





Made in Italy? Images and Narratives of Afro-Italian Fashion

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Abstract. In recent years, several studies have attempted to trace the evolution of the fashion system in a globalised context and pluralized societies. This paper follows in the footsteps of similar research, focusing in particular on Afro-Italian fashion, i.e. on garments created by designers of African descent who have chosen Made in Italy - its rules, structures and conventions - as a tangible and symbolic place to give form to their creativity.

Through qualitative research, the paper discusses the storytelling of Afro-Italian fashion within the Made in Italy imaginary; it focuses on communication practices put in place by the actors involved and by the networks they activate. Specific interest is dedicated to self-defining strategies in terms of values and images proposed as narratives that are both authentic and not other-directed.

In doing so, the study highlights how Afro-descendant creatives promote a new model of Italian-ness, and critically nurture a new Made in Italy by being relevant social and economic actors within and beyond the African diaspora on the national territory.

Keywords: Fashion · Afro-Italian fashion · Made in Italy · Communication practices · Authentic narratives

1 Introduction: Afro-Italian Fashion as an Object of Communication

Italy hosts approximately 1 million people of African descent; a complex diaspora that comprises recent economic-motivated arrivals, asylum seekers and refugees but also a significant number of permanent residents, citizens and so-called “second generations” struggling to leave behind the “immigrant” label and fully be recognized as part of the Italian society¹. All in a historical period that has seen a surge of xenophobia, discriminatory practices, and racist attitudes – sometimes ending in unspeakable violence - directed towards BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of colour) individuals in general, and Blacks in particular.

¹ According to ISTAT census data on resident African citizens, added to Afro-descendants who have acquired Italian citizenship and ISMU estimates of irregular migrants in the territory, the African diaspora in Italy numbered around 1.5 million people in 2019[1, 2].

Since the early 2000s, the fashion and beauty industry has helped to promote - at least aesthetically - the concept of diversity: themes such as inclusivity, body positivity, and self-acceptance have inevitably also passed through the category 'skin colour', one of the many discriminations that have defined the image-related industries for years. Today, around 47% of all fashion show castings are made up of black models [3]. In February 2020, Vogue Italia featured a cover that portrayed the young Maty Fall Diba, an Italian model of Senegalese origin, in a white dress, holding the words 'Italy' in her hands, and the words Italian beauty. Needless to say, there was no lack of controversy over the representation of an Afro-descendant girl as an emblem of true Italian beauty [4]. Decisions that lead to statements like this are important: they contribute to unhinging obsolete and yet still problematic assumptions and imagery, but they are not enough.

The presence of black female bodies in fashion scenarios, from the catwalks to the pages of magazines, is a practice, moreover, far from uncritical; a heated and impassioned debate that often highlights problems related to the stereotypical and sexualised representation of black bodies, attempts to camouflage overt ethnic markers, and problems related to the narrative of aesthetic standards of beauty [5].

Then there is another risk, more submerged and less openly overt, which is that of not talking about and not representing Blackness because of the eternal fear of doing so, as White people, inevitably harbouring a colonial or post-colonial legacy and attitude². The unspoken risk is to perceive and communicate cultures as sealed boxes with a label indicating the rightful owner. This denies that cultures are mobile and influence each other in time and space [6].

Our work embraces this perspective: by tracing the history of the We are made in Italy - WAMI Collective, through the voices of the protagonists, their personal histories and their individual accounts of collections and creations, we will show the process of negotiating tangible and intangible meanings in Italian Afro-descendant fashion. The aim is twofold: a) showing how the crafting and communicative practices implemented by Afro-descendant creatives and designers critically nurture a manifold concept of Made in Italy; b) revealing the cultural and symbolic dimensions - the heritage - of this specific field.

