering signs, symbols, their meanings and the literature. The third year students worked in groups of three and each group selected one character from the play.

The students were able to attend the production of *Boesman and Lena*. All of the third year students attended the performance, and 85% of the first years were able to do so. In addition, the stage director, set designers and coordinators from the UJ Arts & Culture Centre presented a seminar to the third year students with the purpose of contextualising the set design and the costumes worn by the characters against the backdrop of the storyline and its setting.

The viewing of the production itself, the seminar session, the descriptions of the complete 'look' written by first year students, visuals provided by the UJ Arts & Culture and literature surveys all served as collected data. The third year students then utilised this data to analyse the costumes worn by the characters by deploying a semiotic analysis methodology. For assessment, each group presented their findings to an assessment panel comprising of both authors and Alby Michaels, the UJ Arts & Culture production designer. The inclusion of Alby Michaels created opportunities for dialogue and understanding with respect to how viewers of this particular production interpreted the costumes and set design.

In the section that follows, the authors report on the research approach and methodology that they deployed to collect and analyse data for the purposes of the current paper.

Research approach and methodology

This research is guided by a qualitative research approach, which aims to explore, understand and interpret the experiences and meanings that people assign to social and cultural contexts (Creswell 2014; Merriam 2009). Qualitative research was selected given the focus on exploring and interpreting participants' views with respect to the incorporation of *Boesman and Lena* within fashion education. In addition, such an approach was deemed appropriate in order to understand the personal experiences of the predominately 'born-free' participants, particularly considering the social and political underpinnings of the play.

In line with a qualitative research approach, purposeful sampling was used because the participants had certain knowledge and because they fit specific criteria for participation in the research inquiry Babbie 2008; (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2004). As such, the participants comprised of first and third year fashion students who were engaged in the described teaching and learning initiative. These students are termed 'born-free' citizens of South Africa, since they were born after the advent of democracy in the country. To collect data, the authors administered 33 open ended questionnaires to first and third year fashion students in order to establish their views regarding inclusion of *Boesman and Lena* in fashion education, and how they personally experienced the production.

To ensure ethical research practice, the authors verbally and in written form invited first and third year students to partake in this research. All students were informed of the nature and scope of this inquiry and how the data would be collected and analysed. Additionally, all students were informed with respect to the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of their identities. As such, all surveyed students granted the authors written consent to partake in this inquiry. In addition, the authors obtained written permission from Alby Michaels and Grace Meadows to use their names in this paper.

To analyse the collected data, a conventional content analysis method was employed. Such a method is used to describe a situation where “existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited” (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1279). With this method of analysis, raw data is coded with a systematic coding system and categorised into themes or categories (Babbie 2008; Saldaña 2016). From this coding system, the data was categorised into two main themes namely: 1) student’s perspectives on the teaching and learning initiative; and 2) the ‘born-free’ experience of attending *Boesman and Lena*.

Discussion of findings

In this section, the authors discuss the findings that emerged from the data analysis under the two main themes of 1) student’s perspectives on the teaching and learning initiative, and 2) the ‘born-free’ experience of attending *Boesman and Lena*. We discuss each of these two main themes in turn.

Student’s perspectives on the teaching and learning initiative

The students’ perspectives regarding the teaching and learning initiative fell under two sub-themes namely: a) the incorporation of performance art within fashion design curricula, and b) the incorporation of relevant South African history within fashion design curricula.

Incorporation of performance art within fashion design curricula

From a first year perspective, all students responded positively with regard to incorporating performance art within the ‘Theory of Clothing’ module. The comments made by the first year students demonstrate that they developed a greater understanding of the meanings that can be found in fashion and clothing alike. This may lend itself to a more in-depth understanding of semiotics within fashion. Similarly, all the third year students also viewed the incorporation of performance art within the research methodology module in a positive light. The third year students appeared to easily link fashion and performance art in order to gain a deeper understanding of research methodology. In Table 1 below, excerpts from the students’ raw data are included so as to support the findings within this sub-theme.

Table 1: Raw data supporting the incorporation of performance art within fashion design curricula

LEVEL OF STUDY	PARTICIPANT	RESPONSE
First	Student 3	I thought it was an interesting was to get us thinking and taking note of the costumes worn and the significance they play
First	Student 4	I enjoyed having a different source to use in class
First	Student 5	I think it was a creative learning experience. It was an innovative teaching method which helped us to think out of the box.
First	Student 7	I think it was a good idea because for me it taught me how to analyse and understand one’s clothing and how the clothing is worn and the purpose for it.

First	Student 12	I was quite impressed that we were allowed to attend the play as it makes the subject very interesting and broadens the knowledge base.
Third	Student 19	Was interesting and made one understand the different ways of research and methods used to address a particular situation/play.
Third	Student 20	I found it interesting and refreshing to have a collaboration of the two departments and how they link to each other. I learned a lot about research and interpretation of symbols and signs.
Third	Student 31	It made methodology more easy to understand and we could incorporate what he have learned easily.

It is clear from the data obtained that the incorporation of performance art into the fashion design curriculum was viewed positively by students.

Incorporation of relevant South African history within fashion design curricula

Most first year students (85%) reported that the incorporation of relevant South African history benefited design insight. The first year students confirmed that this particular performance led to greater understanding of the role that socio-cultural issues play in fashion. The student responses indicate that they found the inclusion of local content enhanced their understanding of fashion theory. As such, first year students believed that this understanding will impact on and improve their role as designers. In the same light, all the third year students suggested that the production created greater awareness and heightened insight about design. These findings suggest that design can no longer be seen in terms of aesthetics only, but should rather be seen in terms of its emotional connection and evoked meanings. To support these interpretations, Table 2 presents extracts from the raw data produced by the students.

