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**Performing cultural identities and transnational 'imaginaries':
fashion and beauty practices as diasporic spaces among young
London Congolese**

Morsiani, B.

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**Performing cultural identities and transnational ‘imaginaries’:
fashion and beauty practices as diasporic spaces among young London
Congolese**

by

Benedetta Morsiani

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
University of Westminster’s requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2019

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines a range of transnational fashion and beauty practices as narrative spaces employed by young London Congolese to embody their individual and collective racial, ethnic and gender identities. It investigates how they re-think and narrate their cultural heritage through forms of body performances and how these are shaped by the multicultural context of London. The ways in which these cultural practices are received by the Congolese group as well as by members of different communities are also assessed. The study documents the production and consumption of body performances as a new archive of primary source material, scrutinizing the cultural and economic contribution that young Congolese make to the “super-diverse” (2007) matrix of the city, and considers in particular their status as a “minority within minority” (Pachi et al., 2010). In so doing, the research adds a new perspective to the existing knowledge on the Congolese diasporic presence in London as well as providing a framework for a comparative study of other diasporic groups.

“Multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus, 1995) is applied as the principal qualitative analytical approach to collect and examine data which emerged organically from the field. The notion of the performance of cultural identities in everyday life and of ritual experiences is combined with this approach as the secondary theoretical underpinning. In addition, a multidisciplinary framework is used specifically to inform the body performances selected as exemplary case studies. Conceptions of race, ethnicity, gender and transnationalism formulated by these multi-sited but localised “diaspora spaces” (Brah, 1996) are therefore analysed through a grounded and theoretical approach.

The findings show that everyday experiences, cultural memories, storytelling and symbolism can be powerfully inscribed upon rituals of the body. Through fashion and beauty practices, young London Congolese actively fabricate their own narratives of migration and “traditional” forms of belonging to the homeland, while voicing

alternative messages which move beyond conservative values, beliefs and costumes of older generations of Congolese and Black Africans in the diaspora. The performance of cultural identities figures as multiple, shifting and contradictory in the ways it both encapsulates the notion of “authenticity” and the display of global ways of being developed in multicultural London settings. This study, therefore, argues that fashion and beauty expressions of young London Congolese generate multi-layered meanings, not only resulting in the aesthetic, socio-cultural and symbolic representation of diasporic identity expressions and life histories, but also as valuable political and economic sites of agency, transformation, commodification and subversion.

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General Introduction

Performing cultural identities through fashion and beauty practices: A new look at the young Congolese presence in London

Cultural practices provide ways for people to articulate and interpret meaningful worlds in which to live. Body expressions are part of these practices, a symbolic product allowing individuals to display narratives of cultural identities and to convey socio-cultural distinction and membership of a specific group (Kawamura, 2004, Saucier, 2011). Accordingly, this doctoral research explores various forms of fashion and beauty performances as major narrative spaces employed by young London Congolese to embody their racial, ethnic, gender and transnational identities. It addresses multiple aims in examining the significant sphere of entanglement between identity construction, cultural and aesthetic rituals of the body, politics and economics.

Firstly, the study seeks to identify young cultural practitioners within the Congolese community in London who produce fashion and beauty expressions. Secondly, it aims to trace the Congolese heritage represented through these fashion and beauty practices in order to evaluate the ways in which young London Congolese's cultural identities have been shaped and performed. Thirdly, the thesis seeks to investigate how young London Congolese present their fashion and beauty practices, both on-land and on-line (Huc-Hepher, 2017), and how these function for producers, questioning what types of physical places they employ to perform in and examining what kinds of related social and virtual spaces they produce. Fourthly, the study aims to discover who the consumers of Congolese bodily performances are and to investigate the general reception that fashion and beauty practices generates and how these function for consumers. The final major purpose of the thesis is to document the diasporic presence of Congolese youth in London and the cultural and economic contribution they make to the "super-diverse" matrix of this metropolis (Vertovec, 2007).

Bodily performances, which this thesis analyses as central “diaspora spaces” (Brah, 1996) among young London Congolese, often combine the idea of an imagined homeland as a mythical and original place and are seen in my work as forces in the creation of new contemporary identity configurations and places of belonging in everyday cultural life, rather than terrains of trauma, mourning and dislocation (Brah, 1996, Ramirez, 2015). My study intends to demonstrate how living “caught between two worlds”, in “third-spaces of hybridity” at times allow diasporic subjects to challenge cultural boundaries and to attempt to voice counter-narratives for themselves. While exploring and decoding postcolonial identities of Congolese heritage, I keep in mind Stuart Hall’s thinking on cultural identity, which goes beyond static notions of race, ethnicity and gender, but rather sees identity formation as a production that is “always in process”, and always constituted within, never outside, representations (Hall, 1990). Spatialised style practices become a technique of articulating place-identity since they connect the body with cultural values (Craik, 1994). Young Congolese in London are producing new diasporic social scenes and territories of belonging through ritual performances, which reflects a creative appropriation and re-formulation of aspects of the “receiving” multicultural society (Bhabha, 1994, Ramirez, 2015). The thesis, therefore, considers migratory spaces as constantly open to cultural transformation, especially in relation to surroundings (Knott, 2010, Alexander, 2010, Ramirez, 2015).

To understand the background against which this doctoral research is set, a brief reminder is necessary of how the landscape of the Democratic Republic of Congo has for a long time been characterised by a constant state of political, economic, social and moral crisis. According to Human Rights Watch, large-scale violence, corruption, poverty, human rights abuses, repression and massacres remain deeply ingrained within the country to the present day (Sawyer, 2018). This is deeply connected to the Belgian colonial occupation of the DRC to exploit its geopolitical value and, during postcolonial

time, to the acceleration of state failure and the succession of autocratic regimes, the outbreak of the First and Second Congo Wars (1996-7 and 1998-2003), the enduring corruption of political rulers, and presence of ethnic antagonism and of numerous extremist militias and, not least, the spread of deadly diseases including cholera and ebola. All of this has brought millions of deaths and victims, the deprivation of basic human rights, massacres, rapes, injuries, decapitations and imprisonments as well as exacerbating omnipresent poverty within Congolese society (Simpson-Fletcher, 2002, Dagne, 2011, Van Reybrouck, 2012, Schoumaker et al., 2013, Larmer et al., 2013, Burke, 2018b, Sawyer, 2018).

The Congolese situation has been defined by Human Rights Watch and scholars as among the most devastating and worsening on-going humanitarian crisis in today's world (Carayannis, 2003, Autesserre, 2011, Sawyer, 2018). Some indicate that: "the DRC remains an extremely insecure place, prone to outbreaks of conflict and where civilians are periodically subject to personal threat (...) The interaction of poverty, state collapse and war-related violence has created a complex of social dysfunction that has caused every aspect of social well-being to spiral downward" (Larmer et al., 2013, pp. 1-4).

Presently, the country continues to be one of the poorest in the world, wracked by social inequality, violence and disease, with two million children at risk of starvation. Aid agencies operating across the nation have estimated that more than four and a half million Congolese people are displaced (Burke, 2018b, Sawyer, 2018). At the time of finalising this thesis, the situation in the DRC has been on the front page of many international newspapers and it does not seem to be emerging from its troubled history. According to multiple sources, the official results of the December 2018 presidential elections, declaring Félix Tshisekedi as the newly elected DRC prime minister, had been proven to be fraudulent, with many pointing out various irregularities

during the process and the high risk of violent insurrections to come (Burke, 2018c, Burke, 2018a, Burke, 2019b, Burke, 2019c, de Freytas-Tamura, 2019, McKenzie et al., 2019, Wilson et al., 2019, Mo and Doss, 2019).

The highly problematic DRC social, political and economic situation has inevitably generated large-scale population displacement, mostly from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, with a huge segment of Congolese forced to expatriate (Dagne, 2011). The lives of most of the young participants in this thesis have also been shaped by the socio-political disorder and economic instability of their homeland since they had to settle in Europe with their families at a young age. One aspect that makes members of the Congolese group settled in the city of London an interesting spatial and socio-cultural diasporic formation to investigate is their status as “minority within minority” (Pachi et al., 2010). Compared to other places, such as Brussels or Paris where Congolese migration began much earlier for historical and linguistic reasons, and compared to other well-established Black African diasporas in London, individuals from the DRC only began to settle quite recently in the city, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s (Styan, 2003, International Organization For Migration, 2006, Garbin and Godin, 2013). They are now amongst the largest Francophone sub-Saharan groups in the city with a migrant trajectory disconnected from specifically British colonial history and imperial legacy.

Relatively limited anthropological, ethnographic, and sociological academic analysis exists on the Congolese in London, with these studies showing predominant concern for the refugee experiences of the older community, and partially the younger community, along with religious and health practices, and particularly with diasporic socio-political engagement (Nginamau Ngudiankama, 2001, Garbin, 2010, Garbin, 2012, Garbin and Vasquez, 2012, Garbin and Godin, 2013, Garbin, 2013, Garbin, 2014). For example, these studies often analyse the political mobilisations organised by

activists in central London, the use of social media and the politics of representation (Godin and Doná, 2016, Garbin and Millington, 2018). When exploring identity issues, concepts of “home” and “belonging” have mainly been applied, exploring life histories concerned with integration, exclusion, citizenship, racism and discrimination (Garbin and Pampu, 2009).

As a development of, and taking a different approach to, these earlier studies, this thesis focuses on various forms of transnational fashion and beauty practices, employed by young Congolese in London as a central means for individual and collective representation, and the production and consumption of material cultural forms. The performance of identity is explored in the realm of socio-cultural production and its aesthetic, political and economic nexus (Kondo, 1997). Scholars working on the Black African diaspora have emphasised the centrality of cultural performances in shaping and authenticating racial, ethnic and gender identitarian experiences. Non-Western bodily displays and everyday life fashion systems are part of these cultural formations able to convey codes of fluid self-hood, while also resulting as ambiguous sites where pleasure, protest and mainstream ideas are concurrently represented (Gilroy, 1993, Hall, 1993, Craik, 1994, Lewis, 2003, Tulloch, 2008, Tulloch, 2010, Saucier, 2011, Jules-Rosette, 2013, Tulloch, 2016). Carol Tulloch reminds us how the use of fashion style represents a recurring theme for Blacks in Britain and the African diaspora more generally. The love of fashion, and its related performative dimension, has historically functioned as a source of dignity, legitimacy and respectability in presenting a sense of self in public spaces as well as a straightforward mode of “showing off” in front of others. In Tulloch’s words: “the obsession with dressing well is almost part of the DNA in the Black community” (Lewis, 2016).

Interestingly, one of the informants included in this research echoed Tulloch’s observation in stating that: “Fashion, in a way, is in our genes!”. In fact, adorning the

body has long time been a celebrated aspect of daily cultural life in the DRC and its diasporic groups. Bodily performances have developed as fundamental signifiers since the era predating colonialism, offering insights into individuals' place within society and their proximity to power. It is not surprising, therefore, that dress and body practices remain an immensely important medium employed by Congolese to define and present themselves and make a statement to the world (Porter Sanchez, 2015). Rooted in this, my project aims to delineate the various roles played by young London Congolese socio-cultural actors and to frame the production and consumption of a diverse range of fashion and beauty practices as a new archive of primary source material. The interdisciplinary nature of this doctoral thesis allows me to examine how meanings have been generated through rituals of the body, understood as a social, cultural, political, economic and symbolic representation of young London Congolese identity expressions and life histories (Kawamura, 2004). Functioning as a bridge to previous studies on the London DRC diaspora, this thesis seeks to partially fill the research gap on aspects of everyday cultural life and therefore provides an innovative perspective on this minority group.

Significantly, in a different way from existing works exploring identity issues among London Congolese, this study is not intended to be a purely ethnographic work. Rather, it follows a “multi-sited ethnography” (Marcus, 1995) as the primary method to collect and analyse data from the field spanning over three years. I use traditional ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation and interviews, but go beyond a traditional single-sited ethnographic approach. I follow diverse “sites” of activities and observations from both localised and tangible outcomes, through the arrangement of in-depth interviews with informants, the discovery of actual physical places of various cultural events, the observation of their related social spaces and conversation with members of the audience. The primary source data collected from the field is combined

with undertaking desk research and further analysis. I pursue diasporic subjects' lives and biographies of some "key" young Congolese men and women informants who mainly first migrated to Belgium or France, or directly to London at a young age, and are currently settled in London. I follow their public performances and their use of material commodities, especially garments, as well as the performance of some of their creative productions such as poetry, dance choreographies, play monologues, the use of photographic works, etc. I also include the voices of other young individuals of diverse cultural backgrounds as consumers. I trace related personal narratives of everyday experiences, cultural memories, metaphoric symbolism and controversies embedded in these performances. Finally, I correlate these different diaspora sites using a combination of multiple secondary sources. Overall, the research applies a qualitative-interpretivist perspective, addressing narratives of migration, diasporic identity expressions and cultural memories, drawing from cultural, performance and performativity theories on identity in everyday life and ritual experiences as the secondary theoretical underpinning. Historical, migration, transnational, fashion and gender studies are used as additional lenses to inform and frame the research's case studies comprehensively. My multi-sited and grounded approach takes seriously the idea that diaspora spaces should be understood as "place-centred", "network-based", rather than "de-territorialised", in accordance to local configurations as well as transnational attachments (Ramirez, 2015). As argued by Angela McRobbie, studies that are geographically "local" have great value and political relevance inasmuch as they generate knowledge for the understanding of how things actually work in practice, and more generally, they allow us to see how social and global trends are translated or revised when they become grounded (McRobbie, 2003).

Finally, in addition to being strongly relevant to the young community, the focus on fashion practices is also driven by a very current international academic and social

debate on “true diversity” and the inclusivity of sub-groups within dominant fashion spheres. Scholars who have studied the topic agree that fashion, in one way or another, “makes the Black body visible”, representing “one cultural site in which Black people have taken it upon themselves to become more visible” (Byrd, 2016). Similarly to what Paul Gilroy writes about music in Black Atlantic culture, fashion is one of those cultural activities through which the body of the Black African is somehow “reclaimed from its status as a fetishized commodity” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 124). Accordingly, Van Dyke Lewis defines fashion practices of the Black African diaspora as a visible act of reclamation, a medium of self-expression and self-authorship to be dislocated from the culture of the mainstream as well as a medium to recover cultural identities that have been lost from the past. Fashioning the body has historically developed as an important political scheme, a tool of protest, to define both the local and the global performance of Black African identity (Lewis, 2003). Regarding the initial inclusion of Black African fashion productions in mainstream fashion, Lewis questions the durability of the process, pointing out how in terms of structure the fashion industry has for a long time been owned by and operated within standards dictated by dominant cultures (Winter, 2004). More recently, it has been stressed that there continue to be large gaps within both scholarship and mainstream discourses concerning the involvement and contribution of people with a Black African background in fashion fields (Nudell, 2017). Additionally, some point out the frequent negligence and misuse of “Blackness” in fashion spaces, for example through the reification of degrading stereotypes or dynamics of “cultural appropriation”. The notion of “Blackness”, understood as the constructed race of “being Black”, continues occasionally to situate Black individuals in a general position of silence and powerlessness (Byrd, 2015).

Bearing this in mind, it is also undeniable that some progress has been achieved in recent years in relation to racial diversity, especially through the constant critique

developed in digital spaces. We are witnessing the use of models from diverse backgrounds into the mainstream fashion business, with Black models introduced from the early 1970s, British Jamaican Naomi Campbell and American-Somali Iman being among the most established. In addition, there has been the gradual introduction of Black editors of fashion magazines, such as Edward Enninful as the first Black editor-in-chief of British *Vogue*, together with African designers and labels becoming recognised worldwide, including, to name a few, Nigerian Lisa Folawiyo, Nigerian-born London-based Duro Olowu, Ghanaian-based label *Christie Brown*, and Somali-American, New York-based fashion line *Mataano*. Regardless of improvements, the discourse concerning a real balance of diversity still needs to be pushed forward, demanding further progress on inclusivity and visibility of productions from minority groups in order to truly achieve equal forms of representation (Byrd, 2015, Byrd, 2016). As Carol Tulloch reminds us: “[The] issue of the invisibility of Black people has long been discussed in, for example, postcolonial studies. Despite their extensive range of activities in the public gaze that has snowballed over the centuries, the issue of invisibility remains a caustic point in need of address in the twenty-first century” (Tulloch, 2010, p. 281).

Hence, this thesis seeks to address, further stimulate, and explore the significant and contemporary conversation of racial diversity both within and outside the fashion and beauty industries, and in either staged or in more everyday settings. The framework of each chapter is intended to show how cultural performances of young London Congolese provide crucial and powerful insights into everyday life histories of diasporic subjects, reflecting on the role that these play at the intersection of dressing and representing the racialised and cross-cultural body. The body is defined by Terence Turner as a social canvas, “the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialisation is enacted” (Turner, 1980a, p. 12). Accordingly, this analysis demonstrates that body

practices can manifest the ways in which young London Congolese performers and observers perceive themselves and wish to be perceived in front of others as well as showing how the body inscribes forms of resistance and political intervention where hegemonies, inequalities and stereotypes can potentially be contested. Through the use of specific cultural signs, style narratives and images, the “fashioned” body of diasporic subjects involved in the thesis reveals an on-going projection of a sense of being Black and Blackness, therefore acknowledging a collective Black African diasporic cultural heritage (Tulloch, 2010). Simultaneously, the thesis also confirms how studying the spectacle of fashion can facilitate the understanding of “renewed” identity performances, exposing the performativity of racial, ethnic and gender components as contemporary cultural signifiers that can count as political and economic enactments (Kondo, 1997). In so doing, this work particularly informs conceptions of race, ethnicity, gender and transnationalism, inquiring how multiple spaces of body practices in the “global city” sometimes exceed the defined socio-cultural groups and racialised/ethnicised tropes while often embedding complex, at times hidden, and controversial cultural and political messages.

Thesis overview

The thesis is composed of this general introduction, six main chapters and a general conclusion. The first two chapters frame the research historically and methodologically. Chapter one introduces an examination of the complex colonial and postcolonial history of the DRC, from the fourteenth century up to the present day, as well as an up-to-date literature review of political and sociological studies on Congolese migration and settlement across Europe and on the Congolese community in London. The chapter aims to contextualise the research focus and pave the way for a deeper understanding of the current diasporic conditions of young Congolese in this global city. With the expression “diasporic condition” I refer to a double or multiple consciousness that

characterises diasporic individuals' identity formation and everyday life experiences. Indeed, even though the young Congolese included in this thesis do not have the refugee status of most of their parents, they have been indirectly forced to leave their place of origin and to directly experience a physical and psychological process of displacement and detachment. Consequently, young Congolese remain strongly attached to the symbols of their ethnicity and continue to feel strongly attached to an original, often imagined, motherland. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Vijay Agnew (2005), those sentiments are experienced together with active involvement and contribution to the socio-cultural and economic system of London. This diasporic condition has caused young Congolese in London to live in a permanent state of "in-betweenness", formed through multilocality, which does not necessarily imply suffering, as Mark Graham and Shahramit Khosravi (1997) remind us. On the contrary, being "in-between" often stimulates distinct vision and creativity within young Congolese.

The second chapter of the thesis focuses on the theoretical underpinning and fieldwork methods that lie at the basis of the whole research project. The chapter begins with introducing the main qualitative research methodologies and methods, based on a qualitative-interpretivist perspective that is defined by George Marcus (1995) as "multi-sited ethnography", which is applied to critically analyse the primary research data collected during the fieldwork. As mentioned previously, multi-sited ethnography continues to employ traditional ethnographic techniques, such as participant observation and interviews, yet moves on from a traditional single-sited ethnographic approach to instead follow diverse "sites" of activities and observation, correlating them by using a combination of multiple sources. Subsequently, the chapter continues with presenting a literature review on performance and performative studies, discussing theories on identity performance and the interpretation of racial, ethnic and gender identity construction. A more general overview concerning the significance of the human body

as a socio-cultural construct and the specificity of the “superdiverse” context of London is also discussed. These are the overall ideas that inform the thesis on a secondary theoretical level. With multi-sited ethnography as a central approach, and theories on performance of identity as a secondary theoretical underpinning, the thesis additionally deploys an interdisciplinary perspective, as noted earlier in this introduction, to inform the theory that underpins each specific case study.

The following four chapters present selected cases of investigation, which mainly came to light empirically from the fieldwork and could stand independently, since I used theoretical concepts outlined in the previous paragraph to investigate each one of them while grounding the discussion with concrete examples from the data collected in the field. Ultimately, the thesis altogether seeks to offer expanding contexts of significance on the role played by fashion and beauty practices in young Congolese everyday life, cultural experiences and performance of identity in London.

Chapter three focuses on the fashion and lifestyle Congolese subculture of *la sape*. It forms the first case study of my thesis since it is concerned with a well-established trend in Congolese diasporic culture and is a better-known topic compared to the following, more grounded, case studies analysed. It, therefore, aims to function as an historical and theoretical contextual bridge with the rest of the thesis. The chapter firstly examines the historical and contemporary development of the movement in the Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa and its two main European centres of Brussels and Paris. It then mainly focuses on tracing and analysing the state of *la sape* within the London Congolese community. The chapter highlights the contradictory viewpoints and generational polarity regarding the fashion and lifestyle subculture among British Congolese and concludes by arguing that London’s complex urban landscape is gradually leading to a decline of the trend among youth.

Chapter four presents the second case study of my research project. It focuses on the cultural and commercial production of a London-based Congolese fashion brand, *Kiyana Wraps*, which specialises in hand-stitched turban hats and ready-made headwrap models. The chapter shows how young Congolese women “re-formulate” the traditional African head garment to trace an “authentic” Congolese story and to evoke a sense of Africanness/Blackness. The story is embedded in collective memories, often affected by an idealised idea of the DRC and the African motherland. The headwrap has become a symbolic marker employed to construct and perform racial and ethnic identities. However, the chapter also demonstrates how young Congolese women are directly inspired by the London environment in producing their garments. The fashion brand creatively blends ethnic tastes with several stylistic inputs coming from a network of consumers with heterogeneous cultural backgrounds. In so doing, young Congolese women simultaneously transcend the binary of the “imagined” transnational attachments and challenge strictly defined racial and ethnic boundaries. Through the headwrap ritual, therefore, gender configurations are also expressed, intertwining “feminist” values and “feminine” styles.

Chapter five analyses the third case study of my thesis. It focuses on the cultural and aesthetic ritual performance of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, which takes place every year among the young Congolese community in London. The chapter aims to examine the dynamic socio-cultural, aesthetic, and political scenarios that the performance spectacle of the diasporic beauty pageant encapsulates and reveals. The analysis addresses the ways in which the event represents, on the one hand, a contemporary diasporic form of individual and collective cultural representation and embodiment through which Congolese values and norms are actively re-produced and mediated. On the other hand, the event represents a fashion mode of performance currently used by the young London Congolese to openly debate, contest, and engage

with everyday concerns affecting their own community, and more broadly, Black/African diasporas. In so doing, the chapter firstly investigates the development of the pageant training process, which involved young Congolese female contestants and organisers, and took place during the months preceding the competition's final show. Secondly, it examines some of the aspects of the ritual performance incorporated in the beauty pageant's final night show. The case study explains how young Congolese individuals use this ritual performance to record "authentic" cultural traditions and manifest a transnational and "imaginary" attachment to the original homeland in the context of postcolonial displacement. However, at the same time, the pageant's arena mainly serves to disturb conservative beliefs perpetuated by African elders, tackling and advancing controversial disputes regarding Congolese (and other Africans) women's rights, gender equality and socio-cultural stigmas. Additionally, the pageant deploys Afro-diasporic alternatives to Euro-Western beauty and body standards, disseminating notions of Black beauty and the "natural" body, and potentially becoming a tool to overcome Western systems of cultural representation. Therefore, the *Miss Congo UK* becomes a meaningful, at times contradictory, site through which "new" racial, ethnic and gender identities are embodied and the configuration of a forward-thinking mentality characterising the younger Congolese community in London is displayed.

Chapter six presents the fourth and final case study of my research, investigating the evolution of *Congo Fashion Week* (CFW) as an international fashion event, held every year in the DRC since 2012. A detailed examination of the *Congo Fashion Week London* (CFL) pre-show, an introductory fashion evening organised by and for different cultural actors and held for the first time in London in September 2017, is presented as an exemplary site of observation of the CFW team's cultural production. The case study incorporates an analysis that includes two major issues of investigation. The first central issue, which can be defined as a "double-bind", concerns the various

ways through which Congolese fashion event organisers and designers and other African fashion designers need to act within the contemporary fashion industry. This involves a multifaceted, often contradictory, positionality between ways of dealing with the “Western gaze”, the reproduction of cultural “authenticity” and the contestation of the limiting discourses of Western exoticism. On the one hand, Congolese fashion show organisers, designers and other performers are inevitably influenced by Western and non-Western power relations and structures through which the global fashion industry, historically developed in and currently dominated by the West, operates. On the other hand, they simultaneously retrieve, embody and perform an “original” cultural identity, emphasising and longing to express an “authentic” African narrative as well as resisting or trying to subvert stereotypical boundaries dictated by the West in association with African fashion styles through processes of counter-exoticism. The second core issue concerns the simultaneous entanglement between the cultural/aesthetic, the commercial and the political aspects that characterise the *Congo Fashion Week*. This interconnection is firstly investigated through the illustration of the CFW’s collaboration with the *Congo Fashion Institute* project in the DRC, based on the idea of using fashion practices in Kinshasa to provide educational support and to influence employment opportunities among younger generations, especially by means of developing a local “fashion entrepreneurship”. Secondly, the interconnection is investigated through the political message behind the organisation of the CFWL, and its fundraising goal for women survivors of rape and any other kind of abuse, endorsed by the British-Congolese charity *Tamar Foundation*.

To conclude, the detailed analysis of each case study seeks to partially document the presence and contribution made by young Congolese to the metropolis from a cultural perspective. In decoding the production and consumption of multifaceted forms of fashion and beauty spaces and how these have the power to trace everyday life

experiences of diasporic subjects, the thesis aims to stimulate a basis for broader discourses on young London Congolese cultural representations and material culture as well as providing a framework for a comparative study of other diasporic communities.

Chapter One – Colonialism, postcolonialism, the Congolese diaspora in Europe and the Congolese community in London

1 Introduction

This chapter functions as an historical framework for a deeper understanding of young London Congolese migrant geographies, aiming to contextualise processes of displacement and feelings of “in-betweenness” experienced by young informants. It also aims to shed light on the reasons behind their forms of fashion and beauty practices in London which are inevitably entangled with a strong, “imaginary”, sense of belonging to the original home.

The first part of the chapter examines the complex colonial and postcolonial history of the DRC, from the fourteenth century up to the present day. The second part of the chapter presents an up-to-date literature review of historical, political and sociological studies on Congolese migration and settlement in Belgium and France and on the subsequent formation of the Congolese diaspora in the UK and London.

1.1 Colonialism and postcolonialism in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has the largest territory among the Francophone¹ sub-Saharan African nations, with a vast amount of natural resources and

¹ The term *Francophonie* (Francophonie) was introduced in 1880 by Onésime Reclus to bring together all the people around the world who used French as their first language (Gaden, 2013). After the African decolonization in the 1960s, a number of African leaders of former French colonies sought to formulate a political and economic co-operation with the Francophone world (Alexandre, 1969, External Affairs Canada, 1989). *La Francophonie* (the Francophonie) as political organization was introduced by the Tunisian President Bourguiba, in 1965, who suggested that all African French-speaking countries become associated in a French Commonwealth with common political institutions. The formula was then spread by Senegalese President Senghor to other African nations (Alexandre, 1969). From 1967, most of the former French colonies became part of the project, chaired by the French President who maintained a strong political lead on African affairs (Alexandre, 1969, Birmingham, 2008) In 1970, the political Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (International Organisation of La Francophonie) was created and the DRC became a member in 1977 (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, 2007, Provenzano, 2011, Véronique, 2012).

a very abundant and diverse² population (Manning, 1998). Especially due to its crucial geopolitical value, the DRC has been continuously characterised by a severe failure of the political, economic, social and moral spheres, with the Congolese population considered to be one of the poorest in the world (Gondola, 2002, Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). Prior to its colonisation, analysed later in this chapter, the territory saw the rise of diverse empires and kingdoms,³ with the Kingdom of Kongo among the most influential. Founded in 1390⁴ and existing until the nineteenth century, the Kingdom of Kongo's vast geographic included the current western territory of the DRC as well as Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon and northern Angola (Wolf, 1982, Thornton, 1982, Thomas, 1997, Hochschild, 1999, Nginamau Ngudiankama, 2001, Thornton, 2001, McGuinness, 2012). Its capital was a large town called Mbanza Kongo,⁵ governed by a monarch known by the title of Mani Kongo, elected by a congregation of chiefs (Wolf, 1982, Thomas, 1997, Hochschild, 1999). Until the sixteenth century, the Kingdom of Kongo prospered, with many more regions conquered and controlled by members of the royal family (Thornton, 1982, Thomas, 1997, Thornton, 2001).

In 1483, the Portuguese navigator Diogo Cão was the first European⁶ to discover the Kingdom of Kongo (Thornton, 1982, Thomas, 1997, Thornton, 2001, Johnston,

² Including more than two hundred ethnic groups and languages spoken within its borders (Nginamau Ngudiankama, 2001, Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, Gondola, 2002, International Organization For Migration, 2006).

³ John Iliffe provides a detailed history of the emergence of the first African communities and their development up to modern eras (Iliffe, 1995).

⁴ Between 1350 and 1375, the ruler of the state Mpemba Kasi, started to conquer various territories mostly along the southern area of the Congo River. In 1375, a political alliance was born with the neighbouring Mbata kingdom and a new state called Kongo was established in 1390 (Thornton, 1982, Thomas, 1997, Thornton, 2001).

⁵ Mbanza Kongo is today the Angolan capital of north-western Zaire province (Wolf, 1982, Thomas, 1997, Hochschild, 1999).

⁶ The Europeans started to discover the African continent in mid-fifteenth century (Morel, 1969, Konczacki and Konczacki, 1977, Wolf, 1982, Thornton, 1982, Thornton, 1998a, Iliffe, 1995, Thornton, 1999, Birmingham, 2008, Boyce Davies, 2008). Portugal figured as the first country to develop the slave trade along the Western African coast (Morel, 1969, Thornton, 1999, Boyce Davies, 2008). The Portuguese were then followed by Spanish and British traders around 1562, and by the Dutch from 1670 and French traders from 1640. Finally, the slave trade system was acquired by the Swedes, Danes and Prussians, during the eighteenth century. Africans from

2011) and he gradually developed an alliance with the Mani Kongo. A slave trade⁷ relationship was established: in exchange for goods and weapons, the Portuguese could receive slaves and ivory (Thornton, 1982, Wolf, 1982, Iliffe, 1995, Thomas, 1997, Heywood, 2009). Monarchs and many natives were also converted to Christianity (Thomas, 1997, Thornton, 1999). The Kingdom of Kongo started to decline from the mid-seventeenth century when the Portuguese, who wanted to monopolise the slave trade (Thornton, 1982, Wolf, 1982, Thornton, 1983, Iliffe, 1995), provoked deep instability, resulting in several civil wars⁸ and the final breakdown of the Kongo socio-political system (Broadhead, 1979, Wolf, 1982, Thornton, 1999). By the late nineteenth century, when European colonial powers established the division of African regions,⁹ the Bakongo people had no bargaining power due to the military and political weakness of their fragile confederation (Broadhead, 1979, Thornton, 1983).