In an industry as complex as the fashion one, perpetually balancing its material and immaterial natures [7], heritage refers indubitably to a specific know-how, a technical and artisanal expertise as well as a more subtle *savoir-faire* [8]; at the same time, however, it recalls intangible values, narratives, and stories. Thereby, fashion is something both inherently communicative and much communicated about, and creatives display a large amount of reflexivity into self-portrayal through their creative outputs. Therefore, the communication practices enacted by both the designers and the Collective play a crucial role in establishing the boundaries of self-narrative, with the aim of presenting themselves and their work as 100% Made in Italy; a total percentage that does not erase, neither refuse, the African roots and identity they carry within, but that, at the contrary, presents the country and the Italian fashion system with the question of what is 'Made in Italy' in 2023.

² We discuss both Blackness and Whiteness, as Italianess, as socially constructed concepts, bearing socio-political and cultural meanings that go far beyond bare skin colour or official nationality.

2 African Heritage in Made in Italy: Practices and Narratives

Having or not having a national fashion upon which to rely seems to matter more and more in a globalized world. Some authors pointed out this because of production being increasingly transnational: in other words, they questioned the ability of productions made in geographical and cultural contexts far away from Italy to continue to incorporate the distinctive features of Made in Italy creations [9].

Nevertheless, the search for a distinctive Italian fashion identity is relevant even when production remains geographically in Italy because of the re-negotiation of meaning and practices that cultural encounters activates; and it is precisely this topic this essay seeks to highlight: moving beyond the macro-economic effects, we investigate how the afro descendant diaspora visible in the Italian fashion system is transforming the way we ideate, create and narrate Italian fashion through discursive formulations and creative practices.

To achieve this, it is essential to clarify on the one hand the social construction nature of the Made in Italy and, on the other, to identify its core values. Made in Italy cannot be understood if separated from its origins in Italian culture. As a national label, Made in Italy with regard to fashion was launched in the post-war years but took hold on the national and international consciousness with the triumph of Milan and prêt-à-porter in the late 1970s and 1980s [10]. Its roots are to be found in the in Italian art, literature and culture, creativity, and craftsmanship[11]: recalling what Perrino and Kohler, argue on their study on the narratives about and around Made in Italy the recurrent ideology surrounding the concept describes it as “what gives a product the “authentic” taste of being planned, manufactured, and even packed in a country with a longstanding artistic tradition” [12-16].

In such a context, the power of “Made in Italy,” is connected to the ability to translate Italian culture into different forms [17]. When it comes to Italian fashion, the ability of garments to narrate knowledges, tastes and techniques is particularly evident. Over the last fifty years, Italian fashion has experienced an ascending parable; such a success depends, of course, on the great stylists whose names gleam in the windows of the world’s most prestigious capitals (from Armani to Versace, from Dolce & Gabbana to Gucci, from Prada to Pucci, from Valentino to Salvatore Ferragamo), but also on the extraordinary quality, creativity, and competitiveness of all those involved in this supply chain: craftsmen, artisans, designers and embroiderers, patternmakers, and tailors all help to define its excellence from the outset [18].

The added value of Italian fashion, i.e. the prestige of high quality and excellence à la carte, is precisely the atelier culture that still ennobles the whole sector; even the largest companies, with thousands of employees and branches all over the world, still carefully guard their artisan core, aware that know-how, style and formal and material perfection are preserved in specific manufacturing techniques that still are pivotal for the success of Made in Italy. In fact, Italian fashion is not only an industry, but also a culture. More precisely it can be said to be a capital-intensive culture, that is, with a high use of cultural capital [19].

It might be clearer at this point that the label Made in Italy paradoxically engenders two opposing - but co-existing - narratives: an historical and fixed narrative of Italian

identity rooted in the artistic past; and a mutable one that tends to embrace a multiple number of identities, places and actors in their efforts toward global challenges.

In this article, referring to the WAMI collective and their current practices we explore this second narrative: all the designers that belong to this network have chosen Made in Italy - its rules, structures and conventions - as a tangible and symbolic place to give form to their creativity and thus use the tangible and intangible knowledge – heritage - as a raw material within the production process and consider it as a productive investment. Studying in Italy, doing internships in the Made in Italy sector, having mentors who are well established in the Italian market are all choices perceived as strategic precisely because these choices allow direct contact with the specificity of Italian production, that prêt-à-porter universally known for its mix of elegance and practicality.