Table 2: Relevant South African history and the benefits for design insight

LEVEL OF STUDY	PARTICIPANT	RESPONSE
First	Student 1	There is so much of history and depth in terms of apartheid that the effects of apartheid are still experienced by so many people. I have witnessed a lot of hardship and pain by people around me and I wonder what the outcome would be if there was no apartheid that took place in South Africa. This project allowed me to understand that clothing plays a far deeper role in society than what one would assume. Certain judgement about an individual's life can be shown through clothing. At times, clothing can hide what an individual is experiencing and all of these elements allows a designer to think and create and design effectively.
First	Student 2 (negative response)	Possibly in certain aspects, however, not greatly. The character's clothing was not very inspirational for me... Not everyone can afford designer clothes and this opened up my eyes to this, as it may trigger some ideas to make affordable and sustainable clothing.
First	Student 3	It has shown me the importance of the way clothes can carry a message about someone, not only from the play but in life as well. It has also made me take note of the

		small details of clothing which can also add to a bigger meaning.
First	Student 4	I think that linking a period of time... to fashion makes this experience more personal. As a human you are driven by emotions and to understand someone's suffering makes you not only understand their choice in fashion but also to empathise with them. So I think this project has made me understand theory of fashion clearer in a sense.
Third	Student 14	It made me understand the design process system better and made me realise the importance of the elements of design.
Third	Student 22	Before this project all I saw is what I wanted to see... but this has forced me to gain knowledge and look further and into a deeper meaning.
Third	Student 24	It did give me insight in design, because we analyse clothing in the context of the play and semiotics behind the whole meaning of the play.
Third	Student 29	I now try to design emotionally. Make clothing that I feel connected to because that way it will always mean something to me.
Third	Student 32	It has allowed me to understand that there is need for meaning behind specific designs, it is not just a matter of aesthetics but a matter of meaning.

Overall, it is evident that the first and third year students felt the teaching and learning initiative contributed positively towards their understanding of fashion theory and research methodology. The findings suggest that the inclusion of relatable content in fashion education can actually have a positive impact and change the way design manifests itself.

The 'born-free' experience of attending *Boesman and Lena*

As the play is set in 1969, the authors were interested in ascertaining the extent to which the content of the play remained relevant for so-called 'born-free' students, that is, those born after the first South African democratic elections in 1994. The first year responses were mixed, with a slight majority (54%) of students expressing a personal connection with the play, and 31% of students responding that they did not connect with the content. A small number (15%) of first year students felt that this did not apply to them because they were unable to attend the theatre production. From a third year perspective, the responses were balanced with 50% of students indicating that they did not necessarily experience a personal connection with the play even though they felt a sense of empathy towards the characters and, by extension, towards the struggles faced by people of colour in South Africa. On the other hand, 50% of students expressed a personal connection with this play, despite being of the younger, 'born-free' generation. Some responses were very personal, which demonstrates that a teaching and learning initiative of this nature is able to link students emotionally to the curriculum content which can arguably benefit their learning experience. Table 3 includes relevant excerpts from the student data in support of these findings.

Table 3: The ‘born-free’ experience of attending *Boesman and Lena*

LEVEL OF STUDY	PARTICIPANT	RESPONSE
First	Student 5	The play shows the state some parts of South Africa is in. It shows that not much has changed... women a[re] still abused and you never hear about it.
First	Student 10	I have seen situations that is repeated like this due to skin colour and substance [abuse] of a friends’ parents.
First	Student 8	The play supported the story that my mother and grandmother told me about apartheid. My elders told me how they were treated because of their race. The play showed that perfectly.
First	Student 12	Growing up I stayed in a community that was plagued with drugs and alcohol. I could identify with how people could use their last penny for alcohol.
Third	Student 25	Personally: didn’t [personally experience a personal connection]. Emotionally yes. The play was very moving.
Third	Student 26	The characters related to people of our country, that’s why it is more relatable.
Third	Student 27	This has never been my reality. But I do not dispute what the majority of South Africans faced during those tough oppressive times. These issues are still happening in South Africa... I can connect and empathise with the people in this situation.
Third	Student 29	It made me understand better how... apartheid affected...people we don’t read about. My great grandparents found themselves homeless a number of times and ended up seeking refuge in Sophiatown.
Third	Student 31	Most of my great aunts worked for wine farms just outside Wellington and they were still being paid with alcohol.

Overall, it would appear that students felt that the content of the play was relevant to the current situation in South Africa. The notion of ‘born-free’ students identifying with an apartheid-era play could be viewed as concerning, because it would be hoped that South African youth would not have first-hand experience of issues that people of colour experienced in the height of apartheid.

Conclusion

The findings in this paper shed light on the benefits of incorporating South African literature, history and performance art into the fashion design curriculum. It emphasises the need to adjust the curriculum to include content that students can relate to, not only because the teaching and learning initiative enabled a more in-depth understanding of the curriculum content but also because it creates an opportunity for lecturers to positively engage with students.

Incorporating UJ Arts & Culture’s *Boesman and Lena* into the fashion design curriculum is one way in which the authors began to address the gap regarding South African fashion design literature and apply understanding of research design and methodology in relevant and local contexts. Notably, this teaching and learning strategy allowed the authors to begin the process of decolonising the fashion design curriculum, predominately taken from a

Westernised slant, by including South African history and relevant content. The outcomes from this teaching and learning initiative as well as the student responses demonstrate that decolonising the fashion design curriculum allows students to deeply engage with their education with positive impact on how they approach their design tasks.

In addition to highlighting the constructive effects that decolonisation has on student learning, this teaching and learning initiative sheds light on current student issues, such as gender violence and substance abuse. These kinds of issues could also be considered as topics to restructure the fashion design curriculum for continuous meaningful and relevant engagement for students.

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