The modern history of the DRC has been characterised by the complex colonial and postcolonial periods.¹⁰ The modern colonial era began in 1885, with the Belgian King Leopold II's total control of the Congolese territory until 1908, when the Belgian government took over until the 1960 (Nginamau Ngudiankama, 2001, Van Reybrouck, 2012). The Congolese postcolonial period started with the achievement of Independence

Western coasts and hinterland were forcibly exported to Europe, West Indies and across the Atlantic Ocean to the New Americas. Despite the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and the French abolition in 1848, the transport of millions of Africans continued until late-nineteenth century (Morel, 1969, Wolf, 1982, Thomas, 1997).

⁷ African countries before the arrival of Europeans were already characterised by different political systems and complex social and trade networks, with the slave trade already in place (Rodney, 1974, Iliffe, 1995).

⁸ The Battle of Mbvila in 1665 as the most important where the Portuguese defeated the Mani Kongo armies (Broadhead, 1979, Thornton, 1999).

⁹ The "Scramble for Africa" and the European colonisation of the continent was officialised at the Berlin Conference in 1884-5, between France, Britain, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain (Iliffe, 1995, Birmingham, 2008, Pakenham, 2015). Walter Rodney provides a study on the ways Europe kept Africa underdeveloped (Rodney, 1974).

¹⁰ It must be noted that the spelling of the term post-colonialism and postcolonialism indicates something different. The term post-colonialism with the hyphen is mostly used to indicate a specific *historical period or epoch*; while the single word postcolonialism denotes diverse forms of *representations, reading practices, attitudes and values* (McLeod, 2013). Therefore, I decided to use the term postcolonialism, without the hyphen, in order to guarantee a wider meaning of the term: not only as historical passage, but also as an ensemble of ideas and interpretations which are still evolving (McLeod, 2013).

on 30 June 1960 and the establishment of the first republic. From 1965 Joseph-Désiré Mobutu built a coercive dictatorship, lasting more than thirty years, until Laurent-Désiré Kabila's political takeover in 1997 (Nginamau Ngudiankama, 2001, Olsson and Fors, 2004, Van Reybrouck, 2012, Schoumaker et al., 2013). In 2001 the DRC presidency passed to his son, Joseph Kabila, who held onto power until 2018. In January 2019, Félix Tshisekedi was elected as the new DRC President.

1.1.1 King Leopold II (1884-1908) and Belgian domination (1908-1960)

The roots of the colonisation of the Congo can be found in the explorations of the Welsh journalist Henry Morton Stanley. Between 1879 and 1884, Stanley and his large team of specialists, already familiar with the Central African region, explored numerous unknown places along the Congo River, at the request of the Belgian King Leopold II,¹¹ founding the capital Léopoldville in 1881 (Blommaert, 1999, Ewans, 2002, Page and Sonnenburg, 2003, Mugnier, 2005, Gewald, 2006, Van Reybrouck, 2012). During the Berlin Conference in 1884-5, the new colony, under the name of the "Congo Free State", was unanimously recognised by several world powers as King Leopold II's private possession (Page and Sonnenburg, 2003, Mugnier, 2005, Hesselbein, 2007, Stanard, 2012, Van Reybrouck, 2012).

During the first phase of the King's hegemony, the Congo Free State was officially independent, neutral and an open-trade country (Stanard, 2012). All citizens, merchants, businessmen and religious figures from the West could enter the new state (Blommaert, 1999). The supreme determination of the King was, however, to expand Congo's borders with ambitions to exploit the entire territory for his own profit and this

¹¹ Long before ascending to the throne in 1865, the Belgian King searched for potential imperial conquests in all places he explored, for example, the British possessions and the Dutch East Indies (Hochschild, 1999). In 1876, he organised the Brussels geographical conference with different explorers, geographers, and philanthropists, with the objective of discussing the development of Central Africa and with the establishment of the African International Association as a result (Ewans, 2002, Page and Sonnenburg, 2003, Mugnier, 2005, Van Reybrouck, 2012).

soon created local disagreement with other European powers, also looking for profit (Stanard, 2012, Van Reybrouck, 2012). A coercive and belligerent policy, based on a severe and systematic scheme of exploitation, on the part of Leopold II emerged as a consequence (Stanard, 2012).¹² Most of the native population became prisoners, victims of physical abuse and murder (Vanthemsche, 2012).¹³

King Leopold's autocracy was stopped one year before his death, in 1908, when the Belgian government took control of the Congo Free State and transformed it into "the Belgian Congo" (Blommaert, 1999, Page and Sonnenburg, 2003, Hesselbein, 2007, Van Reybrouck, 2012). The transfer of power did not improve the Congolese situation, with a number of historians describing the Belgians as among the worst European colonisers in Africa (Butlin, 2009, Goddeeris, 2015). The colonial dominion remained centralised, with the Congo entirely administrated by Belgian legislative bodies directed from Brussels (Abernethy, 2000, Vanthemsche, 2012). Compared to the coercive approach of the King, the Belgian government used, strategically, a hybrid system of government: they applied both *indirect rule*, to preserve a distance between the Black slaves and the White masters, and *direct rule*, to guarantee an effective and profitable exploitation of the country (Zajackowski, 1984).¹⁴

From the 1920s, Belgians renovated all essential infrastructure and re-established a flexible system of trade and business activities. They also significantly expanded the mining and agricultural sectors, with the country becoming one of the main global producers and exporters of fundamental resources such as copper, cobalt,

¹² For instance, the domain system: any uncultivated fields and all raw materials were automatically transformed into state possessions. In so doing, the King openly betrayed the Berlin conference's agreement, where the Congo was proclaimed a free trade state (Ewans, 2002, Vanthemsche, 2012).

¹³ Despite the initial attempt of European newspapers to describe Leopold's actions as altruistic towards the Congolese people, the truth about his cruelty emerged soon mostly through the contributions of professional outsiders, who denounced the King's atrocities worldwide (Hochschild, 1999).

¹⁴ For example, in 1914, Belgians transformed the *impôts indigènes* (indigenous taxes) introduced by Leopold and normally paid in rubber, ivory and food, into a monetary tax (Frankema and Buelens, 2013).

industrial diamonds, uranium, gold and tin, as well as palm oil, cotton, coffee, etc. (Vanthemsche, 2012). In order to do so, the Belgians continued to adopt the slave labour practice. Native Congolese were still subjected to harsh oppression and had an extremely high mortality rate (Vanthemsche, 2012). The majority of men were forcibly relocated to work, mostly in the mines, while elders, women and children were left alone in the villages, with unstable reserves of food (Frankema and Buelens, 2013).¹⁵

Additionally, the rise of any association was forbidden, and cultural organisations were only allowed when participants belonged to the same ethnicity. It was only after the World War II that the colonised country saw the appearance of a group of educated Congolese, the *évolués* (educated).¹⁶ These were mainly educators, nurses and public servants who fought hard to be respected by Europeans and for respect for their fellow Africans, but could only obtain a few rights such the possibility to buy and possess land (Page and Sonnenburg, 2003, Frankema and Buelens, 2013). The power management and wealth allocation, however, continued to be intensely unbalanced between Europeans and Congolese (Frankema and Buelens, 2013). During the years preceding independence, the Belgian priority was to maintain individual and collective economic profits from the rich Congolese territory (Kent, 2010). The enormous burden of the colonial inheritance based on restrained rights, limited possibilities for education and violence, made the country ill-equipped, at the time of independence, for a democratic transformation (Frankema and Buelens, 2013).

¹⁵ During the 1940s, Congolese worker groups organised some unsuccessful revolts. Among them, a strike action in 1941 and an uprising at the Belgian biggest mining company *Union Minière du Haut-Katanga* (Mining Union of Upper Katanga) in 1944 (Hesselbein, 2007, Garbin and Pampu, 2009).

¹⁶ The legal status of *évolué*, established by the colonisers, defined the social superiority of some Congolese individuals mainly based on morality, Christianity and education (Demart, 2013).

1.1.2 The struggle for independence and the “Congo crisis” (1960-1965)

Following World War II and during the 1950s, the African continent experienced the fast growth of numerous anticolonial and national liberation groups which started to fight for their racial equality, individual emancipation, political freedom and social developments (Gondola, 2002, Clark, 2002, Birmingham, 2008). Many African colonies reached their political independence in the mid-1950s and the 1960s (Birmingham, 2008). In this context, the Belgian Congo saw the formation of the Congolese National Movement in 1958, led by Patrice Lumumba who strongly fought against colonial and neo-colonial domination. The political party was based on the contribution of *évolué* organisations and had democracy and independence as its main objective (Hodgkin, 1956, Page and Sonnenburg, 2003, Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2004, Zeilig, 2008). A violent social revolt exploded in 1959 and the Belgians were forced to concede independence on 30 June 1960 (Clark, 2002, Hesselbein, 2007, Van Reybrouck, 2012, Young, 2015). The Belgian Congo became the “Republic of the Congo”, and later the “Democratic Republic of the Congo” (Lawson and Bertucci, 1996, Blommaert, 1999, Hesselbein, 2007). Immediately after independence, between 1960 and 1965, the nation experienced another critical historical phase, identified as the “Congo crisis” (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, Van Reybrouck, 2012).¹⁷ It involved the incarceration and execution of Patrice Lumumba, the country’s first prime minister elected by the population after independence, in 1961 (Bustin, 2002, Adi and Sherwood, 2003, Boyce Davies, 2008, Gerard and Kuklick, 2015).¹⁸

¹⁷ The crisis brought the secession of the Katanga, one of the richest regions at the south of the country, which became independent from 1960 to 1963. It also included the largest UN peacekeeping intervention (Lawson and Bertucci, 1996, Autesserre, 2011).

¹⁸ Ludo de Witte has analysed extensively Lumumba’s murder, concluding that it was well calculated by Belgian and other Western powers, and secretly supported by the United Nations, with as a main goal to re-establish a neo-colonial dominion and permanently eradicate Lumumba’s ideas. Nevertheless, Lumumba is often considered as the greatest anti-colonial national hero by Congolese oral histories and narratives and his powerful ideology still

1.1.3 Mobutu's tyranny (1965-1997)

The Congo crisis concluded with the seizure of power by Joseph Désiré Mobutu, a former colonial sergeant. In 1960, he was appointed by Lumumba's government as chief staff officer of the Congolese National Army. After independence, the Western Powers needed a trusted and powerful character able to command the Congo in collaboration with international forces (de Witte, 2001). For this reason, he was considered to be the right candidate by policymakers and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2004, Gondola, 2002).

Following a military *coup d'état* in November 1965 (Hesselbein, 2007, Garbin and Pampu, 2009), Mobutu became the supreme head of state. He quickly established a dictatorship, recognising himself as the new legitimate owner of the whole territory and its enormous wealth (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2004). In 1966-7, through his party, the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR), he established a state ideology known as *authenticité* (authenticity) (Garbin and Pampu, 2009, Shillington, 2013). This dogma was mostly designed to separate the Congolese state of mind and behaviour from decades of colonial and cultural paternalism and to re-establish African roots and Congolese cultural identity (Blommaert, 1999).¹⁹ For this reason, for example, Léopoldville became Kinshasa in 1966, and the Congo state was renamed as the "Republic of Zaire", in 1971 (Lawson and Bertucci, 1996, Blommaert, 1999, Garbin and Pampu, 2009, Shillington, 2013).

Throughout the 1970s, Mobutu, also known as "the dinosaur" (Braeckman, 1991), imposed the so-called *Zairianisation* (Zairianization), through which he nationalised the entire economy of the state (Garbin and Pampu, 2009, Shillington, 2013, Owen, 2015). Mobutu possessed a huge personal wealth (*Le Monde*, 1997e), and

represents a fundamental model for many Africans, including for many young participants of this thesis (de Witte, 2001, Zeilig, 2008, Bouwer, 2010).

¹⁹ The ideology included also a precise dress code, which will be discussed in chapter three.

the tiny Zairian élite became the owners, and only beneficiaries, of most national enterprises, while ordinary citizens had to provide much-needed social and welfare services for themselves. The Zairian doctrine known as *Mobutisme* (Mobutism) was also established, determining the development of Mobutu's political ideology and personality cult (Garbin and Pampu, 2009, Shillington, 2013, Owen, 2015). Mobutu's extremely autocratic and criminalised kleptocracy was sustained, internally, by his totalitarian governmental system and army and, externally, by Western powers²⁰ always ready to offer militarily support against threats from armed groups (Shillington, 2013). Thus, the nation experienced a complete collapse of the socio-economic, political and moral system of values (The Times, 1997e), with the Congolese inhabitants remaining one of the poorest African populations and their most basic human rights violated (Naniuzeyi, 1999). Despite the various attempts from Congolese opposition groups, during the late 1960s and the following decades, to destabilise Mobutu's authority, the "dinosaur" managed to remain in power for thirty two years (Blommaert, 1999, International Organization For Migration, 2006, Garbin and Pampu, 2009). His reign was finally ended²¹ by the armed rebellion of the national liberation movement headed by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, in 1996-7 (*The Times*, 1997a, *Le Monde*, 1997f, *The Times*, 1997b, *Le Monde*, 1997b), with Mobutu fleeing to Morocco and dying after a few months (Naniuzeyi, 1999, Page and Sonnenburg, 2003, Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2004, Schoumaker et al., 2013).

²⁰ For example, when armed insurgents penetrated the southern region of Shaba, previously Katanga, in 1977-8, Mobutu used the Cold War strategy and accused the Soviet Union, Cuba and Angola of being responsible. He was, therefore, able to win because of the support received by the US, Belgium, France, China and Morocco (Shillington, 2013).

²¹ Mainly because, this time, Mobutu did not receive international material support (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2004).

1.1.4 Laurent-Désiré Kabila's political takeover (1997-2001)

In 1996, a new opposition political party headed by Laurent-Désiré Kabila, the Alliance of the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo, (ADFL), was founded²² as a result of a coalition with Rwandan,²³ Ugandan and Angolan forces (Olsson and Fors, 2004). At the end of the year, the ADFL started an uprising against Mobutu (*Le Monde*, 1997c, *The Times*, 1997d) also known as First Congo War, which ended with the conquest of the capital Kinshasa in 1997 (*Le Monde*, 1997a, Blommaert, 1999, International Organization For Migration, 2006, Hesselbein, 2007, Van Reybrouck, 2012, Schoumaker et al., 2013).

The nation was renamed the “Democratic Republic of the Congo”, with Kabila as its new official leader (Blommaert, 1999, Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002, Page and Sonnenburg, 2003). Only a year after Kabila's takeover, in 1998, the Second Congo War rapidly exploded, lasting until 2003. It is also known as “Africa's World War I” since it developed around a vast geographic area comprising the DRC, militarily supported by Zimbabwe, Namibia and Angola, against Rwanda and Uganda (Shillington, 2013).

The war broke out due to unresolved tensions between Kabila and his foreign allies (Larmer et al., 2013). Although the Rwandan and Ugandan armies had helped

²² The opposition front grew much earlier than Mobutu's eventual defeat (Nzongola-Ntalaja, 2002). Laurent-Désiré Kabila, previously affiliated to Lumumba's socialist party, became the head of one of the main anti-Mobutu dissident groups, the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP), founded in South Kivu in 1967 (Olsson and Fors, 2004).

²³ The ethnic war between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, from 1990 to the genocide in 1994, deeply influenced Congolese postcolonial history. In April 1994, following the shooting down of the Rwandan Hutu president's plane, the Hutu civilians equipped with machetes and supported by the Hutu regime started a massive massacre against the Tutsi. In three months, 800,000 to 1,000,000 Tutsi and Hutus had been brutally killed. Hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees were helped by French soldiers to cross the borders to Burundi and Tanzania but mostly, with Mobutu's support, towards eastern Zaire (North and South Kivu) which then became the field of permanent conflicts (Van Reybrouck, 2012). Many refugees were reported missing and later began to reappear from the Zaire forests (*The Times*, 1996a, *The Times*, 1996b, *The Times*, 1997c, *Le Monde*, 1997d). The Rwandan support of Kabila's war in 1996-7 was a direct consequence of the genocide: the Tutsi President Paul Kagame accused Mobutu of having given protection and shelter to the Hutu responsible for the massive murder. Mobutu, therefore, had to step down (Van Reybrouck, 2012).

Kabila to defeat Mobutu, Kabila's government never granted them citizenship (Hesselbein, 2007). Ugandans and Rwandans, therefore, fought for Kabila's deposition and substitution with a more democratic government that would guarantee their rights (Shillington, 2013, Schoumaker et al., 2013). Rwanda was also fighting Kabila since the DRC was hosting former representatives of the Rwanda' armed forces, directly responsible for the Rwandan genocide in 1994, together with Rwandan militant groups. Uganda was also fighting against Kabila in order to defend its borders from insurgent groups (Shillington, 2013). The crisis additionally involved economics: inflation and corruption were rising and administrative and economic structures did not have enough resources (Gondola, 2002). Importantly, the prolongation of the regional conflict and the exacerbation of ethnic rivalries was mostly driven by Western interests in the extraction of Congolese natural resources (Olsson and Fors, 2004).

1.1.5 The succession of Joseph Kabila and the contested elections of Félix Tshisekedi (2001-present)

Following the murder of Laurent-Désiré Kabila in 2001, his son Joseph Kabila succeeded the presidency while the civil war endured until 2003 (Page and Sonnenburg, 2003, Dagne, 2011, Schoumaker and Schoonvaere, 2014, Shillington, 2013). Nevertheless, the permanent presence of numerous militia and extremist groups, from both outside (mostly from Rwanda and Uganda) and inside the country, caused a continuous state of disorder, especially in the north-eastern region (Dagne, 2011, Van Reybrouck, 2012, Schoumaker et al., 2013). In 2013, the DRC was described by analysts as remaining an "extremely insecure place, prone to outbreaks of conflict and where civilians are periodically subject to personal threat, primarily because the supposed 'settlement' of the Congo wars did not resolve many of their underlying causes" (Larmer et al., 2013, p. 1). The Congolese situation, experts suggest, is among the largest and most devastating humanitarian disasters in the world of the twenty-first

century (Carayannis, 2003). It has caused millions of casualties and victims, human rights violations by armed men, including rapes, killings and looting, impeded humanitarian access and, as a consequence, provoked large-scale population displacements (Autesserre, 2011, Dagne, 2011).

Both Kabila's 2006 and 2011 re-elections were contested (Larmer et al., 2013). He reluctantly agreed to step down only in 2018, two years from the expiration of his second term (Burke, 2018b). In January 2019, Félix Tshisekedi, leader of the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS),²⁴ was proclaimed the new DRC president following the elections held on 30 December 2018. Despite having been the leader of the historically anti-Kabila main opposition party, Tshisekedi was accused of winning the presidency by striking a power-sharing deal with the Kabila government prior to the elections (Burke, 2019b, de Freytas-Tamura, 2019, Burke, 2019c). Many outside observers, institutions and representatives such as Congo's Catholic Church, the French Foreign Minister and the *Enough Project*, a Washington-based advocacy group focused on Africa, rejected the election results and considered the victory of Tshisekedi as fraudulent (de Freytas-Tamura, 2019, McKenzie et al., 2019, Aljazeera, 2019, Burke, 2019c). As reported by the *Financial Times*, analysis of various voting data showed that candidate Martin Fayulu, leader of the Engagement for Citizenship and Development party, was the clear winner of the DRC's presidential elections. According to a trove of election data representing 86% of total votes cast across the country, Fayulu won 59.4% of the vote, while candidate Tshisekedi finished second with only 19% (Wilson et al., 2019). The *Financial Times* also reported that a larger set of data with more than 49,000 records, according to an anonymous informant with direct knowledge of how the data were obtained, contained the true electronically-fed results that authorities have sought

²⁴ The UDPS was formed by Étienne Tshisekedi in 1982 in Zaire as the oldest and largest political opposition party, established also through the active collaboration of the Congolese diaspora in Belgium. In 2017, after the death of Étienne Tshisekedi, his son Félix Tshisekedi became the head of the UDPS (Garbin and Godin, 2013, Wilson et al., 2019).

to conceal, and the data contradict the electoral commission's official declaration. Tshisekedi, thus, turned out to be the winner of the vote with the electoral commission publishing false results (Wilson et al., 2019).²⁵ Since March 2019, following the coalition government formed between Tshisekedi and Kabila, the former president, as the only senator for life, and his entourage continue regulating power and influencing many choices of the newly elected president. Analysts suggest that a democratic transition has, therefore, once again been defeated with a high risk of more violent tensions and insurgencies to come (Burke, 2019a, Mo and Doss, 2019, The East African, 2019).

All the factors presented above illustrate how the DRC's history has been characterised by hardship and violence which continue to be deep-rooted in the country today. The various interventions of international forces, the emergence of autocratic regimes, the perpetual fights over natural wealth as well as incessant ethnic antagonism, have been among the principal causes of the severe breakdown of the DRC's economy, sociality and morality. The modern history of the Congo in particular has brought a huge number of deaths among the Congolese population as well as the deprivation of basic human rights and essential necessities. Consequently, and mostly from mid-twentieth century, a large section of Congolese has been forced to migrate abroad. The following section of the chapter explores the Congolese diaspora in Europe, beginning with Belgium and France as the most frequent destinations, and continuing with the Congolese presence in the UK and London.

²⁵ According to the results seen by the *Financial Times*, candidate Tshisekedi obtained 3m votes, 4.1m fewer than the electoral commission showed. In contrast, the data indicate, candidate Fayulu won in 19 of Congo's 26 provinces, receiving more than 9.3m votes, 3m more than the electoral commission announced (Wilson et al., 2019).

1.2 Mapping the Congolese diaspora in Europe

1.2.1 Congolese migration to Belgium and France

A restricted DRC migration to Belgium began between the 1910-50s, when some notable Congolese were invited by the colonial ministers for study trips (Kagné, 2000, Cornet, 2004, Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw, 2009, Demart, 2013, Schoumaker et al., 2013). A more substantial migration to the former colony developed from the 1960s, typically involving a large number of students (Kagné, 2000, Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw, 2009, Grégoire, 2010, Schoumaker et al., 2013), and *évolués* such as business people, police officers, diplomats, civil servants, journalists, musicians, dance troupes, performers and tourists (Kagné and Martiniello, 2001, De Bruyn and Wets, 2006, Etambala, 2011, Stanard, 2012, Demart, 2013).

Between the end of 1970s and the 1980s, this privileged group grew due to the gradual degeneration of the political and economic status quo in Zaire, as discussed previously, with numerous Congolese anti-Mobutu political activists and students obtaining asylum in Belgium as well as France (Eade and Garbin, 2007, Trefon, 2009, Pachi et al., 2010, Young and Turner, 2013, Garbin and Godin, 2013, Schoumaker et al., 2013). The Congolese diaspora rapidly developed as one of the oldest and biggest Sub-Saharan African group in these two countries (Schoumaker and Schoonvaere, 2014), with Brussels and Paris historically representing its focal centres, and with Matonge and Château Rouge as the principal districts (Lututala, 1997, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000, Swyngedouw and Swyngedouw, 2009, Diekmann and Cloquet, 2015). Importantly, from the 1970s onwards, these two European cities represented the main hubs for the political struggle against DRC leaders (Garbin and Godin, 2013). In the 1990s and the early 2000s, legal and illegal Congolese migration expanded beyond Francophone confines, with refugees seeking asylum in new destinations such as Switzerland, Holland, Germany, the UK, Canada, the USA and

South Africa (Sumata, 2002, Sumata et al., 2004, Pachi et al., 2010, Garbin and Godin, 2013, Mayoyo, 1995, Soenen et al., 2003, De Bruyn and Wets, 2006).

1.2.2 Congolese migration to the UK and settlement in London

Compared to other Anglophone Black African diasporas, the history of Congolese migration to the UK is a more recent phenomenon. By the late 1980s, the UK was considered by many Congolese settlers more politically secure from Mobutu's persecution compared to DRC neighbouring African countries and other European nations (Nginamau Ngudiankama, 2001, Styan, 2003, Eade and Garbin, 2007, Pachi et al., 2010, Garbin and Pampu, 2009). Congolese migration to the UK for political reasons reached its highest level in the 1990s and 2000s (Styan, 2003, International Organization For Migration, 2006, Pachi and Barrett, 2011). The collapse of the state followed by the overthrow of Mobutu's regime by L. D. Kabila's armed rebellion, the Second Congo War and the implementation of very restricted immigration policies in Belgium, France and Switzerland brought many to seek asylum in the UK (Nginamau Ngudiankama, 2001, International Organization For Migration, 2006, Garbin and Pampu, 2009, Pachi et al., 2010, Eade and Garbin, 2007). Furthermore, the UK became the major destination for other Congolese groups. These "Euro-Congolese", mostly from France, Belgium, Holland and Spain, saw the UK as a less discriminatory environment and with a better labour market, as confirmed by participants of this thesis (Garbin and Pampu, 2009).

Although remaining a "minority within a minority" compared to Anglophone Black African groups linked to British colonial history, the Congolese community represents the biggest Francophone African group,²⁶ among the Central and Western

²⁶ The Congolese community is considered the biggest Francophone African group in London compared to other Francophone Central and Western Africans in London. For example, the Ivoirian, Congo-Brazzaville, Cameroonian, Senegalese, Guinean and Togolese communities (Office For National Statistics, 2011). However, the Congolese group remains a "minority

Francophone African groups, settled in the country (Styan, 2003, Eade and Garbin, 2007, Garbin and Pampu, 2009, Pachi et al., 2010, Garbin, 2014). According to the latest Census of the Office for National Statistics of 2011,²⁷ under the category “Country of birth”, the DRC Congolese in London numbered 10,388 (Office For National Statistics, 2011). However, a 2006 report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated between 20,000 to 40,000 Congolese officially settled in the UK, with 13,000 to 17,000 Congolese estimated to be living in the Greater London area (International Organization For Migration, 2006, Pachi and Barrett, 2011). Therefore, it remains very difficult to estimate the precise number of the Congolese population currently living in the UK and London, as it is likely to be higher than what official statistics convey. The two oldest districts that have hosted the highest number of Congolese are Tottenham in north London and Newham in east London (Styan, 2003). However, the community has progressively expanded in many other neighbourhoods of north, east and south London (International Organization For Migration, 2006, Pachi et al., 2010).

As introduced previously, the socio-political and religious spheres of the Congolese diaspora in London have been well-explored in a number of research studies, for example investigating the role played by major Congolese churches across the city and by diasporic political transnational movements (International Organization For Migration, 2006, Garbin and Pampu, 2009, Nginamau Ngudiankama, 2001, Eade and Garbin, 2007, Garbin and Godin, 2013, Garbin, 2012, Garbin, 2013, Garbin, 2014). The Congolese diasporic cultural scene in London has been partially investigated through ethnographic narratives mainly from members belonging to older generation and few

within a minority” (Garbin, 2014), compared for example to other Francophone African groups from North, South and Eastern African regions, with the Algerian, Moroccan and Mauritan communities as the largest (Office For National Statistics, 2011).

²⁷ It must be noticed that the data of the latest Census considers only African people who were born in Africa, moved to London and were “officially” registered in 2011. Therefore, African communities have inevitably a much higher number of members.

younger testimonies (Garbin and Pambu, 2009, Pambu et al., 2015). The history and evolution of Congolese music, in particular, has been the main subject of these investigations due to its central role within Congolese popular culture and its involvement within the socio-political scenarios, as chapter three will illustrate (Garbin and Pambu, 2009). Furthermore, a detailed study on the Congolese music scene in London has been provided by a PhD thesis on a Congolese/Cuban²⁸ band known as *Grupo Lokito*, with Congolese and Latin musicians of the first generation (McGuinness, 2012). However, the Congolese members of the younger generation, who were either born in the UK or moved from the DRC or other European countries with their parents or relatives at a young age, have received only partial ethnographic attention and their presence in London needs further exploration in order to reveal aspects of their everyday cultural life. Therefore, the detailed analysis of some young Congolese practitioners' narratives and their other forms of cultural, economic and political productions as diaspora spaces provided in this thesis will disclose a new perspective on their current diasporic experiences and contributions made to the global city.

1.3 Concluding remarks

As the chapter has shown, Congolese colonial and postcolonial history has drastically transformed the natural development of the country and shaped its current socio-political and economic instability, which remain deeply rooted within the country today (Frankema and Buelens, 2013). Mainly due to its crucial geopolitical value, the DRC has attracted various interferences from the West which directly installed an exploitation system before and during colonialism and have indirectly supported the establishment of African dictatorships in the postcolonial era. The country has

²⁸ The PhD thesis explores the historical and cultural connection between Congo and Cuba during the slave trade, when Congolese slaves were deported to Cuba, starting from the Kingdom of Kongo until the end of slavery in Cuba in 1885. The study analyses the "return" of Cuban music to Africa and the fusion between Congolese and Cuban styles (McGuinness, 2012).

progressively experienced the emergence of ruthless imperialist schemes, perpetual ethnic antagonisms and violent fights over natural wealth, mainly manoeuvred by few corrupt leaders and their Western outsider collaborators. These have continued to be in control of a large amount of the natural resources of the region and brought the deprivation of vital necessities and basic human rights to the Congolese people, therefore causing a severe breakdown of the DRC economy, politics, sociality and morality (Simpson-Fletcher, 2002).

The fragile socio-political and economic status quo of the country has forced many Congolese to migrate. The first substantial migration wave towards Europe developed after independence, with Belgium and France as first and second destinations due to the colonial and linguistic legacy. The degeneration of the DRC situation, between the 1980s and the 2000s, brought the Congolese towards new destinations such as Switzerland, Holland, Germany, the UK, Canada, the USA and South Africa. Brussels, Paris and, later on, London developed as the main European centres of Congolese settlement and arenas of new forms of social, political, cultural and economic realities. Accordingly, this thesis aims to widen scholarly analysis on the relatively recent young Congolese presence in London.

Chapter Two – Body practices and the fashioning of cultural identities: Framing qualitative research methodologies and methods

2 Introduction

This second chapter focuses on the theoretical underpinning and fieldwork methods applied to design and critically analyse the primary data of the research. The first part of the chapter illustrates the main qualitative research methodologies and methods, based on a qualitative-interpretivist perspective and on a multi-sited ethnographic approach. The ways in which the research follows different on-land and on-line “sites” of activities and observation and connects these by using a combination of multiple sources is discussed. The second part of the chapter presents the general ideas that inform the thesis on a secondary theoretical level. A literature review on performance and performative studies is presented and, particularly, major theories on the performance of identity and the interpretation of racial, ethnic and gender identity construction in everyday life settings are addressed. Finally, a more general overview concerning the significance of the human body as a socio-cultural construct and the specificity of the “superdiverse” context of London is also provided.