Thus, when we refer to the WAMI Collective we are basically observing how the individual and collective identity of its creatives and designers is shaped and consolidated through discourses, past and present, in which Made in Italy is explicitly recalled. The creatives we interviewed told us stories not only about their brands, but also about their own biographies: they recalled families, friends, and networks and, at the same time, evoked historical and traditional backgrounds, geographical provenance, and recent location. In this way, on the one hand, we can observe how they reconstruct and give meaning to their personal biographies, and on the other hand, through these narratives, we can understand to which of the publicly circulating discourses of Made in Italy they turn to justify their belonging. In this sense, recalling Perrino and Kohler [20], narratives were studied as performances embedded in their sociocultural context, rather than as isolated, decontextualized texts [12].

3 Afro-Italian Fashion: A Methodological Approach

This work was born with the hope of being an Italian contribution the trend that fashion studies is acquiring of inserting itself into the debate concerning socio-cultural and, why not, political dynamics. It might indeed shed some light on some of the socio-cultural dimensions that characterise Italian fashion today and can dialogue with a broader international perspective. In this light, storytelling practices are thus understood as complex hermeneutical tools: life stories of creatives and designers becomes a biographic-narrative method they use to reconstruct, retell, and build new meanings and discourses while making sense of past experiences, present conditions, and future projects [21].

Throughout 2020 and 2021, an extensive fieldwork was carried out on the Italian territory, aimed at mapping and studying the presence and dynamics of Afro-Italian fashion, a phenomenon that was starting to attract academic interest, but was severely underexplored. The methodology used is qualitative; it includes textual analysis, a netnography that made it possible to map about 50 different realities, and interviews.

Being the research grounded, over time it became possible to identify actors belonging to three different categories: Afro-descendant designers, Italian designers with a strong Afro connotation, and members of social tailoring workshops that promoted educational and working projects through sartorial craft for individuals with a migratory background. Out of the 50 realities mapped, more than 25 were selected to recruit respondents for in-depth interviews. For the purposes of this paper, we used a specific

subgroup of the above-mentioned data: mapping, interviews, and ethnographic observations pertaining to the dimension of strictly Afro-descendant creatives, that is designers of African descent who have chosen Made in Italy as a tangible and symbolic place to give form to their creativity. A total amount of 15 interviews constituted the main research corpus for the present research.

Access to the field was not easy, especially in regard to emerging and established designers, and it was largely helped by the opportunity to interact with a key respondent, Ms Michelle Ngonmo, founder and president of the Afro Fashion Association. Thanks to her and some of the designers in her network, it was possible to reconstruct the experience of the WAMI Collective from the words of its protagonists.

The case of the WAMI Collective, which we will address in the next section, helps us to understand operationally, with a fascinating case study, the complexity of a cultural object deeply embedded with meanings. To do so, a particularly relevant analytical tool is the Circuit of Culture [22], developed by scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1960s. Looking not only at the theoretical contribution but also at the life trajectory of Stuart Hall in particular, we can see how the Circuit can be a powerful tool to bring out the approach and contribution of exponents of different perspectives, including in terms of heritage.

In the Circuit, Hall found a hermeneutic tool capable of bringing out all the symbolic values associated with a given product of material culture. Observing the society of the United Kingdom of his time, he certainly saw how the cultural contribution of the ethnic matrix to the concept of Britishness was an inescapable element; the fact that, decades later, in a different part of the world, we too use his lens - to quote Bourdieu - to observe our investigated phenomenon is of value not only for the tool itself but, even more so, for the similarity of context that can be drawn from it.

The WAMI case, therefore, provides an opportunity to look critically at the whole concept of the Made in Italy heritage from the perspective of multicultural Italy. The cultural composition of the country has been slowly changing since the last decades of the 20th century; however, the Black Italian presence has become a significant game-changer in the emergence of cultural diversity only more recently had it newly appeared on the fashion scenario. A study in this sense is interesting because, in today's global context, all cultures "come into play, interfere, mix, and become decontextualized and made spectacular [...] [23]". We see this tendency in various fields, from food to music and, of course, within fashion. The latter - in particular the succession of styles, techniques, shapes and colours - becomes, through the work of designers, creatives, pattern-makers - who nurture creativity throughout the supply chain - a container of multiple and plural identities.