2.1 Qualitative research methodologies and methods

2.1.1 A qualitative-interpretivist approach

This thesis uses qualitative research methodologies and methods which fall into the interpretivist tradition of humanities research. Firstly, interpretivist logic recognises the existence of more than one truth and forms of knowledge, created by people’s readings of their world. Knowledge construction is subjective, is shaped by socio-cultural influences, differs from one cultural group to another and can be embodied. Life stories, everyday experiences and material productions exist as ways of knowing (McGregor and Murnane, 2010). Reality is socially and collectively constructed inasmuch as it is

determined through the lived experiences of people. It is in individuals' minds and constructed accordingly to how they perceive themselves and how they interact with others and with their contexts (McGregor and Murnane, 2010). Thus, young Congolese and their realities play an essential role in the research process, rather than being isolated from it. The approach of the thesis is, therefore, inductive in the way that it is concerned with the understanding of shared meanings and how participants create a sense of their own world, their daily lived experiences from their own perspectives (McGregor and Murnane, 2010).

Ann Lin underlines how qualitative work aims to expose aspects of a specific culture, place and time so that the various ways individuals act and think become comprehensible (Lin, 1998). The qualitative-interpretivist approach applied in this thesis, thus, includes various interpretive techniques which have as their main objective the description, decoding and understanding of meanings of naturally occurring phenomena among the young diaspora (Shah and Corley, 2006). This lens has been chosen to guarantee a context of discovery, rather than verification, and the sampling selection has been based on the multifaceted quality of each case study, from which developed empirically grounded theories, rather than being based on quantification and numerical generalisation (Flick, 2009).

2.1.2 Applying multi-sited ethnography: Data collection and analysis

The thesis follows a mode of mobile ethnographic research, suggested by George Marcus,²⁹ which aims to look both in and out of the world system.

[It] moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space. This mode defines for itself an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation. It develops instead a strategy or design of research that acknowledges macro theoretical concepts and narratives of the world

²⁹ Multi-sited ethnography was selected after the reading of *Transnational Spaces* (Jackson et al., 2004), where the method is discussed.

system but does not rely on them for the contextual architecture framing a set of subjects. This mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity (Marcus, 1995, p. 96).

Therefore, Marcus' multi-sited ethnography³⁰ emerges from the necessity to draw a cultural formation across and within several localities of inquiry and diverse spaces of research. It involves separate ethnographic techniques which follow and correlate different "sites" of activities; multiple places of observation and participation that cut across dichotomies such as the "local/global" and the "lifeworld/system" (Marcus, 1995). Multi-sited ethnography seeks to trace: *the people*, the ethnographic subject (Malinowski, 1922) which refers especially to migrants and diasporic individuals; *the thing*, the circulation through different contexts of material objects, such as commodities, gifts, money, works of art and intellectual property; *the metaphor*, the social correlations of signs, symbols, and visual images; *the plot, story or allegory*, the narratives of everyday experiences and socio-cultural memories told in the frame of single-site fieldwork; *the life story or biography*, individual life histories for delineating ethnographic-systematic relations; and, finally, *the conflict*, referring to issues contested in everyday life social spheres (Marcus, 1995). What is meant by "following" these sources is to expand the research focus to diverse places that are imagined but not necessarily physically visited (Coleman and Von Hellermann, 2012).

³⁰ It must be mentioned that Pierre Bourdieu is considered the pioneer of the multi-sited ethnographic approach (Wacquant, 2004, Reed-Danahay, 2005, Goodman and Silverstein, 2009, Ahluwalia, 2010). This refers, particularly, to his initial explorations "in the field" developed in two vastly different sites of research: in his home region, Béarn, Southwest of France (Bourdieu, 1962), and among a Kabyle tribe, in Northern Algeria (Bourdieu, 1972), where he worked on the particularities of peasant life in both societies (Reed-Danahay, 2005, Grenfell, 2006, Goodman and Silverstein, 2009). Seeing the two contexts as parallel worlds, he subjected both fields to the same forms of inquiry, developing his "theory of practice" (Bourdieu, 1972). His intention was to transfer empirical data and conceptual frameworks from one field to the other (Wacquant, 2004), to put sites within a broader network of relations, to investigate individuals' embodied experiences as well as the social conditions of these experiences (Bourdieu, 1993) and, therefore, to codify the difference between micro-social and macro-social modes of analysis (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, Skandalis, 2016).

The research involves both Congolese male and female informants, approximately between 18 to 35 years of age. They all migrated from the DRC to Europe (through Belgium, France, or directly to London) with their parents or relatives at a young age or, in a few cases, were born and raised in London. Currently, they are all settled in London. The research also partially includes the voices of individuals originally from other cultures, although especially belonging to other groups of the Black African diaspora. Using multi-sited ethnography has organically revealed the centrality of various forms of transnational fashion and beauty expressions as among the most complex medium employed by London Congolese to perform their cultural identities. The thesis, therefore, pursues diasporic subjects' life histories, everyday life narratives and socio-cultural memories as well as their material and symbolic productions, and, finally, conflicts inscribed on several performances of the body. Importantly, the multi-sited ethnographic lens is embedded within the fieldwork chapters. The sites of investigation of each case study were not clearly classified under subheadings to let the analysis flow coherently and to avoid repetitions and reductive divisions.

Marcus' approach differs from a traditional single-site ethnography, where ethnographers, historically, would underline the importance of spending a great amount of time in a chosen field, making observations during all seasons, speaking the local languages, and involving the people under study as much as they could (Hannerz, 2003, Nadai and Maeder, 2005). The approach still includes classical ethnographic techniques, participant observation of concrete settings and social interactions as well as formal and informal interviews, for the collection of primary source data among a defined group of people in a single city. However, the nature of the single-sited fieldwork diverges towards a more interdisciplinary approach, not exclusively ethnographic, in line with the contemporary and globalised environment of London. Although accessing the

community, finding available participants, building useful relationships, and tracking down appropriate events spanned a long period of time, this research does not aim to understand and represent the “entire culture and social life” (Evans-Pritchard, 1951) of all Congolese in London. Rather, the study focuses on the observation and analysis of body practices since these tackled significant aspects of the participants’ cultural identities and everyday life in London.

The combination of multiple cultural sites and participants presented in the thesis occurred organically during the research process. These have been discovered in separate places, but complexly and imaginatively interconnected, and, most importantly, were found applicable in the light of the research questions³¹ which have also changed in relation to issues emerged from the field (Nadai and Maeder, 2005). It is also important to underline that young Congolese themselves are increasingly mobile across London, live in many places without having specific areas of gathering, compared to older generations who can still be found in their historical neighbourhoods (e.g. Tottenham). Not surprisingly, most of the public sites explored in this thesis were temporary, short-lived phenomena (Hannerz, 2003, Nadai and Maeder, 2005), self-chosen scenes characterised by a “spatial and temporal ephemerality” (Muir, 2004). Thus, the multi-sited approach made it possible to design a coherent field of research, while sharing the experience of being multi-sited facilitated the trust with some of the informants (Riccio, 2012).

The on-land fieldwork involved participation in numerous Congolese cultural events which were not included in the final analysis of the thesis. For instance, a theatre

³¹ Who are the young cultural practitioners who produce fashion and beauty rituals of the body within the London Congolese community? What are these transnational body practices? What is the impact of the Congolese heritage and of the multicultural environment of London upon young Congolese cultural identity construction and body expressions? Where and how do these transnational fashion and beauty practices take form and what is their role within the Congolese community? How are they featured, promoted, and sold in on-land and on-line spaces? What audiences are interested in consuming London Congolese fashion and beauty practices and how are these received? What kinds of meanings are generated by these? Do they have common themes and purposes?

show,³² visual art exhibitions,³³ film and music festivals,³⁴ community commemorations,³⁵ book launch parties,³⁶ etc. Importantly, during the process, I was placed in a “translocal network of relationships” (Hannerz, 2003), involving the on- and off-site interaction with “key” informants who assumed the role of “gatekeepers” (Mack et al., 2005), assisting the research development, facilitating the communication with a new series of potential candidates and, occasionally, reporting information about community events. The process of expanding connections was also sustained by the well-known “snowballing” technique (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981, Atkinson and Flint, 2001, Seidman, 2013),³⁷ especially through the collaboration of gatekeepers.

Observational written field notes and face-to-face interviews across different contexts represent a fundamental part of the original research. They have been carried out periodically, depending on new event findings, participants’ availability, and their connection to specific cultural activities. Both off-site, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with “key” Congolese informants, lasting between two and three hours, and shorter on-site interviews with Congolese or individuals from other cultural backgrounds among the audience, lasting between five to twenty minutes, were included. Every interview was set up to be “open-ended” (Mack et al., 2005), to enable

³² “They Drink it in The Congo” at Almeida Theatre, Islington, 1st October 2016.

³³ Meeting a young Congolese visual artist, Ange Mukeza, at “#Tribel6 International Art Festival”, Bermondsey, 1-2 October 2016, and at “1st Birthday for Nomadic community Gardens”, Shoreditch, 1st May 2016.

³⁴ “Malebo International Film Festival 2016” at the Dalston Roof Park, Dalston, 4th May 2016; *Kasai Masai* at London African Music Festival, Vortex Jazz Club, Dalston, 23rd September 2016; *Miss Baby Sol* at the Peggy’s big Sunday, Hoxton Square Bar & Kitchen, Hoxton, 9th October 2016, and at the OXJAM Music Festival, Dalston, 15th October 2016; *Konono No.1* and *Kongo Dia Ntotila* at Rich Mix Cultural Foundation, Shoreditch, 30th July 2016.

³⁵ “Commemorating Mama Masika: honouring her life and continuing her legacy”, at the Church of St Mary and St Michael in Shadwell, 19th March 2016.

³⁶ “Chestnut” by *Sheeda Queen*, West Croydon, 16th July 2016; “No Place to Call Home” by *JJ Bola*, Dalston Roof Park, Dalston, 20th June 2017.

³⁷ The “snowballing” approach in qualitative research is used to find and select participants and is based on the process in which one participant leads to another and so on (Seidman, 2013).

the subjects to feel free to express their thoughts and clarify their position.³⁸ As Steph Lawler reminds us: “Narrative is a key means through which people understand and make sense of the social world, and of their place within it” (Lawler, 2008, p. 33). The study of those narratives offered a powerful portrayal of participants’ life histories, experiences, and memories and their perspectives and involvement with specific bodily rituals.

Additionally, data from the on-land field have been combined with the conduction of a “virtual fieldwork” (Scarangella, 2007). On-line contacts via phone calls, e-mails and mostly chats via WhatsApp or Messenger Apps, were often established before arriving at the sites or organising meetings. I also used a variety of media sources found on the web. Social networking spaces, real-time environments where individuals engage in live, interpersonal communicational exchanges (Huc-Hepher, 2017), such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, have facilitated the discovery and on-going communication with the young community.³⁹ Evaluating the contents of Congolese charities and brands websites, weblogs⁴⁰ and keeping myself up to date through personal mailing lists also gave me the possibility to have a better insight into their “image making”. Illustrative interviews transcribed from web channels, mainly YouTube, were also considered. Virtual spaces generally served to build social

³⁸ It must be clarified that the age of each respondent has been maintained as it was at the time of our meetings and that each interview has been transcribed accurately, keeping the original words as they were said by young participants and without correcting their slips in English.

³⁹ Among these: *Congolese Action Youth Platform UK* (2019), a web platform which shares updated information on the issues faced in the DRC and its UK diaspora; *Young, Professional and Congolese* (2019), a web group aiming to stimulate the networking of Congolese professionals worldwide and to discuss business opportunities; *Young, Congolese and Fabulous* (2019), a platform dedicated to celebrate the image and achievements of young professional Congolese, founded by Madeleine Laini, whose work is presented in chapter four.

⁴⁰ Among these: the *African Culture Blog* (2019), which maps Africans in London, *Revive Congo* (2019), a non-profit organisation that seeks to empower and create opportunities for young people in the DRC; *Save the Congo* (2019), a non-governmental organisation dedicated to find peaceful solutions in the DRC, founded by Vava Tampa, an informant whose voice is reported both in chapter three and five; *What Nicka Wore* (What Nicka Wore, 2018), a Congolese, London-based, style and fashion blog, introduced in chapter three; *Kiyana Wraps* website (2019), introduced in chapter four; *Congo Fashion Week* website (2019), introduced in chapter six.

networks in advance, to follow the promotion of events and to keep connections throughout the research period as well as to gather new, useful, data (Scarangella, 2007). Finally, the use of visual ethnographic materials⁴¹ across field spaces has also facilitated my memory and a more accurate description of the physical places visited and people encountered.

Overall, the investigation of specifically designated fields, lived and transformed by young Congolese into “translocalities” (Appadurai, 1996), and the combination of on-land and on-line spoken, written and visual qualitative sources, stretched across time and social spaces, has guaranteed the data quality in terms of depth of interpretation (Scarangella, 2007, Hovland, 2012). Four representative and very informative case studies were selected as exemplary representation of body practices. The in-depth analysis of each has been based on micro-level documentation and investigation, developed through related theoretical understandings. In other words, every chapter from the field has been evaluated as a distinct cultural context of inquiry, richly described, contextualised, and examined. Furthermore, to establish relations across multi-sited fields, these micro-level interpretations were then framed by macro-level theoretical concepts on performance of identity, which inclusively underpin the thesis at a secondary level and are presented in the following section (Skandalis, 2016).

2.2 Performance of cultural identity and the body as secondary theoretical framework

As discussed above, using multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork organically revealed the significance of various forms of bodily rituals as amongst the most predominant and multifaceted expressions employed by London Congolese across the metropolis to construct and affirm their diasporic self-presentations and sense of belonging, to embody their collective memories and, finally, to convey their ways of being-in-the-

⁴¹ Especially obtained through the collaboration with young Congolese photographers.

world (Clammer, 2015). The approach stressed the need for an understanding of socio-cultural realities and cultural identities in everyday life and for an understanding of young participants experiences as “performative”, which means that they are constructed by actions, by “performances” rather than being related to nature and biology. Therefore, this thesis uses performance studies and performative theories on identity and the body as secondary theoretical framework to investigate the ways in which racial, ethnic and gender identities are manifested within the young Congolese community in London. In the following section, the notion of performance in everyday life and ritual experiences are introduced, followed by performativity theories on gender, race, and ethnicity.

2.2.1 Performance, performativity, and everyday life

The notion of performance⁴² is generally associated with the various fields of performance art, such as theatre, dance, cinema etc., which directly include prepared and practiced acting roles (McKenzie, 2002). However, performance studies represent a far wider multidisciplinary field, informing anthropological, sociological, folklore, cultural, gender, linguistic and communication studies (Fine and Speer, 1992). Drawing upon the notion of performance, the concept of performativity and its connected system of ideas have been broadly developed. The “performance principle” is in this sense no longer limited to the stage, to forms of art or to the rituals, but becomes very significant in every aspect of social life, understood as “a showing of a doing” (Schechner, 2013).

Performance and performativity theories are part of a broader social constructionist paradigm⁴³ which underpins this project. A social constructivist point of view strongly argues that identity construction and all human categories, such as race,

⁴² With its etymology leading to dictionary definitions such as “to carry out, go through, or execute in due form” (Fine and Speer, 1992).

⁴³ A social constructionist paradigm considers reality as precisely socially constructed rather than something naturally given, as mentioned previously. The focus, thus, becomes to investigate and disclose how these social constructions happen (Alvesson, 2009).

ethnicity, and gender, are deeply influenced by specific historical and socio-cultural discourses and practices rather than being determined by biological aspects (Grewal and Kaplan, 2006). This perspective goes against essentialist⁴⁴ approaches that consider cultural identity, and any other identity, to be a “pre-accomplished” and intrinsic attribute (Yamakawa et al., 2005), something that is fixed, integral, originary and unified (Hall, 1990, Hall, 1996b). On the contrary, social realities and cultural identities are in this thesis understood as “performative”, which means that they are built and enforced by “performances” rather than derived from naturally determined processes (Schechner, 2013). As James Clifford suggests, the scrutiny of emergent performances guide the understanding of the formation of cultural identities (Clifford, 1988). Cultural performances differ according to the social matrix and cultural traditions of a given community. Through performances, individuals give cultural consistency to the community they feel they belong to. They interpret their own world, keep learning their own culture and give life meaning beyond the near present: “performance is a way of knowing and preserving the memorable past, evaluating the present, making discoveries about the self and connecting with others” (Speer, 1992).

Performance studies are rooted in the work of anthropologist Victor Turner who studied rituals in relation to theatre and plays (Turner, 1969, Turner, 1982). He underlines the reflexive dimension of performance, defining performative reflexivity as a condition in which “a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively, turn, blend, or reflect back upon themselves upon the relations, actions, symbols, meaning, codes, roles, statuses, social structures ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public ‘selves” (Turner, 1986, p.

⁴⁴ In essentialist theories, individual or collective characteristics are believed to be caused by biological elements, to be inherited by birth and to be “rational” and “objective” (Grewal and Kaplan, 2006). For instance, Black people or women are “essentially” different from White people and men (Marxists Internet Archive Encyclopedia, 1990).

24). It is on this reflexive nature that the power of performance to fabricate and share identity and culture is based. Through reflexive mechanisms, which Turner calls “cultural performances”, individuals reveal themselves, come to know themselves better as well as mirroring and monitoring cultural behaviours (Turner, 1980b, Fine and Speer, 1992, Speer, 1992). Similarly, they also come to know themselves better while observing and participating in performances produced and presented by others (Turner, 1986).

A further essential contribution on the study of everyday socio-cultural performances comes from sociologist Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1959b, Goffman, 1967). In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* he studied the structure of social encounters based on theatrical performances. He developed a social theory focused on the different ways of interacting and behaving that constitute everyday life, emphasising how the self is expressed through a repertoire of strategic everyday life performances which are suitable to its social and geographical settings (Duffy, 2005). Goffman defined the concept of “performance” to indicate the face-to-face ways that individuals use to present themselves in front of others, referred to as the audience, observers, or co-participants. He argued that a person, when interacting with others, will always try to control and modify the behaviour depending on who they are interacting with, to create a positive impression and influence the other person. Using the analogy of the theatre, he defined “the front” (the stage) as individual performances before others (the audience). “The front” or individuals’ presentation of themselves, involves three standard parts: “the setting”, “the appearance” and “the manner”. The setting is the environment where social interactions take place, including indoor and outdoor spaces. The appearance is formed by those stimuli which indicate the social status of the performer (e.g. dress and aesthetical look) and the temporary ritual state of engagement during social activities. The manner is shaped by those stimuli which indicate how the

interaction role of the performer is carried out (Goffman, 1959a). Goffman underlined the tendency of performers to present an idealised version of themselves in front of others:

When an individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society (...) To the degree that a performance highlights the common official values of the society in which it occurs, we may look upon it (...) as a ceremony – as an expressive reaffirmation of the moral values of the community. Furthermore, insofar as the expressive bias of performances comes to be accepted as reality, then that which is accepted at the moment as reality will have some of the characteristics of a celebration. To stay in one's room away from the place where the party is given (...) is to stay away from where reality is being performed. The world, in truth, is a wedding. (Goffman, 1959a, p. 125)

In this sense, Goffman interprets everyday performances of individuals as a social mechanism which shows a specific socio-cultural reality of a given community. It is important to underline that Goffman did not mean that performers are “acting” or “putting on” everyday behaviours which are pre-thought or formulated in advance. Performers do not know what they are going to do. However, they have a large repertoire of performances, for instance how to manage the voice, the face, the body, that will allow them to “fill in” a specific situation. The structure of social encounters is, therefore, achieved through the interaction of gestures and behaviours of performers that are constantly performing without being aware of it and, certainly, without being actors. As Goffman puts it: “we all act better than we know how” (Goffman, 1959a, p. 126).

Similarly, to Goffman, cultural theorist Richard Schechner emphasises that “to perform” during ordinary life is to show off, to highlight and display actions for those who are watching. Performances among people take place as actions, interactions, and relationships (Schechner, 2013). A key concept of performance theory is what Schechner calls “restored behaviour” to indicate that social performances are based on actions previously practiced and learned from years of training of “appropriate bits of behaviour” in relation to social and personal circumstances. Restored behaviours also involve choices and can be re-invented by performers. However, the original “truth” of

the restored behaviour is often unknown, lost or ignored, and consequently individuals are often unaware of performing (Schechner, 2010, 2013). Thus, everyday life performances (e.g. cooking, dressing, socialising, taking a walk) and sacred and secular ritual performances⁴⁵ are constructed from behaviours previously learned; they are embodied practices which individuals re-formulate in different ways to suit specific occasions, depending on cultural patterns, historical circumstances and personal choices (Schechner, 2013).

2.2.2 The performance of diasporic cultural identities: performing gender, race and ethnicity

Performative theory was initially developed by linguistic philosopher John Langshaw Austin who introduced the word “performative” to describe utterances as performing actions. He underlined that what individuals communicate does often indicate an action (Austin, 1975).⁴⁶ From Austin’s work, as well as taking Simone de Beauvoir’s statement: “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir, 1973),⁴⁷ gender theorist Judith Butler produced one of the most influential performative theories on identity. Butler explains how gender identities, as part of individuals’ cultural identities, or what we understand to be masculinity and femininity, are performances conditioned depending on the society, its culture, and on the historical moment (Butler, 1988, Baldwin et al., 2004). These identities are not stable or essentialist and are not a fact connected to the biological sex (“female” or “male”), but rather an “idea” an “illusion” forced by dominant discourses. Gender is a specific mode of power as discourse inasmuch as it is socially shaped through the performance of bodily gestures,

⁴⁵ Schechner identified other situations where performances take place: in the arts, in sports or various other popular entertainment, in business, in technology, in sex, in play (Schechner, 2013) However, this thesis focuses on everyday life and ritual performances.

⁴⁶ For example, the utterance “I do” during wedding ceremonies indicates the action of taking the partner to be a lawful wedded individual (Austin, 1975).

⁴⁷ First edition: 1949, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex), Paris: Gallimard (De Beauvoir, 1949).

movements, and enactments of different types (Butler, 1988). It is a corporeal style, an intentional and performative set of acts which are continually reiterated and reproduced through time (Butler, 1988, Butler, 1990, Butler, 2011a).

The body, indeed, is not simply material but carries strong cultural meanings. From the moment individuals are born, their gender is “imposed” based on the biological sex and they will soon begin to learn how to perform gender-specific “acts”, markings of their own society. For example, how to perform vocal modulations, facial displays, bodily gestures, walks as well as how to adorn the body with clothing, etc. This performative process, “the doing of gender”, differs from culture to culture and across historical periods, powerfully demonstrating how gender is socially produced and reproduced (Schechner, 2013). Importantly, performative reiterated acts can either conform to society’s ideas of gender, therefore be interpreted as expressive of a conventional, legitimised gender identity or, on the opposite, go against society’s expectations (Butler, 1988). Thus, analysts suggest, gender should be considered as something that a person does rather than an expression of what one is, something strongly cultural, not natural or inevitable, and always potentially open to be challenged and to change (Bell, 1999, Lloyd, 1999).

Similarly to Goffman’s point of view, Butler considers gender performative acts to be only seemingly theatrical, but not primarily theatrical (Butler, 2011a). Individuals are not spontaneously nor consciously acting but rather performing “beliefs”, performing “an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again” (Butler, 1988, p. 526). Individuals are therefore not voluntarily “choosing” which gender to act out, to perform, although there are personal ways of performing and accentuating it (Lloyd, 1999). Gender performative

acts are never a fully individual matter but rather shared experiences, a reiteration of collective norms and meanings which have been previously learned (Butler, 1988, Butler, 2011a). In so doing, Butler goes strictly against any essentialist understanding of gender which sees anatomical differences between males and females as directly connected to the ways individuals think, act, and feel; where the correspondence of female/feminine and male/masculine identities is generally considered appropriate in society (Baldwin et al., 2004). On the contrary, gender is performed by people during social interaction, it is manufactured out of the fabric of culture and social structure which does not necessarily correspond to the biological sex (Pyke and Johnson, 2003).

Butler's performative theory of gender and sexual identity, which does not support the existence of an original identity but only a continuously repeated simulation of an idea of an original (Baldwin et al., 2004), is similarly debated in racial and ethnic studies. In relation to the Black diasporic experience and its narratives of displacement within a postcolonial and globalised world, cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines cultural identities as arising from the feeling of belonging to distinctive racial and ethnic groups (Hall, 1992). Cultural identities, involving racial, ethnic and gender features, are formed by historical and cultural developments, shaped around diverse discourses, practices, and positioning and often influenced by how individuals are represented in the surrounding cultural systems (Hall, 1990, Hall, 1996b).

The formulation of cultural identities is, thus, performative and performed by the doing rather than the being. These are fabricated and ritualised under the limits of socio-cultural expectations and pre-existing structural positions (Clammer, 2015). Race, ethnicity and gender are human cultural categories constructed by society, without any real basis in biology (Schechner, 2013). However, the idea of racial and ethnic categories in relation to skin colour, visible markers and the identification of individuals

through culture and geography remain strongly operative socio-cultural and political constructs with powerful effects (Hall, 1996a, Schechner, 2013).

Among Black African diasporas, cultural identities are often interpreted as a “one ‘true’ history”, a fixed collective culture that postcolonial individuals with shared historical experiences and cultural meanings hold and claim in common (Hall, 1990, Hall, 1996b). This essential idea of “oneness” involves an act of rediscovery, a deep research of the past, of “hidden histories” which the colonial experience has buried. A common experience of rupture and enforced instability, coming from the trauma of slavery, colonisation, migration unsettlement, and displacement, has somehow unified those cultures across their differences. The illusory rediscovery of the past has historically established a sense of imaginative unity, playing a fundamental role in the emergence of anti-colonial, anti-racist and feminist social movements and remaining a powerful force among marginalised social groups (Hall, 1990). However, Hall emphasises the importance and recognition of all the substantial differences that distinguish specific postcolonial cultures which compose the Black category. He insists on the rethinking of cultural identity formation as a dialogic “doubleness” of similarity and difference. Cultural identities are not just based on an essentialist past, but refer to the different positions in which individuals within a culture locate themselves via narratives, and understand their own world from a specific place, time, history and culture (Hall, 1990).

Accordingly, socio-cultural identifications become constructs which are both performative and performed. The presentation of “ascribed or invented” racial, ethnic and gender identities is replicated performatively without the origins of the original “script” being known, or being lost, or distorted by myth and tradition (Schechner, 2013). This means that race, ethnicity and gender, are not simply a given, but are something that has to be performed, “acted out” and continuously repeated and

recreated through different, previously learned and often common, performative acts in everyday life. Normally differing depending on culture, time and place, performances of the body, such as dress and hairstyle adornments, are part of those modes of individual and collective self-presentation through which a particular racialised and ethnicised identity can be voluntarily fabricated and projected (Clammer, 2015).

Following what has been highlighted above, the performance paradigm, which underpins this thesis as a secondary theoretical framework, gives a strong insight into the understanding of identity construction, personal narratives, aesthetical appearances and manners, and patterns of everyday socio-cultural behaviours among young London Congolese (Clammer, 2015). Investigating performances of cultural identities during rituals, either officially marked by individuals on stage, or less obviously marked through dress and gestures of the body among the receivers, made possible the illustration of the various roles played by diasporic subjects in front of an audience or as members of that audience (Fine and Speer, 1992, McKenzie, 2002). The approach served to grasp critically how young Congolese individuals have decided to present themselves in public spaces, as well as how they have decided to produce and embody their perceived culture (Fine and Speer, 1992, Schechner, 2013). Importantly, the understanding of young participants' racial, ethnic and gender identity configurations as "performative", or composed by actions, and their performances conceptualised as the embodied enactment of cultural forces has also involved fundamental social, political, and economic dimensions, everywhere connected to the interdependence between power and knowledge (Schechner, 2013). In the following section, the more general notion of the human body as a socio-cultural construct is introduced, followed by the contextualisation of the "superdiverse" London metropolis within which this thesis is framed.

2.2.3 The human body as a socio-cultural construct

Various cultural analysts emphasise how bodily practices can be used by social actors to powerfully reflect everyday life experiences. Carol Tulloch, for example, argues that style forms employed by individuals to “design” their lives and bodies for day-to-day living ultimately informs their biographies (Tulloch, 2016). Although fashion and beauty practices have often been thought of as a superficial mask used to disguise the “true” nature of the body, Jennifer Craik reminds us that the ways in which individuals adorn the body can be regarded as a dynamic expression for constructing and presenting a bodily self, where the “life” of the body is played out via the arrangement of clothes, adornments and gestures (Craik, 1994). In accordance with the social constructionist paradigm that broadly underpins this thesis, it is worth underling that the human body is here identified not merely as a material, biological and physiological entity but, its appearances, conditions and activities are also framed by a range of social and cultural factors. Therefore, individuals not only “possess” a body as object that others can categorise, but their body can be seen as a subject representing the physical and cultural embodiment of a self, a vehicle of existence and agency in the world as social actors (Baldwin et al., 2004). Pivotal to this debate are some of the works of Michel Foucault who reflects on the body as both a biological creation and a social construct (Foucault, 1977). He explores, for example, in his work on sexuality, specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves. Among these, he identifies:

The technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988, p. 18)

Foucault drew attention to the practices and discourses through which the concept of power-knowledge is imprinted or inscribed on the human body. He theorises how, in the entanglement of power-knowledge, power is not simply something to be held, won or

exercised by certain groups over others, as conventional political spheres would suggest. Power, instead, should be understood as always combined with knowledge in a way that is dispersed in a society or community through discourses (Baldwin et al., 2004). This reflection also involves bodily decorations and performative manners which can transmit precise information about the society and the community in which a person lives and belongs to, involving the limitations and expectations it puts upon its members, and the degree to which subjects are integrated to it (Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995).

Through the investigation of body practices, scholars say, we can better understand how mind and self are set through the enactment of body techniques (Baldwin et al., 2004). French anthropologist Marcel Mauss discusses the notion of “body techniques” to describe the ways in which individuals, from one society to another, know how to use their bodies through a series of techniques which are not natural but rather culturally and socially acquired (Mauss, 1979). There is no “natural” or inherent form to bodily actions but rather these are historically and culturally variable, assimilated attributes that speak to culturally specific memberships (Baldwin et al., 2004). Mauss argues that the body is our “first and most natural instrument” (Mauss, 1979, p. 104) and that every society, or community, has its own specific “habits” in relation to it. These differ between individuals in societies and their imitations, but especially in their education, manners and prestige (Mauss, 1979). Among the elements which constitute “the art of using the human body”, Mauss sees educational facts as dominant over the notion of imitation:

What takes place is a prestigious imitation. The child, the adult, imitates actions which have succeeded and which he has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence and who have authority over him. The action is imposed from without, from above (...) involving his body. The individual borrows the series of movements [or performances] which constitute it from the action executed in front of him or with him by others. (Mauss, 1979, pp. 101-102)

In engaging the material world, people employ “a series of assembled actions, and assembled for the individual not by himself alone but by all his education, by the whole society to which he belongs, in the place he occupies in it” (Mauss, 1979, p. 105). These are actions “more or less habitual and more or less ancient in the life of the individual and the history of the society (...) In every society, everyone knows and has to know and learn what he has to do in all conditions” (Mauss, 1979, p. 120). Among the techniques of adult life, Mauss classifies techniques of sleep, of rest, of movement (e.g. walking, running, dancing, etc.), techniques of care for the body (e.g. rubbing, washing, soaping, etc.), consumption techniques (e.g. eating and drinking), etc. Dressing and, in particular, fashioning the body, as a form of consumption and as a way of caring for the body, could therefore be added to the Mauss list.