4 The WAMI Experience: The Game Changers

The Afro-descendant designers featured in this work emerge as actively engaged actors, and their choice to place themselves on the Italian scene is neither accidental, automatic, or inevitable. Africa, in all its complexity as a vast and internally highly differentiated continent, presents both a rich and stimulating cultural and productive environment as well as an active, growing, global market, including the production and consumption

of material cultural products. Therefore, it is crucial to remember that the designers are not only physically located in Italy as far as their lives and production are concerned but have also made the choice to operate within the Italian fashion system, to play by its rules and to address its audience. In the frank and extremely to-the-point words of Gzifa:

“I am African, and I took a plane all the way to Italy to study the Italian style; if I wanted to study the African style I would have stayed in Cameroun.”

This crucial agency risks going unnoticed without an active effort to decolonise the perspective with which the Western world looks at both African fashion products and African fashion knowledge; only acknowledging that a suitable comparable scenario is available within the African continent the impact of the African diaspora in Europe and Italy can be understood.

In this context, and while world-changing events, including a pandemic, were shaking the globe, a small revolution took place on the catwalks of Milan. It was September 2020 and, for the first time since its establishment in 1958, the Milan Fashion Week was opened by five designers of African origins. Fabiola Manirakiza, Gisèle Claudia Ntsama, Joy Meribe, Karim Daoudi and Pape Mocodou Fall thus made history. Such a statement might seem excessive. However, the fashion system in Italy is a cautious and conservative environment that represents not only an industry that generates a turnover of more than 70 billion euros each year, but that is also the poster sector of the so-called Made in Italy, pride of the nation and symbol of excellence and Italianess itself at home and abroad, as briefly stated in the previous pages.

The memorable achievement has quite obviously not been reached out of the blue. In the summer of 2016, two friends, Italian-Cameroonian Michelle and Italian-Ghanaian Ruth, gathered a group of industry insiders in Milan to present the newly born Afro Fashion Association and to launch a bold initiative planned for the following year: an Afro Fashion Week in the fashion capital [24].

Camilla Hawthorne, who was present in that occasion, recounts: *“In Ruth’s introductory remarks, she rejected the idea of an undifferentiated Blackness, one characterized in the popular Italian geographical imagination by poverty, abjection, passivity, and non-productivity. The alternative imaginary invoked by the AFRO Fashion Association that day was characterized by a colourful and happy hybridity that, as a collateral benefit, could also awaken a moribund Italian economy from its slumber. Instead of drowning refugees, Ruth conjured a continent full of brightly patterned fabrics and rich creative traditions – a continent whose European-raised children could marshal their spatially extended ‘Afropolitan’ [25] networks to revitalize the storied tradition of ‘Made in Italy’”* [26].

In a 2021 interview Michelle declared herself quite happy of the achievements of the Association:

“In 2017, the first Afro Fashion Week was presented [...] and, little by little, we went from the first edition where there were 20 of us, including the models, to an edition where there are 400 of us, with a backstage with 100 people working, so we’ve come a little way...”

She soon realised she wanted to set the AFW in a style as similar as possible to the official Italian one, certainly not in subservience, but to make the players understand that they spoke the same language, that they were on the same level. The idea was to first be accepted as full members of the field - to use the Bourdosian metaphor - before starting to try to change the rules of the game. On the same note, the AFW took place every year from 2017 to 2022 in the same exact dates as the official Milan Fashion Week, the decision moved by the understanding that all the professionals of the sector flocked to Milan in those few days and that therefore that week was the best time to get noticed.

After years of perseverance, 2020 was the year when things started changing. The Western world had seen an increase in discrimination and violence against people of colour, and the movement known as 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) had ended up into the global spotlight. Although not without its critics, the movement had resonance in Italy as well and led to a specific, provocative, question: "Do black lives matter in Italian fashion?". The question was asked by designer Stella Jean (to date the only black member of the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italiana - CNMI) in response to several personalities within the Italian fashion system expressing sympathy and solidarity towards the victims of racism. United by the same desire to make the Italian fashion world more inclusive and to support Afro-descendant designers based in Italy, Michelle and Stella joined forces, also recruiting Edward Buchanan, creative director of Sansovino6, and created a collective that goes by the name of 'WAMI – We are Made in Italy'.

The "Fab Five Bridge Builders" project thus saw the light of day and the above-mentioned first 5 designers, whom Michelle defined as "the game changers" debuted on the – digital - catwalks of the Milan Fashion Week. One later, at Fashion Week in September 2021, Joy Meribe presented her collection in a 30-piece fashion show, with the audience finally in attendance. In the dark room that hosted the show, bold white letters on a black backdrop announced: 'Joy Meribe - Made in Italy'. The importance of it becomes clear when recalling Joy's own words regarding the choice of name for her brand:

"... When Edward Buchanan and Stella Jean first suggested it to me, I said, 'Are you kidding?' It's the name I've had since I was born, I don't even know what it sounds like, [...] and moreover Meribe is an Igbo name, Nigerian, I said 'Maybe they'll see that... They'll think that...' But in the end I thought 'Well, if these two giants say my name sounds good, who knows?' Stella told me: 'All the big designers, they all put their name in. ' [...] By using my name I felt like I was making myself too exposed, [...] I wanted to keep my private life separate from my work, but now that we are here... [...] I like it; seeing my clothes, seeing the labels with my name on them, the customised hangers... it's quite an impact, isn't it?"

It is certainly a turning point, in a certain sense the end of a process that allowed a designer of Nigerian origin to open the Italian fashion week, but also the beginning of a new challenge, that of not turning the event into a desert cathedral, a symbolic gesture made in a peculiar historical and cultural context, but really making it the beginning of an irreversible process. The signs seem to be positive, because the message of the Afro Fashion Association and the WAMI collective has been accepted and taken up by two key players: the CNMI and the Condé Nast group together with high-profile personalities

in the fashion world, top models and designers alike, including the late Virgil Abloh who designed a T-shirt for the occasion with his Off-White label, the proceeds of which would be donated to the Afro Fashion Association. Indeed, in September 2021, no less than Francesca Ragazzi (Head of Editorial Content for Vogue Italia), Edward Enninful (Editor-in-Chief for British Vogue) and Anna Wintour (Global Chief Content Officer for Condé Nast) visited the backstage of Afro Fashion Week accompanied by Naomi Campbell, while Bianca Balti walked for Karim Daoudi.

For the 2021 edition, the choice of the five talents promoted within the 'Fab Five - Bridge Builders' project was as interesting as it was significant. The group consisted of five young women, with origins in five different countries, three different continents, all grown up and based in Italy: Sheetal Shah, Nyny Ryke Goungou, Romy Calzado Celda, Zineb Hazim and Judith Saint Germain. The five were featured on a special digital cover of Vogue Italia and in a video presenting their capsule collection entitled 'Fab Five, We've always been here' written by Angolan-born author Antonio Dikele Distefano.

In September 2022, Stella Jean returned to the catwalks, two years after she announced that she would no longer take part in the Milan Fashion Week if she remained the only Black designer on the calendar. With her, the third generation of Fab Five: Phan Dan Hoang, Made for a Woman, Fatra, Runway Reinvented and Villain, brands from the most diverse backgrounds, evidence of the diversity so much advocated by the collective.

The fact that as we write these lines, in February 2023, there are ongoing disagreements between the CNMI and some of the members of the WAMI Collective, of which Stella Jean has once again become the main spokesperson, shows that the subject is certainly still hot and not without its exposed points. The Made in Italy imaginary is, for Italian fashion, still strongly linked to Milan Fashion Week, which in this case was the core around which the issues were raised. We do not want to minimise the episode; nor do we want it to cast more media shadow than it should on the steps that have been taken on the imagery that has effectively been released, and on the resonance that WAMI's experience may have in an international context, where support has not been lacking.