To understand how these body techniques are enacted in everyday life situations and how they feature during ordinary interactions, the work of Erving Goffman, cited above, provides further insights. Goffman suggests how, whenever individuals are in the physical presence of each other, a series of cultural understandings are deployed. During social encounters, he theorises, each person feels a need to gain information about others, and vice versa, for instance about their social status and identity. While part of this information is transmitted verbally, other information is “given off” or projected by non-verbal conduct, such as facial expressions, the stance adopted by the body, the tone of the voice, etc. These gestures and their related cultural meanings are conceptualised by Goffman as a set of “body idioms”, a standardised mode of expression, classified for example as “dress, bearing, movements and position, sound level, physical gestures such as weaving or saluting, facial gestures and broad emotional expressions” (Goffman, 1963, p. 33). Following Goffman, the human body is the major tool of face-to-face interaction, an expressive entity capable of communicating complicated actions (Baldwin et al., 2004). Thus, the presentation of self through the

performance of the body in everyday and ritual context can profoundly influence an individual's relation to others (Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995). Bodies mediate notions of personhood and actions. Individuals come to know themselves and others and project themselves upon and into the world through the lived experience of their bodies, which also represent a key site for the playing out of socio-cultural differences (Baldwin et al., 2004).

Forms of body performances, other analysts underline, serve to convert and connect the biological body, otherwise a raw and voiceless entity, into an active communicator of symbolic and aesthetic significance (Baldwin et al., 2004). As stated by Joanne Entwistle: "human bodies are dressed bodies. The social world is a world of dressed bodies" (Entwistle, 2015, p. 6). Any expression of embellishment provides bodies with connotation and identity, reflecting how these enter the realm of culture and aesthetics and making them social (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001, Boydell, 2004). With processes of "adding to, embellishing, covering or adorning", the body is rendered noticeable and meaningful, where the act of fashioning the self often seeks to mark out a distinction in terms of racial and ethnic belonging as well as class, gender and subcultural affiliation that would otherwise not be so visible or significant (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001). Accordingly, the following fashion and beauty case studies investigated in the thesis aim to understand and document fashion and beauty embodied practices as a cultural, economic and political phenomenon as well as aesthetic mediums "for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs" (Wilson, 1985, p. 9) circulating and transforming among the young London Congolese diaspora.

2.2.4 The "superdiverse" London metropolis

In addition to the debate on the performance of cultural identity through the body, this chapter aims to introduce the specific context within which the thesis is framed. Secondary sources and fieldwork data reported in the following chapters demonstrate

the crucial role that the city of London has played on shaping body performances among Congolese youth. Many young informants involved in the thesis voice how this “global city” (Sassen, 1991) has offered them more personal opportunities, commonly perceiving it as less racist, compared to other European centres. It is now, therefore, necessary to emphasise the importance and particularity of London settings as a bridging feature to the following case studies of the thesis. The urban landscape of London, intensely integrated with world city networks, provides an extreme case in terms of high levels of population diversity and vastly diverse migratory experiences, as suggested by analysts (Taylor, 2003, Sepulveda et al., 2011). An imperial centre in the past, London is a place where the international movement of people and things have joined, the cultures of the world have gathered, settled and inevitably combined (Back and Sinha, 2016, 2018). London has historically been a global sender and receiver of people. However, the current mixture of migrant populations is considered by analysts as a relatively recent phenomenon, with almost half of the foreign-born population migrating to London from the 1990s onwards (Sepulveda et al., 2011). Particularly during the phase spanning the 1990s and early 2000s, the UK, and London in particular, enjoyed strong economic growth and witnessed a significant rise in extremely diversified immigration.⁴⁸ Many migrant groups had no specific historical or colonial relations with Britain, and the Congolese diaspora was among these, as specified earlier in chapter one. Described by some as a “magnet” and “hoover” city able to attract and merge migrant populations from practically everywhere, London has become one of the most ethnically and racially diverse metropolies in the world, where established minority communities are merged with a varied range of newer migrant communities (Sepulveda et al., 2011, Nathan and Lee, 2013). This is, for instance, documented by *The Guardian* journalist Leo Benedictus who states: “virtually every race, nation,

⁴⁸ This was especially until a stricter national immigration policy was introduced and the effects of the economic recession in 2008 (Sepulveda et al., 2011).

culture and religion in the world can claim at least a handful of Londoners” (Benedictus, 2005a). With all its stark contrasts, London represents today the UK city of migrants (Back and Sinha, 2018).

In the debate concerning cultural diversity and multiculturalism, Stuart Hall introduced several years ago the term “multicultural drift” to discuss the gradual development of a very heterogeneous population of ethnic minorities in Britain. Without ignoring the persistence of racism, he pointed out how they lived in various areas, how they participated in the labour market, and how they practised different cultural activities. Hall wanted to emphasise how the growing visibility and “natural” contribution of ethnic minorities in British society should be seen as an inevitable feature of urban life in Britain (Hall, 1999). Furthermore, Paul Gilroy deploys the notion of “conviviality” or “convivial multiculturalism”, referring to the methods of “cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas” (Gilroy, 2004, p. xi). In 2007, anthropologist Steven Vertovec theorised the, now well-known, concept of “superdiversity” to describe the transformative nature of immigration patterns to Britain and the very complex make-up of the British population, not only based on ethnicities and countries of origin but on the convergence of many other factors.⁴⁹ Vertovec reminds us how Britain’s migrant and ethnic minority population has traditionally been characterised by large, well-organized African-Caribbean and South Asian diasporas originally from Commonwealth countries or formerly colonial territories. However, Vertovec highlights, Britain has recently

⁴⁹ Together with the *country of origin*, involving ethnicity, languages, religious tradition, regional and local identities, cultural values and practices, Vertovec suggests factors such as *migration channel*, often related to highly gendered flows and specific social networks, *legal status* deciding entitlement to rights, *migrants’ human capital*, especially educational background, *access to employment*, which may or may not depend on migrants, *locality*, connected in particular to material conditions and to the presence and proximity of other migrant and ethnic minorities, *transnationalism*, highlighting how migrants’ lives are lived with strong reference to places and peoples somewhere else and the *usually chequered responses by local authorities, services providers and local residents*, which often function in accordance to previous experiences with migrants and ethnic minorities (Vertovec, 2007).

undergone a deep change in terms of demographic and social patterns. With the notion of “superdiversity” he intends to:

Underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced. Such a condition is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade. (Vertovec, 2007, p. 1024)

Even if the current economic and political scenario of the UK results from a shift towards a more severe national immigration policy, to detain and regulate unwanted migrants, following the global financial crisis of 2008, London can still be categorised as one of the world’s main junctions within the circuits of globalisation and neoliberal capitalism, and with a rich cultural diversity (Nathan and Lee, 2013, Back and Sinha, 2016, 2018). Analysts recognise how multicultural and multi-ethnic diversity is simply a fact of life in London’s urban reality (Watson and Saha, 2013). However, the wider debate on the value of multicultural differences in urban settings remains unresolved among scholars. London’s dynamic cityscape is seen by some as “losing its culture”, with diversity as a deeply unsettling socio-economic force (Goodhart, 2004), also emphasising structural problems such as segregation and discrimination (Phillips, 1998, Ettlinger, 2009). Others, on the contrary, recognise difference as a socio-cultural and economic asset (Nathan and Lee, 2013). Especially following the so-called “migrant crisis” of 2015 and the UK Referendum vote to leave the EU in June 2016, the phenomenon of “immigration”, analysts argue, has been transformed into an abstract symbol of a “world falling apart” and a society which seems to be increasingly divided (Back and Sinha, 2016). The arguments of this thesis therefore need to be situated within what has been referred to as an “intensified anti-immigrant time” (Massey and Sánchez, 2010). In such a context, this study tends to agree with analysts who claim that young migrants are contributing to new patterns of cultural combination and social

connection, yet their perspectives are rarely heard and are often not considered by public concern (Back and Sinha, 2016, 2018).

Importantly, in the analysis of London's contemporary multiculturalism and "conviviality", the significance of racism should not be minimised, always taking into account how contemporary forms of racism come to filter, rank and order diversity (Back and Sinha, 2016, 2018). In criticising Vertovec's work, they point out how in the essay on superdiversity he does not discuss patterns related to racist dynamics, especially omitting the linking between the legacy of empire and racism, and the racist hierarchies developed from it. In so doing, Vertovec does not consider the vast contribution of many scholars, such as Stuart Hall (1987, 1991) and Paul Gilroy (1987) to name the most pivotal, on the cultural politics of race and new ethnicities and on the connection between racism and urban multiculturalism (Back and Sinha, 2016). Vertovec only briefly writes on forms of inequality and prejudice, mentioning that there may be different migration statuses among groups of the same ethnic background, with deep impact on their life possibilities in Britain. More recently, Vertovec recognises that "conditions of superdiversity are inherently tied to power, politics and policy" (Meissner and Vertovec, 2015, p. 552) and that, in urban life, "conviviality and conflict invariably intertwine" (Nowicka and Vertovec, 2014, p. 351). However, Les Back and Shamser Sinha argue, he does not analyse how these paradoxical impulses coexist. Therefore, they emphasise how the notion of superdiversity does not pay the same attention to the ways in which divisions are delineated within urban multiculturalism (Back and Sinha, 2016). On the contrary, to understand urban diversity without falling into superficial celebrations of it we should pay careful attention to the "micro-politics of everyday life" (Wise and Velayutham, 2009, p. 15) in which state power and policies are entangled with new emergent forms of coexistence (Back and Sinha, 2016).

In line with this is Gilroy's idea of "convivial culture" which does recognise multiculturalism as a phenomenon developed organically in Britain's urban centres from an "imperial dissolution" which also continues to include hostility directed at Blacks and migrants (Gilroy, 2004). This idea has been widely explored by analysts working on various fields of research and areas of London, showing how the city could be seen as one of the world metropolises of "convivial multicultural" (Wessendorf, 2014, Back and Sinha, 2016, Valluvan, 2016). For example, in exploring "conviviality" in the London borough of Hackney,⁵⁰ considered one of the most diverse places in the UK and with a long history of diversification, Susanne Wessendorf demonstrates how residents of the area experience ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity as a regular aspect of their ordinary lives. This normalcy of cultural diversity has become, over the years, what she conceptualises as "commonplace diversity", with variations in the way individuals deal with it in public or semi-public realms. Interestingly with respect to this thesis, her analysis shows how social interactions in the public places of Hackney, where some of my young informants live, are at times produced out of "civility towards diversity" (Lofland, 1989, p. 464). Following Lyn H. Lofland, this principle specifies that, in face-to-face exchanges, urbanites tend to act in a civil manner, therefore acting "decently" vis-à-vis diversity. Although this does not necessarily refer to acting in a nice or pleasant manner. "Civility probably emerges more from indifference to diversity than from any appreciation of it" (Lofland, 1989, p. 465). As a result, Wessendorf argues that civility towards diversity might be a collective mode of dealing with cultural diversity in the district, a strategy employed by people to negotiate positive relations across difference, although often without a deeper level of engagement and without excluding the possibility of tensions. She also concludes that issues of class, especially

⁵⁰ The area of Hackney not only hosts long-term residents and newcomers from a multiplicity of ethnic minorities, but it is also distinguished by many distinctions in terms of migration histories, religions as well as educational and economic backgrounds (Wessendorf, 2014).

surrounding inequality and poverty, are far more problematic in the area than those concerning cultural diversity (Wessendorf, 2014).

On a similar note, Sivamohan Valluvan understands “convivial multiculture” not simply as multi-ethnic coexistence and contact, but rather the outcome of what he defines as “normative habituations of conviviality” where the presence of diversity becomes “unremarkable” or where an ethos of “indifference to difference” becomes prevalent. This does not necessarily mean that daily contacts in multicultural cities are always convivial or free of contestation (Valluvan, 2016). Again, some researchers stress the importance of the ways in which power operates, demonstrating the persistence of socio-spatial inequalities, stereotypes, prejudice and racist attitudes in coexistence with day-to-day intercultural interactions (Valentine, 2008, Hardy, 2017). Without excluding these factors, according to Valluvan, it can be said that “habituations of conviviality” do offer, in some instances, young urban Londoners the resources to script an anti-racist narrative for the city (Valluvan, 2016). Accordingly, it has been proven that young adult migrants living in London often develop the ability to produce multicultural convivial worlds in their ordinary experiences. Through a set of navigation tools⁵¹ and convivial aptitudes, young people with a migrant background get through the barriers and limitations that discriminatory patterns place upon them (Back and Sinha, 2016). The argument does include the “migrancy problematic” (Gilroy, 2004). Divisions and hierarchies of belonging emerge within the experience of young migrants, also structuring the way they see themselves, as a result of the legacy of racism and what analysts define as “social weight” (Back and Sinha, 2018). Young migrants find a way to re-make the city, build a life and grow a sense of openness to the future in the

⁵¹ From fieldwork among young migrants in London, analysts list a series of navigation devices as following: i) fostering attentiveness and curiosity; ii) care for the city and a capacity to put yourself in another’s place; iii) worldliness and making connections beyond local confines; iv) develop an aversion to the pleasures of hating; v) make connections and build home (Back and Sinha, 2016).

“midst of racism’s ruins” (Back and Sinha, 2016). Therefore, in order to understand urban multiculturalism, analysts conclude, we should always bear in mind the contradictory co-existence of both the limits of racism and conviviality in city everyday life (Back and Sinha, 2016, 2018).

Additionally, studies demonstrate that the superdiverse environment of London has been favourable for developing entrepreneurial behaviour among migrants, encouraging the rise of numerous migrant businesses. Ethnic minority businesses are now not only associated with the deep-rooted South Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities but also with individuals from highly diverse migrant backgrounds (Sepulveda et al., 2011). Although the real economic value and benefits of cultural diversity remain ambiguous, researchers suggest that a variety of perspectives, skills, and ways of thinking often translate into distinctive innovation and advantages across all type of businesses. While this does not necessarily result in revenue growth and success, some findings support the idea that London has a small, but important, “diversity bonus” and cultural difference can act as an economic advantage (Nathan and Lee, 2013). In a culturally diverse context, people who belong to “diverse” groups, as some analysts demonstrate, tend to be proactive and are more likely to choose to establish their own companies, driven by strong entrepreneurial inclinations, instead of being forced into entrepreneurship simply due to fewer employment opportunities (Nathan and Lee, 2013, Bozionelos and Hoyland, 2014). However, this last point could be questioned since more recent findings show that minority ethnic Britons face “shocking” levels of discrimination in the labour market (Siddique, 2019). In this sense, as Suzanne Hall reminds us, the London metropolis “emerges as an intense place through which migrant citizens are simultaneously integral to and regulated from the past, present and future of the city” (Hall, 2013, p. 12).

Whether for lack of professional alternatives or motivated by other migrants' proactive attitude towards entrepreneurialism, young urban Congolese Londoners included in this thesis claim to be very inclined to develop their own long-term projects as a priority. Being highly exposed to the diverse population of the London milieu is inevitably influencing their points of view and cultural and economic lifestyle. Compared to what analysts report on the experiences of other young migrants in London, young participants of this thesis probably deploy the resources provided by an "habitation of conviviality" to formulate an anti-racist narrative for the city of London (Valluvan, 2016). Without omitting from the context of London the significance of racism in everyday life, it can be argued that the younger generation of Congolese seems to feel more confident and better integrated than their elders. Interviewees have probably been affected by London convivial multiculturalism to perceive the city as less racist compared to Paris and Brussels. The ability to produce their own navigation strategies and convivial aptitudes in ordinary life experiences has given them the possibilities to re-make the city, build a life and grow a sense of openness to the future (Back and Sinha, 2016). This includes, for instance, criticising or discharging traditional life choices and values promoted by older generations of Congolese and other Black African diasporas, as many young voices reported in this thesis will show. Young Congolese Londoners seem rather to construct alternative forms of identity expressions more oriented towards educational and entrepreneurial activities which would potentially lead to successful entrepreneurship.

It is within the very complex nature of a superdiverse, "everyday multiculturalism" (Wise, 2009) and, to some extent, convivial context of the city of London that the following case studies are framed. In the rest of the thesis I will, firstly, analyse a well-established Congolese body practice and, subsequently, some of the new forms of fashion and beauty performances deployed by young Congolese in London. In

most of the cases, these not only stand as cultural identity expressions with the intent to portray a cultural heritage, but represent forms of businesses which provide financial revenues and political spaces for young informants in the cityscape. I will, therefore, demonstrate how *life histories*, *cultural memories*, *everyday life experiences*, *metaphors* and *conflicts* (Marcus, 1995) can be inscribed onto the body and how new London Congolese aesthetic processes of embodiment can stand meaningfully as cultural, economic and political arenas, which often seek to mark out a distinction in terms of racial and ethnic belonging as well as class and gender configurations.

2.3 Concluding remarks

In our postcolonial, postmodern world, characterised by dislocations and discontinuities, cultural identity must be incessantly performed, re-membered, and improvised (Conquergood, 1992). Gender, racial and ethnic identities represent the most embodied of all possible characteristics of being, with cultural performances as a central medium of knowing the self and others more completely (Fine and Speer, 1992, Clammer, 2015). As Richard Bauman suggests, performances are vehicles “for the encoding and presentation of information about oneself in order to construct a personal and social image” (Bauman, 1984, p. 21). Following James Clifford, culture and identity should be considered as a dialogical performance, always mixed, relational, inventive and mobile; politically contested and historically unfinished, rather than being an archaic survival (Clifford, 1988, Clifford, 1992). “Everywhere individuals and groups improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and languages (...) organic culture [is] reconceived as inventive process or creolised ‘interculture’. The roots of culture are cut and retied, collective symbols appropriated from external influences” (Clifford, 1988, pp. 14-15). Under similar circumstances, the performance of cultural identities becomes even more necessary for displaced individuals, who live suspended between past and present,

between two or more worlds. Performances convey agency for recollecting and re-contextualising diasporic cultural identities during everyday life (Conquergood, 1992). The migration experience involves loss and reconstruction of symbolic meanings that are placed between a “real/imagined” homeland and the receiving society (Bal and Hernández-Navarro, 2011). The production and consumption of diasporic performances provide a way to experience a process of “identities materialisation” and establish a sense of place-belonging where narratives of participants become “real” and often share collective understandings (Sofaer, 2008). Performances reflect the imaginative and physical reconstruction of the cultural landscape of the homelands from which people have been torn away as well as combined narratives, behaviours and material culture of the everyday (Fine and Speer, 1992).

Accordingly, this thesis traces young Congolese bodily performances to shed light on the ways young diasporic subjects articulate their way of living and thinking within their own culture and across other London cultures. The study undertakes a qualitative, multi-sited ethnographic approach and follows an interpretative understanding of the world. Thus, it has mainly looked at performances in their natural settings while overall interpreting the phenomena under scrutiny in terms of the meanings Congolese people brought to it (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). A multi-local fieldwork has entailed a gradual navigation, selection and classification of a set of primary empirical data and multifaced sites of inquiry, specifically adequate to comply with the research objectives (Hannerz, 2003). Meaningful moments in young Congolese individual’s life histories and daily experiences in the “superdiverse” London metropolis, embedded within fashion and beauty practices, are detailed in the next four chapters of the thesis.

Chapter Three – The contemporary fashion and lifestyle sub-community of

London's *sapeurs*

3 Introduction

This chapter presents the first case study of the thesis and is based on the Congolese fashion and lifestyle subculture of *la sape*, a well-established trend in Congolese diasporic culture. The focal point of investigation concerns the distinctive role that the city of London has played in shaping *la sape* within the Congolese diaspora. The case study concludes by arguing that the very complex “superdiverse” (Vertovec, 2007) milieu of London, characterised by a “convivial multiculturalism” (Gilroy, 2004), seems to have forged deep discrepancies within the group as well as having influenced a generational polarity. As a result of London’s complex urban landscape, a progressive decline of the fashion and lifestyle subculture among British Congolese youth is taking place.

The chapter is divided into two main parts. To give a broader framework to the case study, the first part analyses the historical and contemporary evolution of *la sape*’s movement in the Congos and its two main European centres of Paris and Brussels. This introductory part of the chapter deals, firstly, with the ways in which precursors of the movement in both Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa appropriated the aesthetics of European tailoring and dress codes worn by former French and Belgian colonial authorities and re-interpreted it by fusing it with precolonial indigenous signs and meanings to negotiate agency and subvert societal hierarchical structures. The first part of the chapter then analyses how the *sapeur*’s⁵² high fashion and elegance performance in the Congos was further openly mobilised into a counter practice employed against colonial and postcolonial authoritative powers and against economic deprivation as well

⁵² The terms *la sape* and *sapeur/s* will be kept in French as there is no suitable English translation (Gondola, 1999a).

as evolving, more recently, into a performative struggle to challenge gender stereotypes and homophobic sentiments. The first part of the chapter finally investigates the subculture in French and Belgian migrant settings, interpreted by analysts either as a language of resistance to overcome discrimination and oppose marginalisation, or as a mode of access to and integration with the Congolese political and business élites.

The second part of the chapter represents the central focus of analysis, investigating the transformation of *la sape* dress and lifestyle practice among the London Congolese diaspora. This part traces, firstly, the more recent establishment of the trend in the city, evolving between the 1980s and the 2000s from a vibrant popular movement to a political opposition group, although one with contradictory internal forces at work. Secondly, the contemporary presence of a restricted sub-community of London *sapeurs* is introduced, reporting some of their experiences and highly ambivalent points of view on the practice of *la sape*. Finally, although most significantly, the chapter documents several contrasting experiences and attitudes towards the movement among younger London Congolese who are not members of the group. While some non-*sapeurs* defended the subculture as an important expression of their cultural background, others stood firmly against it, voicing more problematic and controversial ways of looking at the lifestyle choices and values promoted by the movement.

3.1 The fashion and lifestyle Congolese subculture of *la sape*

3.1.1 A preface on the practice of *la sape*

The socio-cultural phenomenon of *la sape* represents a well-established Congolese fashion and lifestyle practice. Its members, defined as *sapeurs*, are mainly composed of lower-class Congolese men living in both Congo-Brazzaville (RC, former French

colony)⁵³ and Congo-Kinshasa (DRC) and among its European diasporas. *Sape* derives from the French verb *se saper*,⁵⁴ which in French conveys the idea of fashionable and ostentatious dressing habits. *Sape* is therefore a word play used as an acronym standing for *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes* (Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People) (Gondola, 1999a). *Sapeurs* are known for fashioning their identities through the acquisition and reinterpretation of Western designer labels, typically using spectacular luxury clothing inspired by the classical elegance of the Western suit (Kutesko, 2013, Brodin et al., 2016). A typical *sapeur* look consists of haute couture garments which are purposely assembled to assert extreme fashionability. This usually includes suits and ties, pocket squares and alligator shoes, ostentatious watches, sunglasses, and other accessories. Although *la sape* sartorial style is based on Western designs, analogous to that of European dandies (Pinson, 2003, Schiffer, 2008), and is rooted in African colonial histories, it has often been interpreted as a means to express modern Central African identities (Rovine, 2016), illustrating part of the *story* and the *metaphor* traced in this chapter.

The dress practice of *la sape* has been widely analysed by academics, especially by ethnographers, anthropologists and sociologists, in the context of both Congo-Brazzaville (Friedman, 1994b, Martin, 2002, Martin, 1994) and Congo-Kinshasa (Gandoulou, 1989b, Gondola, 1997, Gondola, 1999a, Wrong, 1999, Jewsiewicki, 2003, Gondola, 2010) as well as in migration and transnational matrices of, particularly, Paris and Brussels (Gandoulou, 1989a, MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000, Thomas, 2003, Thomas, 2007, Newell, 2016). Many studies highlight the complexities and ambiguities of the movement. They illustrate how *la sape* has, historically and contemporarily, adopted local forms and how its members have experimented with

⁵³ The area at the north of the Congo river, present day Republic of Congo, also known as Congo-Brazzaville, was established as a French territory in 1880 and gained independence in 1960.

⁵⁴ In English, the French verb *se saper* could be translated as “to dress” or “to dress-up”.

garment styles to express multi-layered social, political and cultural meanings. These aspects of the performance are framed here as the *conflict* and, once again, the *metaphor* of a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995).

Sapeurs have also been the focus of artistic works and have been widely depicted in Western mainstream media and popular culture. To name a few instances, they have attracted the attention of various photographers and fashion designers, becoming the subjects of catalogues such as “Gentlemen of Bacongo” (Tamagni, 2009), “Sapologie” (Giusti, 2009)⁵⁵ and Paul Smith 2010 collection.⁵⁶ *La sape* has also been spotlighted in advertisements and music videos. Among the most widespread are the 2014 Guinness Super Bowl ad (Mediavilla, 2014), “Losing you” a song by American R&B artist Solange (Solange, 2012) and “Sapés comme jamais” (Dressed like never), a song by Congolese French rappers Maître Gims and Niska (Maître Gims, 2015). Several digital magazines, for instance *VICE*, have also featured this topic (Christie, 2009, Lockwood, 2015, Yves Sambu and Baron, 2015).

La sape bodily expressions have for a long time involved a cult-like pursuit of elegance while showing the features of a subculture, including its ethos, rituals and specific jargon. Being a Congolese dandy has mainly been a question of style rather than a matter of money (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000, Wrong, 1999). Beginning as a colonial subculture, the trend then took the form of an “oppositional and counter-hegemonic” youth subculture, according to some analysts (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000). According to others, the movement in migration settings evolved as a form of mimetism or as a form of access to elitarian networks (Brodin et al., 2016, Trapido, 2017). Up to the present day, *la sape* has spread beyond the RC and

⁵⁵ *La sape* had been previously documented by other photographers. For instance, Héctor Mediavilla Sabaté (Mediavilla, 2003) and Baudouin Mouanda (Mouanda, 2008). The movement continues to be the focus of other photographers, including Kinshasa photographer Junior D. Kannah (Kannah, 2014).

⁵⁶ The collection was featured, for example, by *Vogue* Online Magazine (Vogue, 2010).

DRC, reaching other African regions and its diasporas,⁵⁷ involving both young African men and women and, at times, representing a struggle over equality (Hansen, 2004). The following sections will review the fashion practice in an historical perspective by illustrating its socio-cultural and political origins under the French and Belgian colonial occupation of the Congos,⁵⁸ its development during postcolonialism, and its transnational dialogue with the European metropolises of Paris and Brussels.

3.1.2 Dandies between the banks of the Congo River: The emergence of a new urban élite in colonial Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa

The practice of adopting “modern” European clothing and its African “rewriting” can be traced back to the formation of the two Congolese colonial capitals, Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa,⁵⁹ during the first decades of the French and Belgian colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century (Gondola, 1999a).⁶⁰ The European “civilising” mission, depicting Africans as uncivilised, also included the imposition of Western dress on the Congolese populations by colonial officers and missionaries who aimed not only to redeem the “primitive minds” but also the “primitive bodies” of the “naked people” (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000). European masters⁶¹ used to compensate the work of their African houseboys with second-hand clothing, instead of

⁵⁷ Such as Uganda, Cameroon, Senegal and Ivory Coast (Welters and Lillethun, 2018).

⁵⁸ It is not my intention to consider the French occupation of the RC and the Belgian occupation of the DRC as part of the same historical framework. The RC and Congo-Brazzaville are not considered as part of this investigation, however, when debating *la sape*, it is not possible to draw a specific line between the two Congolese capitals and its diasporas in their European counterparts (Paris and Brussels).

⁵⁹ At the time Léopoldville.

⁶⁰ It is fundamental to note here that the importance of dress practices in mediating social relations has for a long time been deeply rooted among Central African societies. As Phyllis Martin reminds us: “In pre-colonial times, clothing, jewellery and insignia conveyed identity, status, values and a sense of occasion. Those with access to European trade cloth and second-hand clothes integrated them into their dress. Central Africans had a strong sense of the ‘politics of costume’ long before new sources and ideas of clothing arrived with colonialism” (Martin, 1994, p. 426). “Into the colonial experience, therefore, many Central Africans brought a well-informed knowledge of the symbolic importance of dress and the association of style, finery, wealth and power” (Martin, 1994, p. 405).

⁶¹ Evidence shows that second-hand clothes were often used by European missionaries and explorers as bargaining items to persuade African chiefs and secure their loyalty (Gondola, 1999a, Gondola, 2010).

monetary wages, since having various “civilised” or “enlightened” servants, capable of using French and dressing properly, was a sign of social prestige. As early as 1910-20, Congolese houseboys began to embrace European “modern” clothing styles to facilitate their master’s status as well as to enhance their own social rank in front of other Africans (Gondola, 1999a, Gondola, 2010).

The 1930s saw the emergence of a new urban élite among young Congolese men of both Brazzaville and Kinshasa, formed not only by houseboys but also by clerks working in colonial offices, male nurses and a few small-scale entrepreneurs. Among these, an additional source of inspiration was the sophisticated elegance of the *Bapopo* or coast men, West African white-collar workers (e.g. natives of Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and Sierra Leon), recruited by private colonial companies to carry out auxiliary tasks in the Congos (Gondola, 1999a, Gondola, 2010). The *Bapopo* positioned themselves as modern and cosmopolitan trendsetters, serving as “models to the Congolese élite to combat ingrained charges of inferiority levelled at them by the French and the Belgians” (Gondola, 2010, pp. 159-160). Members of this new élite became specialised consumers of the latest fashions,⁶² especially from Paris (Gondola, 2010).

In so doing, many townspeople openly rejected the European employers and missionaries’ own agenda in handing out used attire. They transformed the European dress practice into autonomous Congolese well-dressed clothing styles,⁶³ through which metaphors of empowerment are embodied, therefore transmitting a re-interpreted

⁶² This is for instance testified by a young man, Camille Diata, who belonged to the Congolese élite as a clerk-interpreter in Brazzaville (Martin, 2002). In a 1930s letter addressed to a colleague stationed outside the city, Camille writes: “Do you know that in Brazzaville and Kinshasa, all the gentlemen or young people dress Popo style; which is to say they have a helmet worth 150 francs and a silk shirt, a poplin suit or a suit made of another fabric, worth at least around 250 or 300 francs and pants that go all the way to the heels of their feet” (Gondola, 1999a, p. 27).

⁶³ Gradually, local merchants’ shops selling European cloth and clothing and tailors and seamstresses businesses reproducing European fashions, became popular in both Congolese capitals (Martin, 1994, Jong, 2017).

Congolese story. These were usually composed of Western suits and accessories such as canes, eyeglasses, gloves and chained pocket watches,⁶⁴ framed in this case study as the *thing* field (Marcus, 1995). In manifesting an independent form of success and knowledge of European manners, the practice created colonial identities (Martin, 1994, Gondola, 1999a, Jong, 2017). Analysts such as Elizabeth Kutesko, James Ferguson and Jonathan Friedman therefore argue that, whilst Europeans inevitably impacted African local clothing tastes and a transition in vestimentary codes, *la sape* should not be understood as a substitution of a traditional African culture for a Western one (Kutesko, 2013, Ferguson, 2002, Friedman, 1994b).⁶⁵

African Congolese culture, Kutesko argues, has generally not drawn a rigid distinction between the inner and outer self. The exterior appearance has been conceptualised to be instrumental in fashioning the inner being (Kutesko, 2013). Accordingly, as Martin importantly reminds us, the appreciation of dress and jewellery to present the self and establish differentiation among pre-colonial Central African societies and, more specifically, Congolese populations, existed for centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans. The symbolic practice of correlating body expressions and outward display with power and wealth was, therefore, simply being transformed by young men in colonial urban contexts, where a more widespread access to clothing choices and new fashion ideas were introduced (Martin, 1994, Martin, 2002). Similarly to the ways their ancestors used cloth, jewels and emblems to publicly exhibit and confirm their authority, Congolese dandies also recognised the allegorical significance

⁶⁴ Another form of “Western cool” style inspiration came from the first movies screened by the Belgians in the “indigenous quarters” of Kinshasa (Wrong, 1999).

⁶⁵ On a superficial level, *la sape* could be seen as a passive practice of cultural assimilation, of homogenous adoption of European elements. On the contrary, analysts argue that *la sape*’s re-writing of European fashion should be interpreted as an appropriation of Western imported goods, signs and codes within the terms of an “indigenous” logic. Young Congolese men, it is argued, were neither acting “Western” nor deploying a mimicry process through *la sape* performance. Instead, their behaviour was based on an indigenous “cosmology” in which, they believed, “life force” could be extrapolated from powerful others by a form of magic. While the materials were drawn by Europe, the cultural project was framed within an “entirely African” logic (Ferguson, 2002, Friedman, 1994b, Kutesko, 2013).

of aesthetic appearances to assert a position and mediate relations in society (Martin, 1994).

To associate *la sape*'s nature exclusively with the colonial encounter is, therefore, too simplistic. In appropriating European tailoring and dress codes worn by colonial authorities and re-interpreting it with fusing indigenous styles and meanings, Congolese subaltern subjects as precursors of *la sape* movement negotiated agency in subverting societal hierarchical structures (Kutesko, 2013). It is also undeniable that the colonial discourse, which intrinsically perpetuated processes of "othering", had societal transformative powers in relation to men's dressing habits and controversial socio-cultural issues (Thomas, 2003). This became even clearer during the late colonial era, when Western clothing styles not only symbolised a "modern" and "cosmopolitan" transition but became a vehicle for socio-political change. Fashioning the "colonised body" signified asserting class, gender and generational roles, with young Congolese men wanting to appear as similar as possible to Europeans as that was the mark of being *évolué* (Martin, 1994, Martin, 2002). At a postcolonial stage, a "cult of elegance" was displayed by dandies to dissociate themselves from those in power, to contest their social estrangement and regain control over their own individualities (Martin, 1994). Practicing *la sape* became, therefore, part of a wide identitarian agenda related with the cultural, political and social coordinates of the colony and, later on, the postcolony (Thomas, 2003). In this sense, the body expression clearly traces a Congolese colonial and postcolonial *story* as well as embedding a *metaphorical* and *conflicting* dimension (Marcus, 1995).

3.1.3 From the anti-colonial to the postcolonial struggle: performing high fashion as a political act and as a state of mind

Gradually throughout the colonial and postcolonial decades, *la sape* embodied a powerful political symbolism with the habit of "dressing well" established as a

rebellious act (Gondola, 2010). The development of Congolese music and the urban nightclub scene and its entanglement with the body practice played a pivotal role in the progression of the political significance advocated by *la sape*. Especially with the emergence of the Congolese rumba in the 1940s and its international explosion, and the proliferation of proto-*sapeurs* youth clubs in the 1950s, young men blended their interest for elegant clothes, used to symbolically define their social distinctiveness, with the formation of mutual-aid associations (Gondola, 2010, Martin, 1994, 2002).⁶⁶ Similarly to their counterparts in the Congos' capitals, *sapeurs* who had settled in Europe by the early 1930s proudly embraced European high-fashion trends and aesthetic display⁶⁷ as a positive identity marker, as a way to tell their own stories embedded with metaphors, epitomising their search for modernity and emancipation. Some of them were in fact political activists leading anti-colonial struggles (Gondola, 2010).⁶⁸ In so doing, early generations of *sapeurs* in both the Congos and Europe paved the way for succeeding peers to transform what superficially seemed to be a desire to borrow the fashion system of the colonists into a broader discourse in which high fashion was transformed as a banner for socio-political struggle (Gondola, 2010).⁶⁹

The political lexicon of *la sape* intensified even more during postcolonial times. Immediately after the 1960s, when both DRC and RC were granted independence, economic chaos with lack of job opportunities, ethnic and political instability and urban

⁶⁶ From the 1950s, for example, *Cabaret* and *Existentialistes* (Existentialists), so named by students returning from Paris who were admirers of Sartre (Martin, 2002).

⁶⁷ Often trading garments for “exotic” commodities such as elephant tails and wild animals’ skins (Gondola, 2010).

⁶⁸ Such as religious leader and prominent *sapeur* André Matswa in Paris. In 1926, he founded the oppositional movement “L’Amicale” which helped newly arrived Africans, often not welcomed in France and facing deportation or arrest, to find jobs, accommodation, and legal and psychological counselling. It must be reminded that his was an historical moment where Black Africans in Belgium, France and other European cities were treated as colonial subjects of an “inferior race” and exposed as “primitive” creatures in human zoos beside monkeys, giraffes and camels (Gondola, 2010).

⁶⁹ This explains the strong generational linkage which has always characterised *la sape*, involving “pedigree” as well as “panache” (Gondola, 2010). Often defined as a legacy by their predecessors and the result of “proper education”, the movement’s line of inspiration from the past is fully acknowledged by its members (Martin, 1994, Gondola, 2010).

depression afflicted the countries. In this context, the movement further developed as a counter-culture, or a counter-story, with fashion style employed as a symbolic statement to stand against economic deprivation and to express political agency by the youth organisations (Martin, 1994, Martin, 2002). In the specific case of the DRC (at that time Zaire), this became very clear when President Mobutu established the state ideology known as *authenticité* (1966-7), which held at its core a conscious detachment from European influences, as outlined in chapter one. The project also included radical rules towards individuals' dress code. Most Western-styled clothing, involving business suits, shirts, ties, and women's trousers, were banned and substituted with more "authentic" fashion standards. Congolese women were required to wear *pagne*, a wraparound dress composed of untailored brightly patterned cotton fabric, while men were required to wear *abacost*,⁷⁰ a Mao-style, short-sleeved tunic jacket (designed by the president himself) worn with trousers but without a tie, in a single, sober colour (Wrong, 1999, Cameron, 2010, Thomas, 2003, Gondola, 2010, Kutesko, 2013). By the late 1970s and the 1980s, when the movement was highly encouraged by popular music bands among Congolese youth living both in the Congos and European metropolises (Wrong, 1999),⁷¹ *la sape* officially mobilised as a form of political resistance to the authoritarian structure of the Congolese state. In a context where police could arrest individuals who refused to abandon Western fashion styles, *sapeurs* purposely embraced extravagant styles as a subversive expression of the body (Gondola, 2010, Kutesko, 2013, Wrong, 1999). Thus, the practice is here understood as ingraining even stronger *metaphorical* meanings (Marcus, 1995).

⁷⁰ From the French *à bas le costume* (down with the suit) (Thomas, 2003). The *abacost* was abandoned after Mobutu's fall in 1997, with a return to European-style clothing (Kutesko, 2013).

⁷¹ Congolese musicians, who signed recording contracts in France and Belgium, were returning to the Congos to showcase their expensive couturier labels during concerts (Wrong, 1999). Many recording studio owners were also owners of local clothing boutiques. Instead of paying popular musicians for their compositions, owners gave them their clothes to wear during concerts as a form of advertisement among fans and aspiring dandies (Gondola, 2010).

Internationally acclaimed Congolese musician Papa Wemba, also known as *le Pape de la sape*, played an important role in the promotion of *la sape* and its political values. He formalised the movement, launching many fashion trends while citing designer's brand names in some of his lyrics (Wrong, 1999, Gondola, 2010). In interviews, he acknowledged how *la sape* under Mobutu's regime constituted a form of rebellion, anti-poverty and anti-depressive, as well as a way to fight against the *abacost* dictatorship (Thomas, 2003). On a similar note, in interview with Michela Wrong, Colonel Jagger, a well-recognised Congolese *sapeur* in Kinshasa and manager of Papa Wemba's band *Viva La Musica*, recalled: "For twenty years people here wore a uniform. We were the only ones who refused. At concerts *sapeurs* would be beaten up for wearing suits. It was a way of saying no to the system, of showing off our difference. A way of feeling good about ourselves" (Wrong, 1999, 2000). His voice demonstrates how the society of *la sape* additionally promoted a specific way of living for Congolese youth, with values, rituals and jargon to be followed (Martin, 1994). Among these, the importance of behaving with "high-class" manners, of cleanliness,⁷² of no violent actions, and no use of hard drugs,⁷³ as well as the significance of knowing how to make an entrance, to walk,⁷⁴ to sit and to stand like a "gentleman" (Wrong, 1999, Jong, 2017). Publicly performing these rituals of self-assertion was, therefore, explicitly experienced as a counter-hegemonic practice connected to the dictates of

⁷² In 1979, while describing *la sape* culture in an interview, Papa Wemba explained: "[it] promotes high standards of personal cleanliness, hygiene and smart dress, to a whole generation of youth across Zaire (...) well-groomed, well-shaven, well-perfumed" (Gondola, 2010, p. 164).

⁷³ However, these rules have often been disrespected, with *sapeurs* insulting each other, being very competitive or embarking into illegal actions, as explained later in the chapter and framed as part of the *conflict* (Marcus, 1995).

⁷⁴ The walk performance is considered by many *sapeurs* as a kind of artistic expression and it is in this chapter framed as a form of creative production (Marcus, 1995). For example, Kinshasa *sapeur* Colonel Jagger compared it to John Travolta's way of walking in 'Saturday Night Fever', adding: "Well, we were doing that long before he did!" (Wrong, 1999, p. 22). During gatherings, the walk is completed by a modest dancing style of swagger and stroll combined: "a *sapeur* moves as little as possible, just enough to show off his clothes. If you're wearing a nice outfit, you obviously don't want to break into a sweat" (Wrong, 1999, p. 26).

Congolese political authority, therefore as a counter-story forged metaphorically to stand against socio-economic deprivation (Thomas, 2003, Martin, 1994, Martin, 2002).

Regarding this historical socio-political awareness, it is also worth underling the way in which *la sape* has recently evolved as a struggle for gender equality (Hansen, 2004). Despite having long been a predominantly male phenomenon,⁷⁵ emphasising notions of gender differentiation and displays of masculinity (Gondola, 2010), the past decade has witnessed the growth of female *sapeurs*, known as *sapeuses*. While initially only appearing as supporting figures to the men, they are now embracing *la sape* to make their own political statements (Gondola, 2010). A significant contribution in documenting young Kinshasan *sapeuses*' experiences has been made by Congolese photographer Junior D. Kannah and UK journalist Sally Howard.⁷⁶ Howard explains how the inherited eccentric sartorial outfits of *la sape* are reconfigured by Congolese women as a subversive performance to question strict gender roles defined by Congolese society and to express an empowered sense of womanhood. By wearing masculine suits and accessories, and operating through solidarity clubs, *sapeuses* embrace the culture to return to pre-colonial modes of strong African femininity as well as to act as queer women and to stand against gender inequality and widespread

⁷⁵ In the specific DRC case, among the reasons behind *la sape*'s intrinsic male quality was the process of urbanisation of Léopoldville (then renamed as Kinshasa), under a Belgian colonial framework, consciously characterised by gender differentiations. The urban fabric of the capital operated as a male fortress in the exclusion of women, and the development of cultural practices in the urban environment were inevitably affected. From its origins, Congolese music and fashion expressions appeared as eminently male initiatives, fostering the invisibility of women, while promoting, in contrast, the visibility of men (Gondola, 1997). Gender relations were progressively transformed during the final years of colonialism when urban demographics began to be altered by women. For instance, with the appearance of the *Association Féminines d'Elégances (Feminine Association of Elegance)*, women's social clubs, which again had as one of the main objectives' mutual assistance. Contrary to African men, who rapidly borrowed the European suit, African women remained uninterested in European fashion, adopting instead fashions by their clubs which suggested a form of rejection of European values. They remained attached to their traditional attire, avoiding European dresses and skirts (Gondola, 1999a, Thomas, 2007).

⁷⁶ Their work was exhibited in London in 2017 at the Brunei Gallery, with the exhibition entitled: "Les Sapeuses': The Lady Dandies of the DRC".

homophobia (Howard, 2017).⁷⁷ In so doing, they express a newer Congolese *story* which is fully entangled with *metaphors* (Marcus, 1995) of empowerment.

Whether embraced by male or female individuals, the movement has, according to some, reached mystical dimensions, occasionally described by *sapeurs* themselves⁷⁸ and defined by scholars as *religion ya kitendi*⁷⁹ (religion of cloth) (Jewsiewicki, 2003, Gondola, 2010). Gondola highlights how *la sape* could be understood as “an esoteric society based on the fetishization of *kitendi* (...), a belief that dressing well superseded all other concerns of life” (Gondola, 2010, p. 164).

Kitendi (a kikongo word) is more than just cloth; it represents a cult of cloth, a sublimation of the body that has been regenerated by cloth. It is not surprising that *sapeurs* devote most of their money, time, and energy to it. The *sape* offers them a sort of resurrection. Through it their realities reincarnate themselves as in a dream, where they are damaged by strange convulsions and ambiguity. (Gondola, 1999a, p. 33)

Gondola sees the performance of *la sape* at the core of an identity mutation among Congolese youth in the context of African metropolis, defining it as:

⁷⁷ *Sapeuses'* voices have been featured by various Western online newspapers and magazines. For example, Maguy “Mama Afrika” Ndumza, a thirty-three-year-old *sapeuse*, testifies for *Vice Broadly*: “Many men tell me I should dress like an African woman in colourful print dresses; that I will not find a husband if I dress this way. I ignore all of them”. In the same article, Junior D. Kannah remembers what an individual told him while photographing *sapeuses*: “Women should engage in trade to supplement the needs of families rather than wallowing in the street like rogues” (Tsjeng, 2017). Some *sapeuses* also deal with homophobic prejudices due to their “masculine” outfits. As stated by the brother of a young *sapeuse* and reported by *The Guardian*: “We live with her. We think [the way she dresses] is normal. But there are people who don’t see it as a good thing, they think she is a lesbian. Some think she is, others just say it as an insult. People have asked us if she is” (Maclean, 2017). On a similar note, Kimbondo “Mama Africa Mayise” Dumbo, a thirty-six-year-old *sapeuse* says: “Many people think the *sapeuses* are lesbians. Being a lesbian is a big taboo in Africa, so you have to be brave to dress this way (...) To the men who complain about women in the *sape*? I invite their wives to join us!” (Tsjeng, 2017). Through interviews conducted by Howard, the voices of other *sapeuses* were published. Thirty-five-year-old Barbara Kasende states: “To those who say we’re deranged to dress like men I say nothing; they’re just the same old men who say that women should not be in the military or politics.” Fifty-one-year-old interviewee Inda Gabie says: “Today women are seen in every domain of work in the DRC, but we still battle with some old attitudes to women. Dressing like this is my challenge to those attitudes”. Another female *sapeuse* argues: “It is easy to look like a gentleman. But to act like a gentleman? Today we have to show the men how it is done!” (Lightfoot Travel, 2017). These voices cited above aim to diversify the *people*, the *plots* and the *symbolic* fields (Marcus, 1995) involved with the performance of *la sape*.

⁷⁸ See *sapeurs* interviews in the following sections of the chapter.

⁷⁹ The new cult may have been founded by Congolese musician Stervos Niarcos Ngashie with the release of his album “Religion ya Kitendi” in 1989 (Gondola, 2010, Tsjeng, 2017).

A vehicle to borrow new identities. *La sape* is an ambiguous adventure (...) that leads Congolese *sapeurs*, not only from a third world city to Paris and Brussels, but also from social dereliction to psychological redemption. It authenticates and validates their quest for a new social identity which the African city has failed to provide its overwhelming population of youth. (Gondola, 1999a, p. 23)

Furthermore, he identifies three “levels of clothing” which correspond to three different *allegorical* (Marcus, 1995) “stations” in the *sapeurs*’ search for identity.

First, real clothing, which presents the *sapeur* as an individual who suppresses a real identity to acquire a borrowed one. Second, the *griffe* (expensive designer labels), which authenticates this oneiric migration, adds the finishing touches to the usurpation. Third, the spoken (and even sung or danced) clothing makes the *sapeur* the actor and conjurer of this identity. If the value of the real clothing is contested, and if the authenticity of the *griffe* threatened, the spoken clothing reaffirms the illusion of an ego-screaming presenting an enactment of words, gestures, and attitudes. (Gondola, 1999a, pp. 25-26)

Gondola’s understanding of *sapeurs* performances as a form of mythical belief to search for new, cosmopolitan, and often conflicting identities is also explored by other analyses which highlight how the collective experience of *la sape* includes a “highly mythologised” vision of European cities, and especially Paris (Thomas, 2003, Hanneken, 2008, Trapido, 2011). These interpretations provide a bridging point between the subculture in the Congos and the ways in which it progressed in European diasporic settings, as discussed in the following sections of this chapter.

3.1.4 Being a *mikiliste* in Paris and Brussels: A form of resistance or a mode of social success?

Throughout the mid-twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the European metropolises of Paris and Brussels have inevitably been at the core of *la sape*’s further transnational development and its related quest for cosmopolitanism. A “new” social figure, the *mikiliste*, spread in postcolonial Congos especially by means of popular Congolese music between the 1970s and 1980s. The *mikiliste* defines a Congolese *bon vivant* (one who enjoys life) who has established a new life in Europe, or travels regularly there,

wears designer garments and associates with musicians (Trapido, 2011).⁸⁰ A compulsory rite of passage of the *mikiliste*'s personal and social advancement was the cyclical mission of *l'aventure* (adventure), consisting, on an initial basis, of finding a way to travel and live in Europe⁸¹ to acquire a wardrobe of *things* (Marcus, 1995), involving high-fashion designers' clothing and accessories (Martin, 1994, Thomas, 2003, Gondola, 2010, Kutesko, 2013). The city of Paris was, and still is,⁸² considered *la sape* centre "par excellence", the *symbolic* highpoint of an "appearance of wealth" hierarchy based on knowledge and possession of haute couture clothing (Gandoulou, 1989a, Hanneken, 2008). The final objective of this trans-continental *aventure* among European Congolese men was to triumphantly return to the homeland, either to stay or for their summer holidays, to tell their *stories* (Marcus, 1995) through ritually parading their material wardrobes at organised social gatherings in favourite dance bars of Kinshasa or Brazzaville. Only then, were they recognised as "true" *sapeurs*,⁸³ with an

⁸⁰ The Lingala French expression *mikiliste*, together with *sapeur* and *aventurier* (adventurer), replaced the expression *Parisien* (Parisian), formerly used by youth in Congo-Brazzaville to define earlier Congolese men who had travelled to Europe (Gondola, 1999a). *Mikiliste* derives from the Lingala word *mokili* which refers to the individual who "has seen the world", in combination with the French suffix *-iste*. More precisely, *mikili*, the plural for *mokili*, is a term that directly denotes the rich countries of the North, becoming synonymous for Europe. The expression *mikiliste*, therefore, identifies the young Congolese who made it to Europe (Gondola, 1999b, Trapido, 2011).

⁸¹ Reaching Europe was widely considered a "man's adventure", another reason for defining *la sape* in a masculine dimension (Gondola, 1999a).

⁸² Paris continues to figure among *la sape*'s European focal points, maintaining the mythic status it was invested with during the French colonial empire (Thomas, 2003). A recently published study on *sapeurs Parisiens* (Brodin et al., 2016) demonstrates how Congolese *sapeurs* and their art of the spectacle, or creative production, is still part of the urban fabric. The study involves twenty-four *sapeurs*, mainly from Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa, between the age of twenty-two and sixty-four. Some have described *la sape* as an expression of self and body, as a process of individuation and a sign of recognition, as a form of social promotion. Others have defined Paris as the city of luxury, and therefore, still the city par excellence for *sapeurs*. The consumption of luxury brands, the *thing*, is defined as a source of pleasure and as a symbolic link, the *metaphor*, to the group as well as a means to gain the respect of peers, and to assert one's identity (Brodin et al., 2016).

⁸³ Interestingly, Gondola reminds us how the migratory process of young potential *mikilistes* began a long time before undertaking the geographical exodus towards northern cities. Aspiring *mikilistes* experienced *their* Europe firstly in Africa through the *stories* (Marcus, 1995) of other young *sapeurs* who returned home. It is on these encounters that their knowledge on fashionable brand names, trendy nightclubs as well as on immigration lawful dynamics and illegal schemes has been based (Gondola, 1999a).

enhanced social status of benefits conferred onto them by the community (Martin, 1994, Thomas, 2003, Gondola, 2010, Kutesko, 2013), therefore connotating metaphors of prestige to the body practice.

It is worth underling here that these new generations of young Congolese *sapeurs* found themselves in a very different societal position compared to *Parisien* of colonial and post-independence times who were members of the political and business Congolese élite (Trapido, 2017). In contrast, postcolonial *sapeurs* belonged to a much lower and poorer social stratum, often leaving school at an early age, being unemployed and not married. This transformation within the movement in terms of class and social rank reflected the postcolonial milieu (Gandoulou, 1989a). When the regime faced broad-based opposition in Kinshasa in the late 1980s, this new generation of *mikilistes*, through their new aesthetic ritual-stories, much wilder and desperate compared to their predecessors,⁸⁴ were among the ones that “challenged the symbolic primacy of the élite in many informal political spheres” (Trapido, 2017, p. 134).

Due to the explosion of civil wars in both Congos,⁸⁵ and its profound socio-political disorder and economic instability, especially from the mid-1990s onwards, the returning home costume for European Congolese *sapeurs* became more limited,

⁸⁴ Trapido underlines how the aesthetical rituals of the 1970s and 1980s *mikilistes* were a clear variation on the earlier *Parisien*’ theme. In displaying “exploded suits, foot-long crocodile-skin shoes and Hermes umbrellas opened indoors, the *mikiliste* referenced – but went way beyond – the sartorial habits of their parents’ generation. What was true of clothes was true more widely: improvising on an old theme in a new context, they produced a set of rituals that were far wilder and more desperate than those of their salaried forebears” (Trapido, 2017, p. 134).

⁸⁵ Throughout the 1990s, the RC saw the escalation of strong antagonism between government ruling forces and competing parties, actively recruiting armed wings or private militias, which resulted in two main political conflicts, in 1993-4 and in 1997-9. These lay in roots in the immediate years after independence from France in the 1960s and the establishment and maintenance of Marxist-Leninist ruling parties. Current RC president, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, rose to power firstly in 1979. Although being forced to resign in 1992 after the promulgation of a multi-party constitution and the election of another Prime Minister, he regained military victory during the second civil war in 1997 (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 1999). In 2001-2 a change in constitution allowed other two terms to Sassou-Nguesso’ presidency while provoking more violence and continuing to destabilise the country. Despite considered by many as fraudulent, results from 2009 presidential elections kept him in power (Clark and Decalo, 2012). In October 2015, Sassou-Nguesso’s government changed once again the constitution, permitting his presidency to gain another term from the 2016 elections. More violent unrest was provoked in Brazzaville until a ceasefire deal was signed in December 2017 (Ross, 2015, BBC News, 2018).

although still in use (Gondola, 2010).⁸⁶ According to some analysts, for the many forced to permanently settle in Brussels, Paris and, later London, belonging to the movement offered a metaphorical refuge to endure a marginal and precarious existence at the bottom rung of European society.⁸⁷ Regardless of frequently lacking a residency permit, being either unemployed or accepting low income jobs, living in squats or ghettos and at times committing crimes,⁸⁸ *sapeurs* remained loyal consumers of the most recognised European luxury fashion boutiques (Gondola, 2010, Gondola, 1999a, Trapido, 2011). Whether on the African continent or in Europe, analysts argue, adopting *la sape* signified a *symbolic* gesture aimed at reclaiming power against everyday discrimination and exclusion, at forging new identitarian *stories* (Marcus, 1995), new imaginaries, and practices of belonging away from the homeland. *Sapeurs* inaugurated a form of *allegorical* (Marcus, 1995) resistance that disrupted societal hierarchies (Gondola, 2010, Jong, 2017),⁸⁹ a space for “an oppositional, counter-hegemonic culture” through

⁸⁶ A recent example is the 2013 Brazzaville performance enacted by Congolese established *la sape* celebrity Norbat de Paris. The video, posted by YouTube channel Val-Disc and entitled “Norbat de Paris - Le Retour à Brazzaville” (Val-Disc, 2013), portrays Norbat parading on the streets of the capital on top of a car, protected by police officers and followed by numerous Congolese men admiring his presence, taking pictures and shouting his name. The video concludes with Norbat performing a drum musical session. This is a concrete example of the *story* and *allegorical* (Marcus, 1995) sphere addressed by the body performance.

⁸⁷ The European, and especially Parisian, context embodied a very contrasting positionality. On the one hand, there was the “imagined” Paris, seen as a kind of inspirational centre of *la sape*, and, on the other hand, there was the “real” Paris and its harsh metropolitan life “understood as the result of the low rank of Blacks in the sacred abode of White power” (Friedman, 2005, p. 128).

⁸⁸ Cheating transport payments, forging residential papers and cheques, credit card fraud, stealing designer goods and selling drugs (Gondola, 2010, Trapido, 2011). Even Papa Wemba was involved in aiding illegal youth-smuggling operations between the DRC and Europe. He was accused of trafficking visas for several years, arrested in Belgium and France in 2003-4 and refused a UK visa in 2005 (Denselow, 2016, Werman, 2016). Congolese musician and pillar figure of *la sape*, Stervos Niarcos, was also involved in criminal acts, such as organising a series of robberies on banks and cash deposit boxes in Brazzaville. In France he worked as a heroin dealer, dying in prison in the mid-1990s (Trapido, 2011).

⁸⁹ In embracing the movement as an act through which coping with real-life daily circumstances, *sapeurs* in Paris and Brussels behaved similarly to *sapeurs* belonging to other diasporas. Nanette Jong argues how the movement of style is deployed by Congolese *sapeurs* in Johannesburg to affirm status and to gain respect from broader South African society, which relegates them to a secondary rank. Displays of masculinity and rituals of display are used as a direct strategy to reverse the hierarchies of inferiority imposed by a xenophobic context, to subvert established modes and reject accepted norms. The fashion and lifestyle subculture

which “asserting their identity and compete for status according to their own system of values (...), exclud[ing] those who are part of the system that has excluded them” (MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000, p. 137).

A rather contrasting analysis on *mikiliste* groups in Europe is suggested by the more recent work of Joseph Trapido (2017), who stands in opposition to theories on *la sape* as a rubric of resistance in European context. He interrogates Gondola’s (1999a) interpretation of non-elitist *mikilistes*⁹⁰ practices as “hidden critique” of the powerful, as well as questioning how Bazenguissa-Ganga and MacGaffey (1999) contend that transnational Congolese traders, including *mikilistes*, “on the margins of the law” drew on a second economy to resist an oppressive state. Trapido instead argues that the *mikilistes* established a connection with members of the Congolese ruling class in Europe that would not have been made back in the DRC (Trapido, 2017). Throughout the 1980s, in parallel with the DRC migration of numerous *mikilistes*, a substantial section of the Congolese élite also aimed to transfer their assets and families to Brussels and Paris. Many rich children sought out *mikilistes* and musicians in their bars and illegal settings since it was they who had access to the circuits of cheap designer clothes, gradually endorsing the forms of subjectivity, the *stories*, and modes of success that *la sape* movement embodied (Trapido, 2011). From the 1990s onward young *mikilistes* were officially members of the political and business élite who controlled access to the circulation of designer clothes, and, in their return to the homeland,

“provide a specific opportunity for the Congolese to re-insert themselves into the city of Johannesburg, reshaping an otherwise foreign space into a local place of meaning” (Jong, 2017, p. 11). Jong’s study also demonstrates the *metaphorical* (Marcus, 1995) dimension revealed by the body practice.

⁹⁰ As explained previously, the expression *mikiliste* refers to a *bon vivant* who lives in Europe, or travels there normally, wears designer clothes and often associates with musicians. Instead of other terms such as *sapeur* or *Parisien*, also used by Kinshasa inhabitants to describe these cultural icons, in his analysis Trapido prefers to use the term *mikiliste* because it “stresses the aspect of travel along with access to a highly mythologised West – both central to this mode of success” (Trapido, 2011). Since I draw quite extensively on Trapido’s work, I accordingly decided to follow his choice of terminology.

established these as the dominant form of exchange and prestige among Kinois⁹¹ youth (Trapido, 2017). In so doing:

The *mikilistes* did not have as their real aim to resist the state or even to insert themselves into a better position within the social order, though these might, on occasion, have been by products of their actions. Rather, they were trying to access a certain sensibility, an ideal of human flourishing, which was connected to their idea of rank and the individual. (Trapido, 2017, p. 163)

Therefore, designer clothes strongly associated with a pilgrimage to Europe did not represent, according to Trapido, a form of resistance for Congolese youth in urban Kinshasa, Paris and Brussels, but were rather seen as a mark of access to the European metropolis and a source of prestige that circulated as a quasi-currency within the model of “display of wealth” (Trapido, 2017).

Overall, the use of European eccentric sartorial outfits and its ritualised practice among the Congolese has evolved and been analysed through multiple lenses, all highlighting the transformative socio-cultural and political power articulated by *la sape* which resulted from the problematic contexts of colonial and postcolonial Congo-Kinshasa and Congo-Brazzaville. It initially emerged as a cultural and aesthetic appropriation and re-formulation of European materials and codes to reject the colonists’ dominant agenda and to subvert societal hierarchical structures. Subsequent to the Congos’ independence, the fashion expression was further mobilised as a form of political resistance to the authoritative apparatus of the Congolese state and was experienced as a symbolic counter-hegemonic practice to undermine political despotism and the social status quo. It was also further shaped as a subversive performative act to struggle against socio-economic deprivation as well as a discourse to question gender stereotypes and inequality. According to some, for example Gondola quoted earlier, *la sape* could be additionally categorised as a form of religious belief in the search for new, often conflicting, identities. In European diasporic settings, *la sape* has been

⁹¹ Expression that refers to Congolese from and living in Kinshasa.

interpreted by some analysts as a form of resistance which fabricates new practices of belonging, overcomes discrimination and opposes marginalisation, as well as establishing recognition and social status when returning to Africa. Others see the subculture as a mode employed by *mikilistes* to access the Congolese ruling class in Europe and the political élites in Kinshasa through their control over the circulation of designer clothes. Each of these transformations and spheres of interpretation encapsulate *la sape*'s fashion expressions and aesthetical rituals of the body as a performative process embraced by Congolese individuals to carve out a sense of self while drawing on all the paradoxes of the postcolonial Congos and its diasporas.