In this direction it is interesting to show that the communication practices enacted by the designers and the WAMI Collective outlines, little by little, a new narrative plot for Made in Italy: in such a conceptual redefinition African roots and identity seems one of the plural current declinations of Italian-ness, and tangible and intangible knowledges of such creative practices seems to be the fuel for a new cultural heritage of Italian fashion.

5 Conclusions: Whose Heritage?

The importance of the WAMI Collective's success lies in the fact that crucial players in the Italian fashion system, who are not only strictly insiders, but also the public interested in the subject, have recognised and addressed through their narratives and practices the need for a paradigm shift within Made in Italy production.

Extensive and long-lasting literature shows us how exoticism, in fashion, has existed since the dawn of time; in Europe, that attitude that Said [27] would later go on to call Orientalism in 1978 can already be seen in the Middle Ages, in the courts of the lords, princes and dukes of the Peninsula, where the fabrics and dyes brought from the silk route were seen as eccentric, albeit sophisticated, symbols of wealth, status and power.

The same happened in later eras with the African continent, from animal prints, to bold prints in bright colours, to the use of beads and weaves.

Despite the phenomenon's long history, however, the concept of cultural appropriation only emerged in the 1990s, and it is since then that it has steadily started to grow in resonance and militant vigour. The basic assumption that often underlies the discussion is that there are 'insiders' and 'outsiders', members and non-members of a given culture who are clearly recognisable and therefore clearly entitled or non-entitled to use and express it [28].

If, however, we accept the principle that cultures – and thus meanings, values, rules and conventions- are not fixed and unchanging, but constantly evolving - including through contamination with the outside world - the issue of fashion heritage becomes more complicated; this is evident in several interviews collected and analysed in this contribution. Unequal power relations are the key to address it and its relationship with appropriation, and it is in this light that the issue is addressed in this work: focusing on differential access to resources and media attention, it becomes impossible to justify cultural appropriation in the name of creativity and freedom of expression, as it is sometimes done, defending practices of appropriation under the label of appreciation and recognition of the beauty and value of diversity. However, the power relations at work should not be decided a priori on the basis of categories identified, once again, in a unilateral way, but it is necessary for these to emerge from the field, through empirical research [29].

Young describes three types of cultural appropriation: a) Subject appropriation when the culture or life of a population is represented; b) Content appropriation when products, elements or styles belonging to a culture are used; c) Object appropriation when tangible objects come into the possession of someone belonging to a culture other than the one who produced them. Although fashion is arguably a creative industry, and not an art form, the comparison is interesting because all three types of appropriation listed above can easily be traced in fashion creations. Let us think of a fashion show that has as its narrative framework life in tribal Africa (subject appropriation) brings to the catwalks garments inspired by traditional costumes or made by copying typical textiles (content appropriation) and perhaps is accompanied by scenic elements, or jewellery, or accessories, from Africa (object appropriation).

If in the past drawing inspiration from faraway cultures was less problematized, nowadays the critique is focused not so much on inspiration – fashion being, after all, a creative industry – whereas on the lack of recognition attributed to local artisans and craftspeople and the exclusion of the represented cultures from the narration surrounding the creations themselves. Therefore, without in any way denying the dangerous and potentially harmful consequences of cultural appropriation, we nevertheless want to emphasise how crucial it is to overcome a dichotomous approach of 'mine' versus 'yours'. It is necessary to be aware of how much heritage and how much cultural transmission there is in fashion, and to work on two fronts: on the one hand, certainly, to implement dialogue and responsible and accurate communication of the creative process, and on the other hand, as the case illustrated in these pages has shown, to increase within the fashion system the spaces and opportunities to represent a narrative that is not

exclusively dominated by the gatekeepers that have too long been associated exclusively with the concept of Whiteness.

In such a context, the discourses of WAMI designers and creatives are key sites for observing the dialectical process of the social construction of Afro-Italian fashion because they reveal not only how individuals construct their social world through their actions, but also how their individual and collective identities reflect their ability to appropriate this objectified social reality.

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