The first part of this chapter has, therefore, partially demonstrated how the *people*, the *thing*, the *story*, the *metaphor* and the *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) are embedded and expressed through the fashion and lifestyle subculture of *la sape*. Analysing the well-established Congolese body practice has also shown what cultural theorist Richard Schechner understands to be the meaning of performing during ordinary life: to show off, to highlight and display actions for those who are watching. Socio-cultural performances among *sapeurs* can be said to take place as actions, interactions, and relationships, with *sapeurs* being most of the time well-aware of performing, or “showing of a doing” (Schechner, 2013). The body practice of *la sape* can be framed within what Schechner identifies as “restored behaviours”, indicating how *sapeurs*' performances are based on actions that have been previously practiced and learned from years of training of “appropriate bits of behaviour” in relation to their individual experience and especially involving choices and re-invention in accordance with their specific socio-cultural, economic and political circumstances (Schechner, 2010, Schechner, 2013). Everyday life *sape* performances, such as dressing up flamboyantly and following specific ways of behaving with the body in a “high-class” manner, including the significance of cleanliness, of using jargon and knowing how to make an

entrance, to walk, to sit and to stand like a “gentleman” (Martin, 1994, Wrong, 1999, Jong, 2017), thus result in ritualised embodied practices re-formulated by *sapeurs* differently depending on cultural patterns, historical circumstances and personal choices (Schechner, 2013).

The following sections of the case study will trace the movement’s growth, inherent contradictions, and progressive decline among the Congolese diaspora in London. It will investigate the contemporary presence of a restricted sub-community of London *sapeurs* while, very importantly, documenting the contrasting points of view towards the movement among younger London Congolese who are not members of the group and who, at times, stand against it.

3.2 *La sape* in London

3.2.1 The “children of London”: From the time of “easy money” to militant anti-Kabila nationalism

Starting from the 1980s and as the 1990s progressed, the UK, and London in particular, became an important new destination for the Congolese diaspora, fleeing from escalated political violence and economic collapse in the DRC. Together with other reasons outlined in chapter one, Trapido’s Congolese informants, the majority of whom had lived in France or Belgium prior to coming to the UK, perceived London as a less racist city compared to Paris and Brussels as well as an easier city in which to find work. This is a position also confirmed by many young participants of the thesis, as this chapter will show later. Furthermore, it became more difficult to gain visas from the 1990 Schengen Convention signatory countries, including France and Belgium. Before this period, student visas had been one of the main modes of European entry for Zairians. Another reason for Congolese migration to the UK was the gradual suspension of grants and narrowing of checks by French and Belgian embassies before the issuing of student visas (Trapido, 2017). Importantly, Trapido adds the criminal economy and scheme of

identity fraud as additional motives, in deep conflict with the specific way of living allegedly promoted by *la sape*. Many of his Congolese *mikiliste* informants testified that committing fraud in the UK had been significantly easier compared to other European countries and more profitable, often recalling the period approximately from 1990 until 2000 as *le temps de l'argent facile* (the time of easy money). The UK seems to have been slower in addressing the weak aspects in its banking and benefits schemes, introducing fingerprinting for asylum claims at a later time than France and Belgium, and with the practice of various claim applications continuing for a longer period. As attested in 2008 by a Trapido informant: “here [in London] if you go to claim asylum, they take your prints (...) that all started about 2000. Before, people would go and come back, go and come back [make multiple claims]” (Trapido, 2011, p. 213). However, the criminal economy among *mikilistes* and their often-practiced forms of identity fraud have consequently declined due to the advancement in European police security and stricter control on benefits allocation in the new century (Trapido, 2011, 2017).

Previously, the wealth gained during the time of “easy money” was used by some London Congolese, for example, to dress in extremely expensive clothes and to attend music concerts in Paris. The connection with the music scene was, once again, particularly relevant since much of this money was directly invested by the *bana Londres* (the children of London) as well as by other European Congolese, into the practice of *mabanga*, music patronage. By the end of the 1980s, cash became a widespread form of payment to musicians for mentioning their names on music records. Previous to cash, the music patronage of *mabanga* was performed through the exchange of clothes, given to musicians by young European Congolese on their return to the homeland, to be mentioned on records. This formed a sort of cast of European Congolese celebrities with recorded lyrics telling those in Kinshasa of the prestigious lives they were conducting in Europe (Trapido, 2017).

In the expanding displays of ritual authority, *mabanga* was probably the single most important device. Used for creating a reputation, it allowed status and rank to be depicted and conceptualised through the romantic narratives of the songs and the implication of a connection to a glamorous world. (Trapido, 2017, p. 144)

A significant contribution to the development of this practice was signed by Congolese musician Koffi Olomide while recording his album “Magie” in 1993. Here, he acknowledges the financial help of European Congolese, reading off names of his *mabanga* supporters, with a special salute to the *bana Magie oyo ya Londres* (the children of Magic, those ones from London). Music investments became a central source of income for the majority of Congolese musicians throughout the 1990s (Trapido, 2011). In a context in which musicians and regime figures were often related to each other, *mikilistes* seem to have accepted being represented alongside the rulers in various ways. Through the *mabanga*, *mikilistes* were inevitably named in the same songs as members of the ruling class, such as military and political figures. A notorious example was Kongulu “Saddam Hussein” Mobutu, one of the sons of Mobutu, who established his own music production company (Trapido, 2017).

Music patronage was not the only way to display prosperity and social status back home. Less commonly but similarly to *sapeurs* living in Paris or Brussels, *bana Londres* also employed dramatic theatrical performances of wealth during their return to Kinshasa. Luxury cars were particularly significant for the *symbolic* display of rival rank and many *mikilistes* began to ship these home, to use and exhibit during their holidays in Kinshasa (Trapido, 2017).⁹² Trapido comments on the way in which Kinshasa’s inhabitants interpreted this extraordinary performance of wealth, framed

⁹² The return of *bana Londres* to Kinshasa and their theatrical performances of wealth to assert societal status have been transmitted as popular legends. Among the most extreme is the episode of one famous London *mikiliste* who had a Jaguar shipped to Kinshasa. When he learned that a rival already had such a vehicle, he throws a large rock onto his car to demonstrate that it meant nothing to him, while implying that his rival would not have the courage to do the same. Another *mikiliste* had his Rolls Royce used as a taxi, to convey that the luxury car was a thing of no regard to a powerful man such as himself. During concerts and in bars *mikilistes* often ritually throw expensive jackets on the floor to communicate how those jackets are “worthless things” to them (Trapido, 2017).

here as part of the *story*. In contrast to Paris, the city of London has often been defined by Kinois as a city dominated by witchcraft. Many Kinois shared a great fear in relation to *mikilistes* who had returned home from London. Using the words of an informant: “you have to pay attention when you see these *bana Londres* going past in their Jeeps. They are very dangerous” (Trapido, 2017, p. 144). Trapido explains that among the reasons behind this popular belief are the reports circulating in Kinshasa about the presence in London of a large Indian population. The Hindu religion is locally interpreted as devil worship while Indians are thought to sell talismans in their shops on every London corner. Trapido relates such views on the wealth and prosperity of the *bana Londres* to older Central African political and economic local traditions:

In the context of economies based around violence and gatekeeping, to become wealthy or powerful has often been thought to necessitate the mystical sacrifice of others. Sudden surges of unstable wealth are clearly a recurring motif of Central African modernity and have tended to be viewed as (...) money from magical devices. (Trapido, 2017, p. 144)

More generally, the *mikiliste* culture was radically transformed in accordance with the socio-cultural and political scenario of the DRC at the beginning of the 2000s. With the migrant criminal economy in Europe in progressive decline, a small section of *mikilistes* between Europe and the DRC profited from previous political links. They managed to draw on their cultural “virtuosity” as financial resource, instructing “the art of ambiance” to political rulers while at times becoming themselves members of the political élite (Trapido, 2011). *Mikiliste* rituals, based on performative largesse and expenditure, were gradually integrated into the DRC political system and widely appropriated by political élites in Kinshasa. Some Congolese political figures became *sapeurs* themselves, deploying features of the movement in campaigns and public appearances for their own political agenda.

On the opposite side, the relation between the *mikiliste* environment and the political and music scene in Europe took a completely different direction. A much larger

segment of Congolese *mikilistes* in Europe started to organise violent attacks against musicians (as well as journalists) who had later shown their support for (at the time) President Joseph Kabila, himself a self-confessed *sapeur*. Since his rise to power, substantial financial payments and various opportunities⁹³ were increasingly offered by Kabila to popular orchestras and other individuals in the public sphere. In the 2006 election campaign (as well as in the 2011 campaign), many of the DRC's most prominent artists sang in Kabila's support, allegedly being compensated with a large amount of cash.⁹⁴ In response to this and following violent events taking place in Kinshasa during the same decade, those same Congolese musicians who, on the one hand, were seen as key figures of *la sape*, were under attack. For instance, in 2006 Papa Wemba, known for deploying *la sape* as a political statement against Mobutu, was now accepting money, probably also to avoid conflict, from those in power. As a result, his 2006 concert in Paris was almost boycotted and performed to a practically empty arena (Trapido, 2011, 2017).

Interestingly, London developed as the focal centre of political resistance. Many key figures among "the attackers", latterly known as *les combattants* (the fighters), were the same *bana Londres* who had been previously financing the Congolese music scene in Europe and enthusiastically participating in the *mikiliste* culture and economy of largesse. If until recently "the *mabanga* transaction had incorporated the patron into a narrative in which love, transnational flows and material abundance were entwined, now ritualised, often ludic, violence sought to close these channels by specific attacks on musicians and on points of access to the public sphere" (Trapido, 2011, p. 220). A section of the *bana Londres* embraced a completely different attitude and the logic of

⁹³ In 2006, for instance, major orchestras received an unspecified amount of money to perform at Kabila's wedding (now divorced) (Trapido, 2011).

⁹⁴ It is here worth highlighting that, probably, these musicians would have faced difficulties if they had refused the President money (Trapido, 2011).

the *mikilistes* exchange was transformed into a very hostile language. While various prominent music groups continued to travel to Paris and Brussels without substantial incident, they were often too scared to visit the UK. Radical *mikilistes* were delivering death threats and prohibiting musicians with even the most indirect link to Kabila's regime from performing in London.⁹⁵ Trapido reminds us how in some aspects the London Congolese community, despite being only the third-largest in Europe, has always had a deeper impact in certain aspects on the Kinois back home. This was initially based on London Congolese' reputation as big spenders and big users of magical devices, while now the impact on Kinois is mainly due to the well-organised militant nationalism within the diaspora (Trapido, 2011, Trapido, 2017). All the new dynamics illustrated above are understood as exposing a *conflicting* (Marcus, 1995) transformation of the subculture, both among *mikilistes* who integrated their practice with political élites in the DRC as well as among those former *bana Londres* who developed a radical system to attack Congolese musicians in Europe.

3.2.2 The contemporary sub-community of London's *sapeurs*: self-assertion and self-contradiction

For *The Guardian* 2005 series "London: the world in one city. British identity and society", Leo Benedictus explored many migrant communities across the capital. Among these, he visited the Congolese community in Tottenham, a northern area where most of the older generation of Congolese reside. Some of the voices of Benedictus's informants are used in this section to broaden the *people* and the *story* fields (Marcus, 1995) explored throughout this case study. For instance, at the Zairean/Congolese Community Association in the Selby Centre, informant Louis-Marie Lupumba cited fashion style as one of the first aspects of his culture that would enable Congolese

⁹⁵ Koffi Olomide was threatened with a gun on his arrival in London, and was told never to come back while, in 2007, Kester Emeneya received a call in Paris with death threats if he set foot in the UK (Trapido, 2011, Trapido, 2017).

people to be recognised: “The way [Congolese] dress is very particular. They like to dress smart” (Benedictus, 2005b). At a Congolese grocery in West Green Road, another informant, Roger Ndosimau, is described by the journalist as wearing all black, with cream shoes, cream details on his black top, and a cream and black snakeskin-effect belt. When asked if the Congolese community had a distinctive presence among the other Africans in the area, Ndosimau replied “Yes, because of the way we dress. Our forefathers were very, very neat people - I can even say the neatest in the world!” (Benedictus, 2005b). At a local Congolese restaurant, music producer “Papa Mapasa”, well-groomed with patterned shirt and shades, explained: “Even as kids we wouldn’t dream of coming to school without brushing our teeth or brushing our hair. Our shoes had to be shined, our shorts well-pressed. We had to put on a singlet (...) It’s a habit from childhood” (Benedictus, 2005b).

The contemporary presence of *la sape*’s London sub-community, mainly composed of an older generation of Congolese, has been more recently documented by London-based South African photographer Alice Mann. In her ongoing project “Maximum effect - *la sape d’ Europe*” (Mann, 2019), she visually depicts Congolese *sapeurs* mainly based in London and some based in Paris. They all pose with their own carefully curated aesthetics, wearing items by European fashion haute couturiers such as Ralph Lauren, Versace, Vivienne Westwood, Moschino, Gucci as well as more mainstream brands such as Adidas or Doc Martens, through which they express their individual personalities and self-awareness. On her website, Mann states that the use of fashion style and designer clothing for her subjects provides a means of self-expression, empowerment and distinctiveness, a vehicle to challenge limitations while celebrating difference (Mann, 2019). Her photographic work and interviews with her subjects have been featured in printed and digital magazines and websites, such as on the PHmuseum photographic platform in March 2017, in *Metropolitan Magazine* in November 2017,

and *Huck Magazine* in April 2018 (De Stefani and Mann, 2017, *Metropolitan Magazine*, 2017, Cian and Mann, 2018). The viewpoints and clothing styles of Mann's informants are cited below as exemplary description of *things* used and narratives of *everyday experiences* of other London *sapeurs* presented in this chapter.

Various London *sapeurs* who collaborated with Mann ranged from forty to sixty years of age, belonging therefore to the older generation of Congolese. In the online *Huck Magazine*, Theophile Munganga, also known as *L'intellectuel*, said:

I knew I loved fashion from an early age. All of my mother's family - the uncles, the aunties - were living in London, Germany and all over Europe. They would send us back designer garments that made me interested in travelling there. I remember wearing them and feeling really different, individual and proud. After I moved to Belgium to study, I came to London and had to work hard here just to be able to buy these things. You cannot buy these labels if you are not able to support yourself. But I love my body and I want to give myself the best. When you are looking good, you are feeling good. (Cian and Mann, 2018)

In the same online magazine, *sapeur* Diaquiesse Kiasungua, also called "Papa Yoyo", described himself as an artist, as do many others, while posing in his Maison Margela outfit:

When I think about what I have to wear, I think about it like an artist: 'What can I add to have maximum effect?' Just like Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso or Jean Metzinger will compose and use colours to make a painting, I see my body as the canvas and the clothes as the paint. The simple rule is that you must have an impact on viewers. Dressing gives an impression of how I want to be seen or judged, so it's a very good device to express or conceal your true self. Clothing is a conversation between both you and the inner you, and between yourself and others. (Cian and Mann, 2018)

Accordingly, whether interpreted by analysts as a form of resistance or as a mode of success in European settings, the performative dimension of *la sape* remains crucial, where clothing consumption expresses the constitution of a new social self, with a strong fulfilling effect produced on the individual (Friedman, 1994a, 2005). Together with *sapeur* Diaquiesse Kiasungua, many other members of *la sape* consider themselves as symbolic producers of "mobile art-works", with the objective of making a strong impression to the spectator during everyday lives (Brodin et al., 2016).

Two younger London Congolese *sapeurs*, probably in their mid-to-late thirties, were also involved in Mann's project. Yaya Beauga appeared in various shoots wearing outfits produced by Kokon to Zai, Adidas X Jeremy Scott and Ted Baker. In interviews, he explained how fashion has always been his hobby, liking clothes instead of playing football or doing sports. He was inspired by his father, who has always loved formal clothes:

All my life, I never saw him wear trainers or dressing in a casual way. He always looked good and wore formal clothes – 'classic', that's his dress code. Especially nice suits, nice waistcoats, proper shoes. So, when I dress in suits now, I am thinking of him (...) I am also my own inspiration. I am Yaya... if you see me, the way I am, it's unmistakable. And I like that people will see me and think, this is Yaya style! (*Metropolitan Magazine*, 2017, p. 60)

In another interview, he added: "I'm a decorator, an artist. You see, when I match colour, I never miss. You'll see the way I play with it; it will be totally different. It's always about having my own touch on something" (Cian and Mann, 2018). While many *sapeurs* only dress up when attending gatherings during weekends, according to Mann, belonging to *la sape* for Yaya Beauga seems to be a full-time way of life. The photographer claimed to have once spotted him at Hackney Central station by surprise: "He didn't even know I was there... it was a hot day, and he was dressed in full leathers...I don't think he's ever off-duty; it's just who he is" (*Metropolitan Magazine*, 2017). The second younger London Congolese *sapeur* photographed by Mann is "GMS *Le Correcteur*" who, while posing in his Gucci style, stated: "I like being individual, looking different. My mom told me that when I was younger, I used to cry when I wasn't wearing things I liked" (*Metropolitan Magazine*, 2017, p. 65).

Another key figure of Mann's project was an older generation *sapeur* Prince Jamal, portrayed wearing a long vintage fur over a Ralph Lauren suit. In his impeccable look, Prince Jamal explained for the online *Huck Magazine*:

When I was growing up, I was the youngest of five brothers and I always had this; it's something I didn't have to fight for. But one thing I make sure to do when I am looking good is to never leave the house without at least £20 in my pocket.

The problem is that you see people going out, all dressed up in expensive designer clothes, and then asking others to buy them drinks at the bar or give them cigarettes. You'll never see me doing that because it's allowing yourself to be devalued. This is about the total presentation, being a respectable person: the way you talk, the way you walk, the personality... You have to be true to what you are showing. (Cian and Mann, 2018)

In interview with me, Prince Jamal, described himself as a DJ who plays various kinds of music at a community club in Tottenham. He left the DRC at the age of nine and has never been back. He also lived in South Africa before settling in the UK. In narrating his *everyday experience* (Marcus, 1995), he defined London as a free city, as the place to be. This was in comparison to France, and especially Paris, where his relatives are based, and where he always felt the need to carry his ID when leaving the house (Interview: 9 March 2018). According to his point of view:

The true old style of *sape* is not there anymore. People would starve for buying clothes but now they all buy fakes just to impress. *Sapeurs* are impressionists but with just fake *griffes*. *La sape* comes from Congo-Brazaville where people could be elegant with 200 pounds but in Kinshasa 200 pounds are only for a shirt. *Sapeurs* in Kinshasa brought *la sape* to the next level,⁹⁶ but most of them want just to show their labels. It is now a belief, *une religion* (a religion). (Interview: 9 March 2018)

In parallel to what Prince Jamal previously expressed to Mann, he again pointed out the problem of many *sapeurs* who bought clothes to impress “but then they want to buy a coffee to a lady, but they want the woman to buy for them” (Interview: 9 March 2018). However, Jamal presented a similar conflicting pattern in the way he behaved during our meeting. He proudly introduced himself in a Nike style outfit, wearing shades on a rainy day, and openly appreciated my own outfit. At the same time, he did not suggest paying for my coffee while letting me pay for his order. In this sense, Mann's photographic work is certainly aesthetically valuable, and her fieldwork is informative.

⁹⁶ Here Prince Jamal refers to the fact that, while *sapeurs* in and from Congo-Brazaville have always preferred a more “classical” look, never including more than three elegant colours, *sapeurs* in and from Congo-Kinshasa are famous to be very extravagant and excessive in taste, deploying brighter and wilder combinations for their outfits.

However, to some extent her positive, arguably one-sided, representation of *la sape* does not consider the problematic and very ambiguous aspects of it.

A more critical contribution on *la sape*'s London sub-community has been produced by Eugenio Giorgianni. In a 2016 Al-Jazeera feature, he describes a Saturday late night out with some of London's *sapeurs*. The evening commenced with the reunion of a group of men originally from Kinshasa, between twenty-five and forty-nine years old, at a Tottenham local barbershop. When asked to illustrate what it meant to be a *sapeur* and what was *la sape* philosophy of life, their stories generally resembled the voices of *sapeurs*, previously introduced, in the Congos and other European diasporas. While, once again, positioning themselves as performers, these other members of the London subculture also defined *la sape* as a state of mind, a cosmopolitan, non-violent, and joyful *état d'esprit* (state of mind), which involved being elegantly and flamboyantly groomed, but it was not entirely about the money spent. Their stories suggested that, to be a *sapeur*, an individual must have a sensible aesthetic "eye" in matching colours, and have the confidence to coordinate and perform an ostentatious look, while being clean, presentable, and content even if he has not eaten enough during the day (Giorgianni, 2016).

At the barbershop, Giorgianni attended a traditional catwalk performance and dance of the labels. During their theatrical "catwalk-conferences", framed as forms of creative productions, *sapeurs* generally exhibit their perfectly matched outfits through ritualised gestures and controlled movements of the body, such as a confident walk, posture and seductive gaze. Luxury brands, the *things*, and the aesthetics of excess become a *metaphorical* (Marcus, 1995) mode of authentication, where the "dance of the labels" is experienced as an art form (Brodin et al., 2016). The London scene was opened by one of Giorgianni's informants, Charlie Schengen, who is in his late forties

and considers himself a retired *sapeur*, but still likes to dress up. Giorgianni describes the ways in which Charlie displayed the elegance of his outfit:

He alternates slow, long strides with rapid sequences of heel-toe steps, loudly knocking his J.M. Weston triple sole shoes on the salon floor. He concludes by standing in the middle of the room with his arms wide open, taking in the admiration of the audience while a younger *sapeur* turns the label of his jacket to reveal the original Dolce & Gabbana label. (Giorgianni, 2016)

The ritual was defined by London Congolese *sapeurs* as a *symbolic* homage to Papa Wemba, quoting one of his most iconic 1980s lyrics in which he describes the essential characteristics of a *sapeur* as: “Well-shaved, well-styled hair, nicely-scented and well-dressed”, words also often used by Wemba during interviews, as reported earlier (Giorgianni, 2016).

The evening continued with a christening celebration at a North London Congolese community centre. The father was a *grand sapeur* (a great *sapeur*) from Kinshasa and Congolese guests also displayed extravagant elegance with their wild and colourful outfits. These were composed of shiny leather trousers, jeans, reptile skin, metal additions and men’s skirts with the addition of sunglasses and flashy hats. Interestingly, in parallel with the ways through which *la sape* movements in the Congos and within other diasporas have developed, ambiguities were also brought to light by the sub-community of London’s *sapeurs*. A significant discrepancy and conflicting dimension within the movement was, once again, revealed through the entangled relation between politics, economics and music. That same section of radical *mikilistes* whose role has made the London Congolese diaspora recognised as the European political focal point for anti-Kabila nationalism, has kept gathering and celebrating special occasions with the more moderate section of Congolese *sapeurs*. In this regard, Giorgianni describes the presence during the christening party of *la sape parlementaires* (parliamentarians), outstanding *sapeurs* belonging to each Congolese diaspora in Europe and appointed by Papa Wemba to represent the movement internationally. At

the same time, among the guests were also some important political activists. These were members of the radical group of *les combattants*, widely held responsible for organising attacks and threats against Congolese musicians who were considered supporters of Kabila's regime, as explained earlier, and for systematically prohibiting them from performing in Europe. In the space of celebration, all attendees sang Papa Wemba's lyrics and danced to the Congolese rumba rhythm of his *Viva La Musica* band, the same live music performance which has been previously targeted in Europe (Giorgianni, 2016). Regardless of the political discordances and undeniably dark aspects at the basis of the group, Papa Wemba remains, for some, *la sape*'s iconic leader and symbolic figure.⁹⁷ As testified by *sapeur* Gauthier Mudiata:

He was our Papa. We turned into *sapeurs* because of his music and his example. People focus on the bad side of *la sape*, and of Papa as well. They say it's about thug life but real *sapeurs* don't steal. First of all, *la sape* is an education, a code to manage family and friends' relationships, and to improve yourself. It's not just about clothes. In any case, we don't have to copy every aspect of our model. (Giorgianni, 2016)

Accordingly, the movement is also defended by others as a form of symbolic empowerment. *Sapeur* Cedrick Golden clearly exemplified this using a metaphor: "To me, clothes are like food. If you are elegant, people treat you on a different level. *La sape* turns you into a strong person, gives you the courage to wake up in the morning and work hard to make yourself better" (Giorgianni, 2016).

However, some of Giorgianni's informants also exposed very ambiguous, deeply conflicting, feelings about the movement, highlighting the risks of fashion extremism especially in relation to the current DRC's socio-political and economic situation. While presenting themselves as well-groomed and expressing a pride for

⁹⁷ However, this is not always the case. According to *sapeur* Ndosimau, interviewed by journalist Benedictus, Papa Wemba sparked controversy within the community after claiming, in a *BBC4* documentary, that Congolese people were so materialistic that they turn to crime to pay for their expensive clothes. As *sapeur* Ndosimau put it: "[Papa Wemba] talked a lot of crap and I can tell you that the Congolese people are furious at what he said. Even other African people said to us, 'Why did [he] says things like that on the telly? How can [he] says something like that, which is not real? Why?' They may think we're all on drugs, or whatever. I can tell you now, you won't find any drugs on me!" (Benedictus, 2005b).

being able to make it, at the same time they shared concerns about the DRC's political disorder and about the level of poverty afflicting the Congolese living back home. The strong desire for and focus on luxury clothing collided with the awareness of *la sape*'s trivial dimension. Some combined a sense of regret or shame on wasting time and money with the need for personal satisfaction and social recognition. Emblematic of this is the inconsistent position of former *sapeur* Charlie, the same individual who claimed to be a veteran of *la sape*'s London scene, who staged the impeccable outfit showcase at the barbershop. He stated: "I don't want to say how expensive my clothes are. People in Congo are starving, someone could get mad at me" (Giorgianni, 2016). When asked to give his point of view on the contribution of the subculture to Congolese society, Charlie strongly and inconsistently affirmed:

Zero. Nothing but stupidity. No one wants to go to school, people just want to spend on clothes, even the *shegey* [a Lingala term to denote young men often belonging to gangs] and live on the streets. Plus, other African people don't feel shy to dress in their traditional costumes, while in Congo this is still seen as ridiculous. (Giorgianni, 2016)

Another informant, *sapeur* Aimé Champagne, while stating how his Ozwald Boateng suit makes him feel comfortable, also highlighted great discomfort and societal expectations when travelling back to the DRC for holidays or business:

When I go back to Kinshasa, it's so sad to dress nicely among people who are suffering in poverty, and still admire me, and want to be like me. Sometimes I feel I don't want to dress like that anymore. But if I don't, they would laugh at me, as someone who emigrated and failed. (Giorgianni, 2016)

In this sense, the body performance of *la sape* embeds very conflicting meanings both in relation to a transnational dimension among older generations of London Congolese as well as in relation to the ways in which the movement is perceived among younger individuals who do not belong to it.

Given the complex historical and contemporary socio-cultural, political and economic significance encapsulated by *la sape*, it is unsurprising that the subculture represented an unavoidable topic of discussion when investigating the realm of fashion

and beauty rituals of the body among younger generations of London Congolese for this thesis. Despite being interested and often directly involved in various forms of aesthetic display practices, none of my informants belonged to London's sub-community of *la sape*. Quite contrasting points of view regarding the group were brought to light by various individuals during interviews or informal conversations. On the one hand, *la sape* was considered by some a fundamental cultural feature of their heritage to be proud of, although they did not define themselves as official members of the movement. On the other hand, a more problematic and controversial dimension was emphasised by many, who were both non-members as well as standing in opposition to *sapeurs'* core characteristics and values.

3.3 Conflicting viewpoints on debating *la sape* among non-member young Congolese: Will the London movement survive?

3.3.1 In defence of *la sape*: Acknowledging the subculture as a central expression of the Congolese heritage

Among the voices of some of those in favour was young Congolese photographer Laetitia Kamayi, one of the first contacts made within the young community. She was born in the DRC, raised and settled in London. She completed a BA Honors degree in Photography from the University for the Creative Arts and a MA Photographic Studies from the University of Westminster. Laetitia defined the language of *la sape* as “another form of creative expression” (Email conversation: 4th August 2018). Similar was the opinion of twenty-nine-year-old London Congolese Liam, born in Kinshasa and settled in the UK with his parents at a young age. He is the creative director of *MCMedia London* (2019)⁹⁸ and was one of the photographers and video makers in charge of visually documenting the *Congo Fashion Week London 2017* pre-show,⁹⁹ which forms

⁹⁸ A Congolese, London-based, photography company.

⁹⁹ Liam is, therefore, also cited in chapter six.

the case study for chapter six of this thesis. During the evening, when asked to discuss his point of view on *la sape*, Liam stated:

As we [the Congolese community] know ourselves and many Africans know about us, we are very fashionable people and the young generation, we are no different. We are also very fashionable people. Fashion is important to Congolese people. You know, in Congo, when you go down to the Congo, a lot of people like to dress. We get criticised a lot that we spend a lot of our income on clothing and so and so but that is part of us we might also want to embrace it instead of looking at it as negative. Embrace the fact that we do spend quite a lot of money on clothes and we do like, you know, flamboyant, vibrant colours. Embrace it, showcase it! This is us and this is what we do! I am not a *sapeur*, no, I do not identify as *sapeur*. But as you could have seen tonight [at the CFW London pre-show], *sapeurs* are flamboyant characters, aren't they? They draw attention, they attract attention. I guess I have been in Europe for many years so, you know, my fashion style, let me say it, is a bit 'tamed', with quotation I say it. I guess I have been here so long that I got influenced by a more 'tamed' European style. But I think *la sape* culture is brilliant, is brilliant, is always on. Who are we to judge whether is good or is bad, the fact is that is always on! They have every right to celebrate how they choose to dress. It is amazing in terms of creativity and in terms of an art form. It is wonderful. (Interview: 21 September 2017)

A third positive attitude towards *la sape*'s movement was provided by thirty-four-year-old Monique Bolange. Monique was born and grew up in Kinshasa, attending primary and secondary schools there before leaving the Congo in 2002 at the age of seventeen. Monique moved to London to live with her four sisters and, since then, she has always lived in the capital. Although moving to the UK when she was still "learning and getting to know more about her own personality", she defines herself as an African woman who keeps her cultural roots alive. After gaining a law degree from the University of Westminster, she started working in fashion retail before going back to the legal sector through volunteering. She is currently a clinical research administrator at the Hammersmith Hospital. However, her passion for fashion and love for clothing styles has always been a predominant aspect of her everyday life experience, having a major impact on shaping the ways in which she feels about herself. In her own narration:

Fashion means a lot to me. I always tell my friends I could be like sad and feeling down and I would just 'Oh, let me play dress up' and just that would lift me up... even just by myself, putting outfits together, looking at myself in the mirror and

thinking ‘oh, that’s good, I really like that!’ that’s how much fashion means to me. It is a kind of thing through which I can transform my feelings and say ‘Yeah!’ to myself. (Interview: 02 April 2018)

Furthermore, Monique expanded her story on her way of experiencing fashion expressions and bodily displays in relation to the wider social group she belongs to, arguing that dressing up is “in the blood” of many Congolese people. In accordance, *la sape* was defined by Monique as a practice that is inherently embedded within her culture and can never been taken away from the Congolese: “I think that even unconsciously has impacted each one of us. We all want and love looking good and smelling nice”. She emphasised that her ten-year-old daughter could, always correctly, recognise Congolese individuals passing in the street through how they were dressed, their hairstyles, and the ways in which they carried themselves. As Monique put it: “There is a certain ‘type of look’ (...) It doesn’t have to be always extravagant, it is just different and recognisable” (Interview: 02 April 2018).

The inner connection between the realm of fashion and the music scene in Congolese culture was also emphasised by Monique. She especially outlined the role played by key musicians, first of all Papa Wemba or Koffi Olomide, in setting up certain standards of dressing up and “looking good” among the youngsters: “musicians have impacted the way fashion is seen for us, culturally wise, they have kind of established the feeling for the fashion attitude. All young people in the DRC now want to look good like them” (Interview: 02 April 2018).

When asked to position herself within the subculture’s framework, Monique specified that she did not have any *sapeurs* in her family, however, at times, she would be considered by some relatives to be the *sapeuse* of the household, due to her unique attention to fashioning her presence. Even though she never clearly identified herself as *sapeuse*, her interest in asserting her cultural identity and expressing her individuality through fashion developed since a young age in the Congo:

When I left, I was only seventeen and I was still finding myself and my style and obviously what I have now here I didn't have in the Congo and it would have been hard for me to do the same that I do here. But then, now that I think about it, I remember people always complimented me on the way I looked, on the way I carried myself, so I would say I always had it in me. It is just me. (Interview: 02 April 2018)

Monique described her fashion style as “classy” and “glamorous”, based on following trends while making her own garments and accessories with matching compositions. She told how she always loved putting outfits together and looking nice, uploading pictures from her phone of her “styled self” onto her personal Facebook profile: “It became a habit. People were used to wait, especially on Sundays, to see what I was wearing and what I was going to post and stuff like that”. For this reason, in 2014, she started, as a hobby, a Facebook page called “What Nicka Wore. Diary of a Curvy Girl in Love with Fashion” (2018) through which she shares her fashion ideas and suggestions on how to combine stylish looks.

From this, the idea of creating a more official style and fashion blog abbreviated to “What Nicka Wore” (2018) developed “to widen the scope of my daily posts and to be able to make my voice heard more easily, express myself more openly and freely”, as stated in the “About” page of her blog. In this online space, Monique documents her styles for international followers, on a daily, weekly or monthly spare time basis. Her blog is thus her individual way of telling her own *story*, her *daily life experiences* and as a new fashion and beauty form embedding *metaphorical* messages (Marcus, 1995). As expressed in interview, the main objective is to encourage other women to feel good about themselves, creating a source of inspiration for self-empowerment: “I wish for other ladies to look at me and think “Oh, if she can do that, if she can dress like that, I mean, I can do it as well!” (Interview: 02 April 2018). A second goal is to share how to look confident and stylish without having to devote a large amount of money to clothing and accessories. In this regard, in the blog Monique defines herself as a “lover of beautiful things and a conscious shopaholic” (What Nicka Wore, 2018). The

“conscious” refers to her personal motto, also cited in interview, concerning fashion shopping as a lifestyle habit: “you don’t need to break the bank to look good”. The same thought was emphasised during conversation where she voiced how she owns some expensive haute couture label garments but prefers not to spend her entire salary on high fashion. On the contrary, she proudly described her wardrobe to be predominantly full of much cheaper clothing accumulated throughout all her past years. In Monique’s words:

With my blog I am trying to show that you can have a ten-pound dress and wear it and look a million dollars! You don’t need to go crazy with money. My sisters call me the ‘Queen of Primark’ ‘cause I shop in Primark like crazy. And people would ask me ‘Oh, where is that piece from?’ and they would always be surprised when I answered from Primark. And another question that I get from people is ‘How you afford to buy all of it?’ but I don’t just go on spending and spreading and buying everywhere (...) [It] is not like, I have ended up buying tonnes of stuff in one week or in one month or even in one year (...) I have stuff that I had for over five years. (Interview: 02 April 2018)

Additionally, she is directing her fashion blogging hobby into a secondary source of economic income, hoping in future to transform it into a full-time job. Occasionally, she explained, she organised wardrobe “clean ups” where she posted pictures of herself wearing garments on sale for very affordable prices. In expressing some conflicting feelings:

My wardrobe is actually broken because I have got loads of clothes, but I am getting to a point where I say to myself that I don’t need so much stuff so I just sell everything for almost nothing just to be able to give it away and sometimes I think ‘Oh gosh, did I just make a mistake? Will I ever be able to get something like that skirt again?’ but, then, I re-think ‘It has just been sitting there for two years!’. (Interview: 02 April 2018)

In so doing, Monique is arguably transforming the basis of *la sape*’s original beliefs, seeking to communicate a very different approach to clothing as a material form of gaining confidence in the self. The totemic symbol of the *griffe*,¹⁰⁰ considered by “true” *sapeurs* as central to individual satisfaction, is substituted by more affordable clothes that are able to signify similar feelings of empowerment and identity valuation.

¹⁰⁰ Expensive designer labels.

Simultaneously, she seemed to have strategized, and at times questioned, her preoccupation with bodily appearances, revealing some level of deeper, economic, self-awareness. These are probably among the reasons why Monique portrayed *la sape* as a key aspect of her Congolese heritage, strongly favouring the cultural concept, while never officially feeling like she belonged to the group.

When asked about the impact of the specific context of London on shaping the movement, Monique admitted that the sub-community of *sapeurs* in this city is progressively reducing: “I feel like it is declining in London, though it is still there, but I have been in London for the last sixteen years and I can feel the change, I can see that is decreasing, I don’t think it is as much as it used to be before” (Interview: 02 April 2018). She explains that many of the Congolese youngsters, especially those who were born and raised in London, do not feel attracted to the very eccentric and extravagant *sapeur*’ clothing style, considering it too excessive and “over the top”. As she puts it, younger generations look at *sapeurs* in the Congo and feel:

They don’t belong to that because they only know what is here, even the culture for them is mostly the culture that have been growing up here and what the *sapeurs* do, does not go together with what we do and have here in London, cultural and fashion wise, so it is only normal for them to look at *la sape* and think ‘Oh my god, why do they dress like that? I am never gonna dress like that’. (Interview: 02 April 2018)

Monique justified the lack of interest or stronger criticism against the movement as an attitude coming from some of the parents who, according to her point of view, do not guide their children to be interested in all aspects of Congolese culture:

I wouldn’t really blame them but (...) is their parent duty to open their children more to what their Congolese culture is. I am not saying embrace everything of your culture, but I am saying let at least the children know that *la sape* is part of our culture... ‘cause is wrong when young people think ‘Oh, I am ashamed of that and can never been associated to that’. It is their [*sapeurs*] choice to spend a lot of money on clothes without having a house. They choose to do that, we can’t blame someone if he/she choose to do it. (Interview: 02 April 2018)

Undoubtedly, the role played by some Congolese parents has been influential on the ways in which a section of younger individuals within the London community perceive

la sape. On the one hand, it could be true that some British Congolese youngsters have not embraced or appreciated *la sape*, due to a lack of knowledge or interest towards their cultural heritage. On the other hand, however, it is also true that some other young individuals within the community revealed quite different motivations for standing against the Congolese subgroup. The individual position of some of my interviewees seemed to contradict Monique's critique, since most of them show great concern with re-discovering every aspect of their cultural roots, voicing a great deal of understanding of their heritage, including having direct personal experiences regarding the movement of *la sape*. They were aware of what the subculture represented and interested in using the medium of creative fashion and elegance to express their cultural identities, as demonstrated in the following chapters of this thesis analysing various other types of fashion and beauty expressions. However, at the same time, many openly criticised the lifestyle decisions and core values promoted by *la sape*, deciding instead to focus on a completely different perspective on ways of living, thus demonstrating a further internal conflict developed within the young London Congolese group in regard to the subculture.

3.3.2 In opposition to *la sape*: Refusing the lifestyle choices and main values promoted by the movement

One of the first informants who made me initially notice that the subculture seemed to be in progressive decline among new generations of London Congolese was political activist Vava Tampa.¹⁰¹ During a preliminary encounter at the beginning of my research in 2016, he took care to specify that fashion expressions in the DRC developed much earlier than the popularised trend of *la sape*. While sharing introductory information

¹⁰¹ Vava Tampa is the founder of charitable/non-governmental Congolese organisation called "Save the Congo", previously cited in chapter two. Since Vava was one of the key organisers of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, his voice and contribution within the community will be better discussed in chapter five.

about the state of the subculture in the city, Vava explained that a large section of his peers felt very differently about the trend compared to the elders and often did not associate with its values. It is here worth reiterating that *la sape* remains strong in the DRC and, very differently from the past, is currently part of the DRC political establishment, with former President Joseph Kabila himself a self-confessed *sapeur*. Subsequent to this transformation, the young generation of London Congolese, who are more or less politically active in the diaspora and generally anti-corruption and pro-democracy in the DRC, appeared firmer in standing against values perpetuated by the subculture. This is, for example, in comparison to older generations of *combattants*, who showed a certain level of conflict, as previously demonstrated, between political actions and attitudes towards the performance of *la sape*. The day we met, Vava argued that, based on his experience in London, several years ago the group used to organise many more community gatherings specifically to perform catwalk exhibitions to display their outfits and show off their labels. Since then, however, the movement is transitioning. As Vava explained:

Compared to seven or five years ago their parties are much less. There are now *ex-sapeurs* in the community who some sort of gave up on it... It is not so popular anymore, it is going down... If you ask me, I spent the last year dressing up every week with the same exact clothes (...) I did it in purpose as a message to act differently from *sapeurs* and against what they claim to be important in life! (Interview: 24 February 2016)

Vava Tampa's story and critical introduction on the topic opened up the discovery of various other points of view underpinning quite controversial stances on *la sape*. An example is the voice of thirty-year-old Priska Kibala. She moved with her family to the UK at the age of five and, since then, has always lived in Thornton Heath, Croydon, South London. In interview, she introduced herself as part of three minorities: "I am a woman, I am Black, and I am Muslim". She has four children: ten, seven- and two-year old girls and an eight-year-old boy. She has been married for fourteen years to her Nigerian-Caribbean (part Dominican and part Jamaican) husband. In describing major

events of her life story, Priska narrated the encounter with her husband on the streets, where she spent most of her teenage time when her father was imprisoned for five years,¹⁰² as well as her conversion to Islam at the age of eighteen, following her husband.¹⁰³

Priska defined herself as a young entrepreneur, who has always had a business drive, particularly due to the fact that, since a young age, her parents have continuously reminded her and her siblings that they moved to the UK for their children to achieve better lives and to support their relatives back in the DRC:

My family in coming to the UK had one specific drive which was getting us an education, make good of ourselves and help back home so that's always the spirit I had throughout my life. So, I knew I had to do better because I do have people relying on me back home because they are not doing that great. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

She continued by sharing her cultural memories on how she has always been reminded to never forget her roots:

I have pretty much settled in London and I consider this as my home but, also, I do have another home. I have not been back yet but would love to go back someday but, nevertheless, the connection is very much still there because I did live there for five years, so I still remember a lot of things, so I still have that connection. I was brought up in a Congolese household with our culture and that's just part of me, always been embedded in me whether not being back for so long. That's something that is still there, and it is very prominent. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Priska is currently working to improve the situation of the Black community in London.

She is involved with a project called "The Black Child Agenda" (2019) through which

¹⁰² Having experienced life on the streets, Priska stated: "I am thirty years old, but it feels like I have been living three lives". She described how many people on the streets are not real friends. They turn against you or are not there when needing help. For this reason, the street pushes you to become a lion, a fighter. She knows many stories of stabbings and she physically witnessed two where she helped breathing one of the victims. According to her opinion, knife crime in London is provoked by lack of education, self-awareness and self-love (Interview: 10 April 2018).

¹⁰³ Priska specified that her decision to become one of the few Congolese Muslim individuals in the UK came after she saw how the religion transformed her husband, previously involved in bad behaviours, into a calmer and better person. She emphasised how her parents, a Pentecostal mother and Catholic father, went against her decision to convert to Islam, not talking to her or just telling her "what are you doing? Are you gonna become a terrorist?". She was also blamed by the extended family after the conversion of many other younger cousins (Interview: 10 April 2018).

she is training to become a parent advocate, especially for those children of minorities who have experienced direct or subtle racism and bullying in primary and secondary schools. Priska explained that many parents in the Black community are not ready to defend their children against damaging behaviour since they do not know how to react, due to lacking knowledge of their basic legal rights. Priska and other people in the team are, therefore, trying to equip Black parents to strategically face those issues in a professional and effective way, for example training them in how to formulate official emails and reports, and to keep everything on record in order to avoid anything being denied or used against them, as well as instructing parents on the “school-to-prison pipeline”.¹⁰⁴

Once we started to converse about the role played by fashion practices within the Congolese community, Priska highlighted how clothing style and a sense of creative dress has always been embedded within her culture. It has collectively represented a central medium through which Congolese people constructed and expressed their cultural identities: “It is because of our fashion that we were recognised much earlier than when Mohammed Ali fought in Kinshasa, when Congo was Zaire.”¹⁰⁵ People did not really know who we were, but they knew how we looked like!” (Interview: 10 April 2018). She kept articulating her story on how the Congolese have continued to distinguish themselves among Black African diasporas in London by their “elaborate” and “grand” way of dressing. Interestingly, during our meeting, Priska’s fashion style was composed of full black chador with a dark grey synthetic fur jacket covering her

¹⁰⁴ According to Kelly Welch, the “school-to-prison pipeline” concerns the evidenced process by which children belonging to a lower-class background, especially Black, from kindergarten through the final year of secondary school are, for a wide range of reasons, pushed out of school classrooms, and into the juvenile then in the criminal justice systems. “The pipeline reflects the expansion of student criminalisation to the detriment of educational objectives, with the most harshly disciplined students experiencing repeating grades, dropping out, committing crimes, and eventually being incarcerated” (Welch, 2017, p. 1).

¹⁰⁵ Priska here refers to the historic boxing event “The Rumble in the Jungle” between Mohammad Ali and George Foreman which took place in Kinshasa in 1974.

shoulders, finished by a flashy necklace in a gold colour with black stones and a red beret hat. She drew attention to her outfit saying:

As you can see, I am a Muslim woman but the way I dress is very different because I still have that creative attitude which is a blessing (...) the way I look gives me an identity, gives me a way to stand out. I very much like to put pieces together. I still have my own touch of style. This give me my own identity. People who do not know me, for example other Muslim women, do not get why I do this mixture, but this is why, because I am Congolese, and I am very proud of where I come from. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

However, when asked to clarify her position on the subculture of *la sape* and to narrate more precisely her own everyday experience and cultural memories, Priska articulated quite a strong opposition to it. She remembered growing up surrounded by *la sape* culture with both her parents and some uncles at the time considered prominent *sapeurs* within the London diaspora, which made her middle childhood socially challenging.

I used to hate it when I was a child because we were so different from every other child. I would have always wanted to wear Nike or anything else that children were wearing but we would go anywhere in Dolce and Gabbana t-shirts, Yves Saint Laurent, crocodile skin trench coats (...) so you can imagine! All the children in their 'more normal' clothes and we were going with those animal skin clothes and Dr Martens boots, golden chains, we just looked like - how can I describe it - we just stood out and we really did not want to stand out, we wanted to be included, we wanted to be like anyone else so what me and my siblings would do? we would try to go anywhere by ourselves and we would have different pairs of outfits in our bags and we would go just down the road just before arriving to the place and we would change clothes and we would put all those stuff in our bags without knowing the real value and we did not really care (...) The first reaction from other children was that they were just staring at us like we were from a different planet (...) with curiosity and laughter, I wouldn't call it bullying because we weren't the ones to be bullied, we could standing for ourselves so they knew that they couldn't bully us but they could stick us behind our backs and they gave us those looks like 'Oh my gosh, what are they wearing?' and we didn't want that. Especially as a child, when you are ten or eleven you wanna be included, you know, you wanna follow what everybody else is wearing. I think if it was explained to us why we were wearing those clothes, where we came from and everything else, we would have had more sense of proudness, but we were just told to wear those clothes and we were embarrassed from it. We liked it within our own community, but we were embarrassed outside it. In the community was ok because everybody looked the same, everybody looked 'grand' and we all fitted in, so within Congolese settings was ok but outside it wasn't! (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Priska gave a revealing testimony in illustrating the main reasons behind *la sape*'s strong establishment among her parents' generation while growing up in London. She

confirmed Trapido's research in saying that, between mid-1980s and during the time of "easy money" from 1990 until 2000, the movement was very prominent among older generations of Congolese, it was "the thing" in London, and always mixed with entertainment, and anything that was related to pop culture. She maintained the idea of seeing *la sape* as a technique deployed by Congolese to symbolically stand out and establish some sort of metaphorical social status within the community:

To be a 'true' *sapeur* you must be able to afford buying designs straight from the runways or just before pieces goes to sale, because you are showing a high status. This is what makes you a great *sapeur*, it gives you a name. A way of saying 'I can afford this piece while you can't and that puts you in a higher status. And that's why in their parties or gatherings they used to leave all the labels out, to show that the piece is authentic and not fake, or some would go also with the receipts to show it to people. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Confirming again Trapido's work, Priska also clarified that, at the same time, older generations did not have professional jobs, as several were cleaners or had low-wage occupations. Therefore, many turned to committing crime, for example credit card fraud, mentioned previously, to be able to facilitate *la sape* lifestyle. "I know many stories about older people, it is no secret in the Congolese community about credit cards frauds just to get that piece of designer. But at what cost? So that's where it got dangerous" (Interview: 10 April 2018). In so expressing, Priska's voice demonstrates the cross-generational conflict at the basis of the divide concerning the body practice between older and younger Congolese individuals settled in London.

When asked to draw an historical and contemporary comparison between *la sape* sub-community in London and those in France and Belgium, Priska emphasised how many Africans and some Europeans living in Paris and Brussels were aware of the movement, established much earlier, due to the colonial and postcolonial bonds and migration relations with the Congos. Many could recognise social figures of *sapeurs*:

When Congolese started to live in Belgium and France 'they/we became part of the culture' just the same as here in the UK they had Asian people coming in. So White Londoners knew the Asian culture, they were very familiar with it and that is the same thing in Belgium and France with Congolese. This is why people there

knew before what *la sape* was (...) I think Congolese were certainly inspired by the ‘posh’ society in Belgium and France, from the haute couture, that is where Congolese took the ‘elegancy’ and they ‘marinated’ it with our own history, because we do come from kingdoms where everything was majestic before centuries of colonisation (...) and Congolese mixed what was already there with what the colonisers have left and we got *la sape* out of it (...) Now in France and Belgium the movement is still very strong and definitely bigger compared to the one in London and are actually Congolese in the diasporas that often influence *sapeurs* back home. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Priska cited another fundamental explanation behind why *la sape* groups of Brussels and Paris are certainly larger in comparison to the London one: the societal matrix and professional opportunities which differentiate these three European cities. According to her point of view, London has helped to shift *la sape* mentality, being an easier city to live in regard to racist behaviour. She stated that many Congolese of her generation do not face racism on a daily basis as much as their counterparts in Belgium and France. As she explained:

They will let you know ‘we do not like you, you are worthless’ in your face. Us, Congolese Londoners, have not faced it like that, so we have had a stronger sense of self-worth and that has empowered us, to do better and be better. And here in London there are more chances for us, and this empowered us. By empowering ourselves we kind of started to look at different directions of not letting the *sape* culture getting as big as Paris for example, because we have seen that we have got real things to do, real changes to make! (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Therefore, according to Priska’s opinion, while young Congolese in London are progressively abandoning *la sape* values as a way of living to focus on other forms of identity valuation, young Congolese living in France and Belgium continue to perform *la sape*, probably as a form of a defence and acceptance mechanism against more discriminatory and exclusionary societies of Paris and Brussels.

In remembering the time of her parents’ generation in London, Priska highlighted how the subculture was made very popular and cultivated by many, similarly to *sapeurs* in Paris and Brussels, as a “coping” cultural expression, since it offered some sort of serenity. As she puts it: “A lot of us came from nothing so having the group was seen as a distraction, as a way to almost be in ‘La La Land’, to forget

about our troubles, to indulge in this, in those fabrics that made people feeling good, better, just to forget about problems” (Interview: 10 April 2018). In so doing, Priska confirmed some scholars’ theories on interpreting *la sape* as a symbolic refuge, as a mimetic mechanism for facing daily life difficulties on European soil. Following Erving Goffman, *la sape*’s outward appearance and lifestyle can, in this context, signify a masked socio-cultural presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959b). Its commitment and its spectacular compensatory consumption and skills are used by Congolese individuals who belong to minority groups as a form of mimicry which ambiguously questions cultural and social divisions (Brodin et al., 2016). Interestingly, the *sapeur* is defined by Gondola as an illusionist who dresses precisely to mitigate social differentiations, making class values and social status unreadable (Gondola, 1999a). It is argued that his fashion choices make the body immediately recognisable but, in embracing codes that have been delineated by the group and for his own self, he creates an outside space of the standard urban matrix. He reclaims his own, independent, aesthetic codes which often destabilise politics of exclusion (Thomas, 2003).

However, Priska’s story did not frame *la sape* as a mode of rebellion or revolutionary act. On the contrary, she understood the movement as a language of assimilation which should be related to colonial histories, revealing a strong need to gain acceptance by European societies and find a space within the city. Priska remembered how *la sape* features trace signs of Western superiority over the non-West, based on how colonial perpetrators structure the ways in which Black African individuals have continued to perceive themselves.

If you look at history and you have been told that you are like an animal, you are not good for nothing, you are a savage, uncivilised, you start to dress like your colonisers, you want to be accepted... you start to think ‘so, if I dress like them, if I speak like them, if I move like them, I will be accepted, I won’t be looked down on, so if I wear the most expensive haute couture I will fit in, I won’t be looked down at!’ So, you tell yourself that is what you need to do, and this makes you feel better. So, this is what was happening among my parents’ generation, a similar approach. They used the movement to be accepted in the city. They

needed acceptance that's how I see it. Maybe in their minds they were seeing it as a sort of rebellion, to be able to dress as good as the West but in the grand scheme of things it wasn't a rebellion, it was an acceptance mind frame that they were going through. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Drawing on Frantz Fanon's work, Priska's narration on *la sape* among older generation of London Congolese can be related to the inferiority complex of Blacks in association to Whites perpetuated during colonialism (Vassallo, 2011, Begedou, 2014). In his seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon examines how the complex of inferiority was indoctrinated by colonists into the minds of the colonised through psychological mechanisms of racism. "Whiteness" was a symbol of purity, justice, truth, virginity, defining what it meant to be civilised, modern and human, while "Blackness" represented the exact contrary, a symbol of ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality, ignorance, and inferiority. Colonised subjects inevitably began (or were forced) to identify themselves through the eyes of colonisers. They experienced a dynamic of internalisation of this inferiority, which Fanon calls "epidermalization", where their self-esteem and self-motivation evaporated. Black men started to emulate their oppressors, to wear "White masks" in an attempt to "turn White": pushing away the negative connotation of Blackness to gain recognition and be accepted as men from the colonisers (Fanon, 1952, Sardar, 2008).

In interview, Priska continued with differentiating older generations from younger generations of London Congolese regarding the subculture. On the one hand, older generations also embraced *la sape* due to a lack of education and knowledge of the self, as well as a way of turning a blind eye on the socio-political situation of the DRC: "They thought they couldn't do anything, so they just wanted to turn their backs and indulge". On the other hand, she specified how many younger generations consider the movement as a cultural attitude which distracted their parents and slowed down the professional and intellectual progression of the diaspora in the city.

Dressing ostentatiously as a form of acceptance is consequently fading away, in Priska's experience in London, with many young Congolese no longer interested in spending thousands of pounds on clothes. In comparison, they are more focused on education, obtaining qualifications, investing in businesses or properties for the family, and supporting improvement back home.

What I see as a true rebellion is to educate yourself, gaining control of yourself. We are true rebellions. The younger ones have got education, knowledge, we have got fire in us. We know the difference between assets and liabilities. We perceive a long run. Ok, it is good to buy designers stuff and everything, but we think 'what is doing for us? For our condition? For our wealth? In the long run? What are we gonna leave to our children?' I think absolutely nothing if we continue to follow our fathers and uncles' attitude. It is just going to leave us the legacy of being 'elaborate' and 'fashionable' of dressing very nice but in the long term we are gonna be stuck in the same situation. I am not saying that *la sape* culture is bad, but there must be a balance of knowledge of yourself and knowledge of how you can direct those money (...) because it makes no sense! Other things in life are for us more important than buying clothes and handbags and we now know that money can go to have a better future and can go in assets that can make money in the long run, you know? A lot of *sapeurs* in the Congo live in tent houses while their all collections can buy them a nice house so can you see the mentality? We are trying to get out of that 'slave mentality', that being slave to material stuff just to demonstrate something... they live in a tent house and when it rains the roof collapses, but they have collections worth thousands! And many times, people put themselves in debts to get that instead of investing or even having debts but for a house where your children can live in or to buy a piece of land (...) So priorities are really messed up and in this we just need to educate the older generations and make sure that our generation don't fall through the same traps. (Interview: 10 April 2018)

Priska's testimony, therefore, offers further insights on the conflict dividing different generations of London Congolese in regard to the performance of *la sape*.

Importantly, Priska's criticism towards the fashion and lifestyle sub-culture, and her last argument particularly, was widely shared by several other young Congolese informants. For instance, twenty-nine-year-old Emma, who moved from the DRC to the UK with her family at the age of three and described fashion expressions as the deepest side of her Congolese culture. She underlined her passion for dressing well and enjoyment of purposely presenting herself "nicely" in front of others for special occasions. However, she raised some concerns about the practice of *la sape* within her

community. Emma recognised the collective awareness of how occasionally wanting a “special look” is a fundamental aspect of who Congolese people are. At the same time, she drew a distinct line with *sapeurs*’ attitudes, “carried wherever they go”. She criticised their obsession with wearing high fashion garments on a daily basis, often without being able to afford it, for the specific purpose of constantly impressing and entertaining others. She categorised this behaviour as a constructed exhibitionism which does not reflect a real image of the self. In explaining some of the reasons for not identifying with *la sape*, Emma stated:

The problem is that some *sapeurs* financially don’t have much, don’t even have a home to stay in, but they still spend maybe four thousand pounds to buy clothes. This is where I strongly disagree with! They never wear cheap clothes but Gucci or Vivienne Westwood and for me it’s just entertainment, they want to entertain their friends and show off and this is really not part of my character (...) I think *la sape* is really just about how you want people to see you. If you want to dress nice, spend all those money for nice clothes that’s fine with me but I think this is just showing how you want people to see you! They want to be seen as rich and of a high class even if they are not, it is really just a matter of appearance. (Interview: 7 May 2018)

Emma has seen various *sapeurs*’ flamboyant performances while growing up in London. They appeared in many kinds of gatherings of the Congolese community, children and birthday parties, weddings or even during a simple dinner, but would always show up very late, at 2 a.m. or so, to do their performances. She found their eccentric conduct to be ironic:

Some of the things they say or how they act make me laugh ‘cause they become a character and they want to show charisma through clothing and I think ‘Oh my God!’ ‘cause they are all grown men but it is funny when I think on how much they take the pride to do all of that and they love it, but I think it is negative to spend all those money in clothes which doesn’t have any real value. (Interview: 7 May 2018)

Emma continued by adding to her everyday experience that she has not seen *sapeurs*’ shows at community events over the past five years, especially in those organised by her peers, agreeing with Priska in noting a decline of the trend among younger generations: “I have many Congolese men friends and they all love fashion and to dress well and

look nice, but they don't follow the whole *sapologie* behaviour at all. They are very different from *sapeurs*" (Interview: 7 May 2018). Confirming Priska's opinion, Emma also emphasised how the movement is losing its influence in London due to the specific "superdiverse" cultural environment of the city, which is guiding young individuals in shaping and promoting a different mental approach to life: "young Congolese are much more interested in developing long term substantial businesses and goals that will benefit our lives, our children. Clothes are not gonna benefit our lives and the community" (Interview: 7 May 2018).

London *sapeurs*' catwalk performances were also defined as hilarious by thirty-three-year old Lina who described to me the ways in which some of the oldest walked into a room with a "certain style and pride. It is not just the dressing, it is how they act!" (Interview: 18 May 2018). Despite not being considered "full" *sapeurs*, some of the youngest are somehow maintaining a sort of "showy showy" body language. Their attitude is humbler, but some reminiscences from the movement can be noticed. Lina gave the example of the way they usually "wear shades during evening parties when is totally dark light at night and there is no need for shades" (Interview: 18 May 2018). However, when asked to express her thoughts on *la sape* beyond these performative acts, Lina revealed a conflicting standpoint analogous to previous young informants.

If that's what *sapeurs* want to do they can do it, but I feel that people should not run themselves broke just to impress others, it is better to make other investments with that money, I guess, in a house, car or stuff like which are actually needed for the family. When I speak with other Congolese of my age, I assume they don't really take *sapeurs* seriously because most young people have the assumption that if you are showing off your clothes you usually don't have enough money for anything else, but you spend it all on your clothes and for us is not that impressive. What we find impressive is people who actually are working hard and get themselves educated and putting the money into a better use. What we think is 'why would you spend your money in something that is so temporary, how about investing in something that is more long term?' or at least this is something that I always say to myself and people who surround me think the same. (Interview: 18 May 2018)

Among other interviewees who considered *la sape* simply a superficial display that promoted values only based on a temporary gratification of the self was thirty-five-year-old Lucille. While conversing about how the DRC was promoted in the West, Lucille again positioned herself in disagreement with the ways her Congolese cultural heritage was represented through the movement. In her voice:

I am happy with everyone that brings to light our culture, but I really don't like 'the behind the scene' [of *la sape*] because I know that people only usually see the 'glitz' of it, they don't see the rest, all the struggles that Congolese have been going through. *Sapeurs* spend thousands of moneys just to put one outfit together but then they don't have any house. They just live in a moment which last a couple of seconds and then they are left with nothing (...) I don't know any *sapeur* in London, I have never looked for them honestly! (Interview: 2 July 2018)

Lucille interpreted *la sape* as quite a dangerous aspect of her culture that needed to be questioned, transformed and possibly eradicated, since it had never benefitted Congolese individuals in the DRC and its diasporas in any way. At a point in our dialogue, she refused to recognise the group as part of her heritage:

I know that because I am Congolese, and I can see from my own family the way we were brought up and how we were told to work out our finances and understand money and investing and it is not in our culture to do anything close to what *sapeurs* actually are doing. (Interview: 2 July 2018)

Lucille wished for Congolese people, and especially the youth, to understand the "behind the scenes" and the consequences of being part of such a "frivolous" group and, instead, to evaluate a more far-sighted system of ideas "to bring the country up at all levels and not just for few moments" (Interview: 2 July 2018).

Overall, London's multicultural and superdiverse environment is perceived by young Congolese as less racist and offering more work and professional opportunities compared to Paris and Brussels. According to some young participants of this thesis, Congolese living in Paris and Brussels continue to embrace *la sape*'s performance and values possibly as a form of a defence mechanism against more discriminatory and exclusionary societies of France and Brussels. They continue to display luxury brands

and the aesthetics of excess as a mode of acceptance and authentication, while equally still desiring to be recognised and gain social status back home, due to a lack of a real integration in Europe. London, instead, for young Congolese figures as a more accessible place for personal and collective growth. For example, in Priska's experience, it is true that, similarly to Paris and Brussels, the subculture was initially deployed by older generations of London Congolese as an act through which coping with the settings and real-life circumstances of the environment, as a form of mimetism to gain acceptance and find a space in the city fabric. Elders probably deployed *la sape* to present the self within the framework of a more successful image in front of others, despite a real lack of social and economic advancement, as well as a lower educational background and knowledge of self. Cultivating the movement offered them some sort of relief and distraction from daily life issues.

Most of the young British Congolese are interested and often directly involved in various forms of fashion expressions and aesthetic display practices, historically well-rooted in their cultural legacy. They certainly appreciate how instrumental outer appearances are in fashioning the inner self, reflecting the Central African' region's historical preoccupation with body display. However, none of my informants belonged to the London sub-community of *la sape* or embraced its features. While some showed pride in delineating *la sape* as part of their cultural heritage, others criticised *sapeurs'* core characteristics and values. None of them were "obsessed" with high fashion brands or pursuing the cult of elegance and performing the ethos, rituals and specific jargons required to be part of the group.

Even young individuals who recognised the subculture as a fundamental aspect of their tradition to be proud of were somehow implementing a cultural renewal towards what lay at the basis of *la sape*'s original beliefs. As Monique's experience showed, her style and fashion blog sought to communicate a very different approach to clothing as a

material form of gaining confidence in the self. The totemic symbol of expensive couturier labels, considered by “true” *sapeurs* as central for individual satisfaction, was substituted by more easily affordable clothes able to signify similar feelings of empowerment and identity valuation. In so doing, Monique revealed a level of deeper economic self-awareness, strategizing a new method to experience the medium of fashion as a cultural embodiment of the self.

Although still interested in using the medium of creative fashion and elegance to express their cultural identities, various other informants openly criticised the lifestyle decisions and core values promoted by the movement. While in the past *la sape* evolved as a language that aimed to destabilise political systems, it is currently well established among members of the DRC regime and Congolese political élite. It is unsurprising, therefore, that anti-corruption and pro-democracy young political activists in London do not associate with the subculture nor recognise its values. *La sape* was simply seen as a superficial display, a ritual of the body based on a temporary gratification of the self that does not have any long-term relevance. Consequently, the ostentatious dress practice, as a way of living, and its strong generational linkage appeared to be progressively losing relevance among younger generations of London Congolese. They no longer saw the subculture as the result of a “proper education” or a line of inspiration passed down from their fathers and grandfathers that must be pursued but were rather more interested in education-oriented achievements and family responsibilities. They claimed to be focused on cultural activities that were able to firstly shape a deeper and more durable progression of their community in the city, and secondly invest in an improvement in the homeland, aiming therefore to acquire recognition within the Black African diasporas through their professional efforts.

Along with further tracing the *people*, the *thing*, the *story* and the *metaphor* (Marcus, 1995) enclosed within the fashion and lifestyle of *la sape*, the second part of

this chapter has therefore demonstrated the intrinsic *conflict* characterising the contemporary sub-community of London's *sapeurs*, its cross-generational conflict dividing older and younger subjects, as well as the conflict emerged on debating the body performance among non-members young London Congolese (Marcus, 1995). The case study has also confirmed how the development of cultural performances varies depending on the social matrix, practices and belief of various groups within a given diaspora. Through body performances, migrant subjects can either give cultural consistency to the community to which they feel they belong, re-articulating their own culture, or rather questioning some aspects of it. Certainly, performances, and their inevitable transformation, constitute a means used by individuals to interpret their own world and give life meaning beyond the near present (Speer, 1992). As framed in chapter two, cultural identities are not just based on an "original" past but refer to the different positions in which individuals within a culture locate themselves via narratives, and understand their own world from a specific place, time, history and culture (Hall, 1990).

Whether or not young London Congolese decided to embrace, refuse or transform *la sape* fashion and lifestyle practice and values, secondary sources and fieldwork data revealed a deep correlation between forms of bodily performances with the construction and generational reformulation of racial, ethnic and gender identities, especially in accordance with time and place. This chapter aimed to introduce on an empirical level some of the ideas on which the thesis is based. The Congolese voices reported throughout the case study have shown how the dress and "beautifying" practice of *la sape* has been directly or indirectly entangled in life histories and experiences of both insiders and outsiders of the group. The cultural, political and economic meanings produced by fashion and beauty practices are especially attributed in ongoing social interaction between the wearer, who is also performing an identity, and the viewer. This

is particularly relevant among African people or with a Black African background who have kept using the “stylish look” to engage with the world and reconfigure their place in society (Hansen and Madison, 2013).

3.4 Concluding remarks

The body has for a long time been a form of fundamental cultural capital for Black African subjects, functioning as a canvas for self-representation during colonial times as well as decolonial and neo-colonial processes (Hall, 1993). In this sense, the socio-cultural, aesthetic and political phenomenon of *la sape* should be understood as a practice which continues to reveal a level of agency within urban Congolese societies both at home and abroad. It expresses the formation and performance of cultural identities, of values and politics through the medium of fashion style, manifesting differently depending on the environment within which it has been located.

Each multi-sited ethnographic field (Marcus, 1995) concerning the movement of *la sape* was analysed throughout the chapter, to trace the transnational geographies of young Congolese participants and their everyday life diasporic experiences in London. The main *people* and *biographies* (Marcus, 1995) from the fieldwork interviews were the two migrant Congolese young women, Monique and Priska, whose discordant voices, experiences and cultural memories have offered a detailed testimony on the current situation of the fashion and lifestyle subculture among the youngest in London. Various other London Congolese diasporic experiences across generations were also followed, portraying points of view from both a section of insider London *sapeurs* as well as from other individuals who did not feel or wished to belong to the group. In accordance with the historical and contemporary transnational dimension of the movement, the voices of *la sape* pillars, such as Papa Wemba, and of some of the emergent female *sapeuses* living in the DRC were additionally presented.

The *thing* (Marcus, 1995) was the *griffe*, or expensive designer labels, as a form of material culture at the core of the movement and seen by “true” *sapeurs* as fundamental for individual satisfaction. The relevance of the *griffe* has been, for instance, highlighted through the *mikilistes* trans-continental adventure towards Paris as well as through the photographic work of Mann on contemporary London *sapeurs*, who posed confidently in front of the camera and performed their selves in wearing personalised high fashion outfits. The exemplary catwalk-performance at the Tottenham local barbershop, considered by many *sapeurs* as a kind of artistic expression, was also framed as a form of creative production. In addition, the substitution of haute couture labels with more affordable fashion garments was pointed out. These were utilised by young London Congolese as new objects to experience the medium of fashion as a cultural embodiment of the self.

The *story* and *plot* (Marcus, 1995) was traced by a delineated historical development and transformation of the fashion and lifestyle practice in the Congos and its diasporas as well as by the ways in which different generations of London Congolese *sapeurs* and non-*sapeurs* defined and positioned themselves in relation to the body practice. A Congolese transnational story involving narratives of everyday diasporic experiences and collective memories was also outlined through the presentation of the exemplary fashion catwalk gathering performed by some London *sapeurs* at the Tottenham barber shop.

The *metaphor*, or the social correlations of signs, symbols, and visual images (Marcus, 1995), involved the strong, ever-changing, socio-cultural and political meanings and symbolic values associated to the practice of *la sape*. The historical symbolic roots of the body practice were revealed on the ways precursors of the movement employed European fashion appearances as a form of empowerment to establish new modern and cosmopolitan African identities in front of the coloniser and

to attest social status in front of other Africans. Asserting the self through the performance ritual of *la sape* underwent an even more political dimension when deployed to stand against Mobutu's dictatorship and continuous economic deprivation and, more recently, to express discontent at gender inequality and homophobic discrimination, as well as in diasporic urban settings to cope with exclusion or access Congolese elitarian circles.

Finally, the *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) was the very contradictory significance embedded in *la sape*. While the movement became popularised within the music sphere as a performative language to fight political oppression, it was later introduced and employed by political and élite figures themselves, with the support of those same *sapeur* musicians. A deep ambiguity within the older *sapeur* group in London was, for instance, presented during the christening party taking place at a North London Congolese community centre, which gathered in the same space anti-Kabila radical political activists beside recognised *sapeurs* of the European diasporas. *La sape* embedded also a cross-generational conflict, where less integrated older generations of London Congolese continued to embrace the movement as a practice of belonging to navigate a multiverse metropolis while more confident younger generations did not feel the same need. Furthermore, a discrepancy among the younger group was also exposed, with some accepting the flamboyant body practice as an important aspect of their cultural legacy heritage while others openly refused its core principles and encouraging a cultural renewal.

The following chapters in the thesis revolve around the new ways in which young Congolese in London produce some exemplary everyday fashion and beauty performances. These serve to mark racial, ethnic and gender identities, to display adornments of the body, to tell life histories, to foster community and to express individual and collective concerns in the multicultural, “superdiverse”, context of

London as well as to involve and engage subjects who are not specifically from the same group (Schechner, 2013).

**Chapter Four – Fabricating and transcending binaries of “imagined”
transnationalities: the local, cultural and commercial fashion design of *Kiyana***

Wraps

4 Introduction

This chapter forms the second case study of my research. By investigating a London-based Congolese fashion brand, *Kiyana Wraps*, specialised in hand-stitched turban hats and ready-made headwrap models, the chapter examines how young diasporic women maintain emblematic ties with the African continent and with their specific Black Congolese cultural heritage.¹⁰⁶ The chapter also argues that “superdiverse” London strongly impacts their production. Two different, but related, elements of the fashion company production are, therefore, delineated. On the one hand, the headwrap practice evokes socio-cultural and symbolic meanings which are essential for the construction and performance of racial, ethnic and gender identities. Through the re-appropriation of the traditional Black African head garment, young diasporic women maintain a strong bond with their cultural legacy. They perform a sense of Blackness and trace a “Congolese story” embedded into cultural memories which are often affected by an idealised representation of the motherland (Tulloch, 2004). The analysis also outlines how the headwrap ritual is used to embody gender configurations, where “feminine” styles and “feminist” values are intertwined, representing a symbolic hybrid marker employed to unite diverse women.

On the other hand, the case study highlights the commercial approach of the brand. It analyses how the commodity culture of headdress fashion has been re-formulated by *Kiyana Wraps* to simultaneously exceed specific cultural borders. Deeply

¹⁰⁶ Some parts of this chapter have been published in the Taylor & Francis Online Journal “African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal” on the 25th October 2018. The article, entitled “Transcultural body spaces: re-inventing and performing headwrap practice among young Congolese women in London”, can be access at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2018.1537592>.

influenced by the multicultural context of London, the brand creatively blends ethnic tastes with several cultural and stylistic inputs coming from a network of consumers with heterogeneous cultural backgrounds. In so doing, the *Kiyana Wraps* team challenges strictly defined racial and ethnic boundaries and transcends binary of the “imagined” transnational attachments. In deconstructing the stereotypical idea behind the headwrap tradition, the brand aims strategically to expand its economic horizons.

The chapter is divided in two major sections. The first main section contextualises the case study with an historical overview of the cultural heritage of the headwrap costume, its roots on the African continent and its diasporic legacy and symbolic value. The evolution of *Kiyana Wraps* as fashion brand is then introduced, with an analysis of the strong narrative and symbolism behind its stylisation. The second main section of the chapter examines in detail an exemplary brand event, “Unveil-the-workshop”, held in Central London in December 2016. The analysis particularly demonstrates how hybrid racial, ethnic and gender diasporic identities of different young cultural actors are performed through the headwrap ritual.

4.1 *Kiyana Wraps* on display

4.1.1 The cultural heritage of head dressing

Among numerous African headdress practices, the headwrap holds a strong significance and longevity (Bradley Griebel, 1995a). Defined through various names,¹⁰⁷ the original African headwrap is a rectangular piece of cloth wrapped from the back of the head and tied or tucked around the head (Lynch and Strauss, 2014, Bradley Griebel, 1995b). It was historically employed to protect the wearer from the environment, but also to show aesthetic preferences and enhance the wearer’s face as well as to convey powerful

¹⁰⁷ Bandanna, headrag, head handkerchief, tie head, headtie, turban and headwrap (Tulloch, 2003, Lynch and Strauss, 2014, Tulloch, 2016). I here use turban and headwrap as used by the *Kiyana Wraps* team.

socio-cultural meanings, such as individuals' ethnic affiliations (Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995, Lynch and Strauss, 2014).

Although a precise historical moment has yet to be defined, Helen Bradley Griebel hypothesises that the African women's headwrap costume evolved from the West coasts with the vast European trade expansion on the continent, and especially when the Atlantic slave trade had hardened by the mid-seventeenth century (Bradley Griebel, 1995b).¹⁰⁸ Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, low-priced European-produced cloth became more accessible to a broader African population, who adopted it to satisfy their natural aesthetic needs and personal choices (Lynch and Strauss, 2014). The headwrap gradually developed as a popular accessory among West African women and, subsequently, as a widespread practice among other African communities and overseas. Together with cloth, ready-made European kerchiefs were also part of the trade-demand and imported to West Africa by the mid-eighteenth century (Bradley Griebel, 1995b).

Previously, the use of the headwrap was much less common compared to other African head adornments as a result of the scarcity of woven cloth (Bradley Griebel, 1995b, Lynch and Strauss, 2014). Elaborate hairstyles were used by Africans such as ornamental shaving patterns, or by applying and sculpting clay to the hair as well as embellishing it with flowers, beads, shells, metal and feathers (Bradley Griebel, 1995b). It is, however, important to point out that the headwrap practice was not introduced to Africa from outside, neither by Europeans nor Islamic beliefs.¹⁰⁹ The headwrap has been recognised as an authentic indigenous West African article of dress, in terms of the

¹⁰⁸ As highlighted in chapter one, the arrival of Europeans in Africa and their Atlantic slave trade began from the late fifteenth/sixteenth centuries. It is therefore possible to assume that the headwrap practice has earlier origins.

¹⁰⁹ The evolution of the headwrap could be associated with the use of turbans and veils among Muslim Tuareg communities of North/West Africa (Hawad-Claudot, 1992). However, Griebel underlines, the use of headwraps among non-Muslims as indigenous dress tradition should be differentiated from the Islamic tradition (Bradley Griebel, 1995b).

functions, styles and meanings it embodies (Bradley Griebel, 1995b). Despite the overall lack of historical sources regarding its origins, Griebel points out the account by the British Richard Ligon, who describes the turban worn by a West African woman in Cape Verde, currently Senegal, in 1647, offering evidence that some West African women were wearing headwraps by the mid-seventeenth century (Bradley Griebel, 1995b).

A much wider and diverse documentation is available from the nineteenth century. Numerous writers and visual artists portrayed African and African-American women wearing headwraps and show how the costume travelled across the Atlantic to the Caribbean (Bradley Griebel, 1995b). The 1707 painting by Danish artist Dirk Valkenburg which represents a group of newly arrived enslaved West African women wearing headwraps on a South American plantation (Bradley Griebel, 1995b) is a good example. Another important testimony comes from Scottish explorer Mungo Park, who between 1795-7 and 1805-6, travelled in different West African regions alongside the Gambia River. He wrote that one of the means through which West Africans marked themselves out was by wearing a variety of hair decorations specific to their social group. He documented Gambian women wearing headwraps in the 1790s, describing it as a sort of bandage, a narrow strip of cotton cloth, wrapped around many times and over the forehead (Miller, 1954, Bradley Griebel, 1995b).

Griebel emphasises how the headwrap practice and its powerful significance have survived over time and space in both African and diasporic lands. It has become a distinct marker of the outlook of “Africanism”, encoding an “African world view”, a culturally learned way of perceiving the world also through the making and use of material objects (Bradley Griebel, 1995b). Hence, different generations of Congolese women in the DRC and its diasporas continue to accompany their traditional vibrant and

colourful dresses with headwraps (Foster, 2002, Bradley Griebel, 1995a, Bradley Griebel, 1995b, Farber, 2010), as a way of telling their own story.

4.1.2 The diasporic value of the headwrap and its symbolic roots in African head dressing

Individuals belonging to the Black African diaspora have sought strong connections to their ancient homeland, often influenced by an idealised idea of it, ever since they were forced into slavery in the Americas. The bodily practice of dressing the head has commonly and symbolically embodied that connection (Boateng, 2004, Strübel, 2012). During and after slavery in the US, the headwrap acquired paradoxical, deeply conflicting, meanings. White overlords forced millions of enslaved Black women to cover their heads with a simple head rag as a badge of enslavement which, consecutively, developed into the stereotype that Whites held of the “Black Mammy” servant (Bradley Griebel, 1995a). However, these negative connotations were strongly challenged by enslaved Africans and their descendants. They instead considered the headwrap as a metaphorical “helmet of courage”, functioning as a symbol of a truly perceived communal identity and as a symbolic uniform of rebellion signifying complete resistance to loss of self-definition (Bradley Griebel, 1995a). Through the collection of numerous formerly enslaved African American women’s narratives, Griebel demonstrates that, seventy years after emancipation, many African-American women continued to wear some form of hair covering similar to that worn by enslaved women, with the traditional headwrap and its sub-Saharan style as the most common form, used in different social contexts (Bradley Griebel, 1995a). The headwrap has been emblematic of the ways Black African women consciously acknowledged an allegorical connection with their enslaved predecessors as well as with those who remained in Africa (Bradley Griebel, 1995a, Strübel, 2012). It epitomised in material form women’s

“dual souls” (Du Bois, 1903), an ancestral Black African soul and a second one forged in the ordeal of racial slavery (Bradley Griebel, 1995b)

Black African women in Europe also re-appropriated the traditional headwrap into everyday dress by re-inventing new headwear styles to commemorate and celebrate African influences, thereby strengthening their diasporic cultural identities and feelings of belonging to their specific ethnic group (Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995, Farber, 2010, Strübel, 2012). In her study on the relationship between young Black British women of Jamaican descent and their self-assembly headties during the 1970s, Tulloch highlights that the headwrap should be considered a fundamental signifier in providing cultural and social narratives (Tulloch, 2003). She argues that Black British women’s clothed bodies were simultaneously influenced by their socio-cultural values, directly formed by their existence in Britain, as well as by the socio-political transnational influence of African American women on the opposite side of the North Atlantic Ocean. Black British women wore headties to search and express a hybrid cultural identity:

Whether worn as a tower of fabric bound tight around the head, a folded square or a triangle of cloth bound tight to the head and secured at the back, front or side in a tight, neat knot; or the luxurious fabric wrapped around the head, the ends left free to cascade down on to the body, the headtie enabled Black British women to engage in a public embrace with African-American, Caribbean and African women, and symbolised the ambitions and potency of the term pan-African. (Tulloch, 2003, pp. 226-227)

Inspired by the Black-consciousness movement of the 1970s,¹¹⁰ Black British women used headties to construct aesthetic identities as part of a feminist-cultural discourse, based on the combination of their own diasporic experiences as members of a Black counterculture which operated within the White hegemonic system of Britain. The body practice was employed by them to symbolically identify as “Womanist”, a term used by

¹¹⁰ The 1970s activities of the civil rights, Black Power and Black-consciousness movements had a crucial influence in the formation of a collective Black African cultural identity. The community was encouraged by Black activists and musicians to “Think Black, Talk Black, Create Black, Buy Black, Vote Black and Live Black”. Being “Black” and of African origins stood against being an unsettled, invisible “negro”. All cultural levels of the community embraced the concept, including dress styles and self-images (Tulloch, 2003, p. 64).

African-American Alice Walker to describe a Black feminist woman who has grown from being “girlish” into managing heavier responsibilities of womanhood and is craving knowledge to take strong control of her life (Walker, 1991, Tulloch, 2003).¹¹¹ Therefore, the use of headties intentionally emphasised the connections with Africans and African-Americans and the development of an African diasporic cultural consciousness and aesthetic (Tulloch, 2003).

It must be underlined that the preservation of the headwrap and its symbolic value among African diasporas finds strong historical roots in the African cultural practice of adorning and embellishing the human head, as mentioned earlier. This has been long performed through various creative styles expressing multi-layered connotations and metaphors. According to many African societies, the head holds a unique significance as the root of intelligence and personality (Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995, Lynch and Strauss, 2014). For instance, the Tabwa¹¹² ethnic tribe of the DRC consider the centre of the forehead to be the core of wisdom, prophecy and dreams and their belief is highlighted in the Tabwa diviners’ headdresses (*nkaka*) (Roberts, 1990).¹¹³ Another example of how the art of dressing the head signifies a socio-cultural, metaphorical, action is the Pende wig (*mukotte*), a local form of headwear among the Congolese Pende¹¹⁴ ethnic group. In the 1930s, the *mukotte* became the popular symbol of resistance against the Belgians (Biebuyck and Van den Abbeele, 1984). These examples show how the head, due to its central position, is often regarded as the perfect

¹¹¹ The term includes all women independently from their races and sexual orientation (Walker, 1991).

¹¹² The Tabwa are a Bantu tribe found in the southern Katanga Province (Jenkins, 2006).

¹¹³ The beaded hat presents a central spiral motif over the diviner’s forehead, the location of his wisdom, perception, creativity, and second sight, which refers to the “eye of Kibawa”, the earth spirit who controls the domain of the dead. This “third eye” also represents the moon, contact with the ancestors and fertility (Roberts, 1990, Hackett, 1998, Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995) The opposing triangles which surround the spiral eye, signify “the rising of the new moon” (Roberts and Maurer, 1986, Roberts, 1990, Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995, Hackett, 1998). This metaphor includes both “darkness”, obscurity, ignorance, danger and destruction, and “light”, perception, wisdom, safety and hope, and guide Tabwa people to deal with misfortune and death (Roberts, 1990, Hackett, 1998).

¹¹⁴ Settled in the Southwestern region of the DRC (Danver, 2015).

site of the body to be aesthetically and symbolically decorated (Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995).

The next sections will introduce the cultural and commercial production of fashion brand *Kiyana Wraps*. The analysis will demonstrate how significant the African heritage of dressing the head is for young London Congolese women and how the legacy of the cultural practice produces socio-cultural and symbolic meanings built on imaginary transnational ties between the DRC and London. The analysis will also reveal the economic interests of the company, showing how the traditional headwrap is re-formulated by *Kiyana Wraps* into a modern commodity which transcends racial and ethnic tastes and creates new cross-cultural spaces lived by a range of diverse consumers.

4.1.3 *Kiyana Wraps*: an introduction

Kiyana Wraps is a Congolese, London-based, brand specialised in women's accessories including hand-stitched turban hats, ready-made headwrap models, fabrics and, occasionally, handmade jewellery such as necklaces and bracelets. The brand was born as a family business run by a young Congolese fashion designer and creative director Madeleine Laini and her sister Christelle as operations director. In narrating her cultural memories and ordinary experience in London, Madeleine explained in interview:

I have always worn headwraps as part of my personal style... For example, I grow up with Erykah Badu¹¹⁵ as my model...I have always been a great fan of her music, her style... Later on, very often I have caught a lot of attention from people on the street because of my headwraps...a few times it literally happened to me that women on the street would unwrap their wrap and asked me to rewrap it for them...this made me think a lot. (Interview: 17 December 2016)

Madeleine continued her narrative emphasising that her natural ability to sew and her passion for stylistic expression led her to train at the Kensington and Chelsea College and to become a milliner. This experience "pushed" Madeleine "to look at fabrics with a

¹¹⁵ African American singer songwriter who often wears hats and headwraps during her performances.

different perspective” (Interview: 17 December 2016). Christelle also explained that the business idea developed through the encounter with an African TV presenter who, during a party in London, remained fascinated by their headwraps and invited them to talk about their passion for turbans on her show, *The Sporah Show*.¹¹⁶ From this, *Kiyana Wraps* was established in 2011.¹¹⁷ Today the company is based in Covent Garden and is the result of a collaboration between the Laini sisters and Congolese stylist Josette Matomby.¹¹⁸

The company involves two main fashion stylisations in presenting its designs. Firstly, it includes easy-to-wear turban hats, headband models and African wax-printed fabrics for headwraps which can be worn every day. These are usually composed of comfortable and restrained forms which enfold the head shape and are mainly produced from traditional African cotton fabrics. Secondly, more elegant stylisations and voluminous hand-crafted models are included, specifically elaborated for formal occasions.

The customised production of this cultural and business practice represents a concrete, although conflicting, example of head dressing re-elaboration which combines a powerful cultural heritage with contemporary tastes. As featured on the website, the brand uses “authentic African methods of head wrapping (...) combined with a blend of

¹¹⁶ An African talk show that explores and celebrates topics on cultural diversity, business, innovation, and style among Black Africans in London.

¹¹⁷ During the same year, Madeleine Laini also decided to create an interactive on-line platform on Facebook called *Young, Congolese, and Fabulous* (2019) mentioned in chapter two. This is dedicated to people of Congolese descent, where fans can share articles, photos, music, documentaries etc., about the DRC. The cover image says: “Congolese and Fabulous. Reclaiming the narrative”. The page description claims: “We shall tell our own stories... We believe that it is important to portray the right image of men and women of Congolese descent”. As Madeleine described in her weblog “Noughts-not-Crosses” (2019), the page was triggered by the lack of positive stories on the web about the DRC, prevalently focused on “depressing” articles on rape, poverty, war etc. Madeleine felt the necessity to create a more encouraging space for Congolese people in the diaspora. The platform *Young, Congolese, and Fabulous*, therefore, aims to unite and celebrate “inspirational” Congolese professionals who are excelling in their diverse fields and have contributed to contradict negative perceptions and stereotypes on the Congolese culture and have worked on improving the general representation of the DRC.

¹¹⁸ Who also works with Congolese fashion designer Benjamin Kitoko.

contemporary aesthetic” and, therefore, “to be able to create something new, something innovative [where] each piece is a unique celebration of artistry and ancestry” (Kiyana Wraps, 2019). In Christelle’s words: “we do a lot of research...we look at history, art, stories...we get inspired by architecture, movies, nature etc...the designs are very creative because there is a lot of thought behind them!” (Interview: 17 December 2016).

Kiyana Wraps’ stylistic “hybridity-talk” (Hutnyk, 2000) is, therefore, applied in favour of a creative fusion of transnational and intercultural elements. The brand is visibly and intentionally Black and Congolese in identification, with the interest of promoting a specific cultural difference, while, conflictingly, also indorsing multicultural aesthetics to incentivise its marketability (Hutnyk, 2000). As Madeleine explained:

Now wearing *Kiyana* headwraps is part of my marketing strategy...when I put on one of my headwrap is not just about me... I know that when I go somewhere I am representing myself and what I do... it is a way to pull people towards me and get people thinking about headwrap in a different way...so people would look at me and wonder how it works with a different style, between tradition and modernity (...) what I really planned to do from the very beginning was to merge the traditional African wrapping and the traditional European ways of making a hat...in this way women don’t need to wrap their head but they can just have a beautiful headwrap at home ready and wear it whenever they feel like...whenever they want to feel powerful and beautiful... what we want to convey is elegance, uniqueness, quality, and, most of all, beauty. (Interview: 17 December 2016)

Multicultural aesthetics from the “superdiverse” space of London and “hybridity-talks”, such as the brand signatures on the website: “Congolese heritage. Made in England” as well as “From heritage styles to signature designs” (Kiyana Wraps, 2019) are strategically, to some extent in conflict, used as a “call for access” to transform a body ritual typically used by certain racial and ethnic groups as a more encompassing practice (Hutnyk, 2000). In so doing, the brand has reached the interest of predominantly Congolese and other Black African communities but also expanded its “imagined markets” (Dwyer and Crang, 2002) to a broader and diverse range of clientele including Western and Middle Eastern women.

4.1.4 *Kiyana Wraps*’ “Congolese story and journey” and its “traditional authenticity”

A “Congolese *story* and journey” is embedded within the brand production through a strong sense of belonging to the DRC, as testified by both Laini sisters in interview: “What makes our headwraps to be Congolese is surely the fact that our identity is Congolese, and our work comes directly from that!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). More explicitly, an authentic narrative, which ingrains *cultural memories* (Marcus, 1995), is transmitted by using many Swahili names, often suggested by Madeleine and Christelle’s mother and aunties (Interview: 17 December 2016). Together with the brand name *Kiyana*, meaning beautiful in Congolese Swahili, the majority of the turban hat models are described by traditional names. Including, for instance, *Faraji* (consolation), *Asha* (life), *Kimari* (moonlight), *Bahati* (chance), *Moyo* (heart), etc. Most of the cotton headwrap fabrics for the headwraps, with colourful African patterns, also have names inspired by Congolese geography, history and languages, involving, for example, *Kivu* (DRC eastern region); *Zaire* (DRC former name), *Lingala* (another official language spoken in the DRC), etc. As Christelle underlined: “We have decided to use authentic Swahili names to give a touch of our culture, to create a story for each piece and to show to our customers our roots!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). French-inspired names are occasionally used to describe cotton fabric patterns, for example *Irondelle*, from the French *hirondelle* (swallow), and *Tournesol* (sunflower). Fabrics of different materials such as velvet, satin and silk have names inspired by London areas, for instance *Mayfair* (London Borough of Westminster) and *Belmont Violet* (London Borough of Sutton). Therefore, while the selection of traditional Swahili names is clearly employed to evoke diasporic memories, to create a transnational geography with the original homeland and to emphasise cultural difference, the use of French maintains

a postcolonial linguistic legacy while the addition of English names mirrors a contemporary London influence and everyday life experience in the city.

A Black Congolese “traditional authenticity” and its strong transnational exchange is also highlighted by the ways through which the brand supplies its materials (Dwyer, 2004a). As explained by Madeleine, most of the original African cotton textiles used for her production are often transported to London from Madeleine’s Congolese relatives and/or friends in the diaspora who travel to the DRC. This is necessary due to the economical and logistic difficulties of international shipping. Some fabrics are additionally imported from Nigerian and Togolese wax print markets (Interview: 17 December 2016). In regard to this, Christelle underlined: “We would like to have a factory in Kinshasa, our hometown, from where we export African fabrics directly to London (...) also, you know, to create jobs for other Congolese people!” (Christelle’s interview: 17 December 2016). Similar thoughts came from Madeleine:

I wish to set up a studio in the DRC and start to make the turbans over there as well...I don’t mean to move there but to start to organise the production and the selling over there as well...I wish to involve Congolese women who live in Kinshasa and maybe help them to find an occupation...to give something back to my country if you know what I mean...this is what we really would like to do and hopefully in the next few years we will be able to do that! (Interview: 17 December 2016)

The “authentic” narrative, or *story* (Marcus, 1995), is coherently portrayed on the website, where the fabrics are commercially featured as “luxury African wax prints”¹¹⁹ or “guaranteed real Dutch waxes” (Kiyana Wraps, 2019). The African continent has a long history of textile trade and production, particularly through manufacturing activities carried out by women (Strübel, 2012). Prior to the European arrival in Africa, textiles were already used on the continent as a monetary unit. By the end of the fifteenth century, European-produced fabrics (not yet wax-prints) entered the West

¹¹⁹ An African wax print is a printed cotton fabric to which the design is applied with hot wax or resin on both sides of the cloth (Nielsen, 1979).

African trade system, becoming a currency, together with firearms and alcohol, in exchange of gold, ivory and slaves (Hodder, 2013, Sylvanus, 2007).

The introduction of batik fabrics in Europe can be traced back to Dutch political control of the city of Java, Indonesia, in the seventeenth century, and their interest in expanding the production and trade of Javanese batiks, later known as wax-prints (Nielsen, 1979, Akinwumi, 2008, Robinson, 1969). Even if initially the batik fabrics did not have a great success in Europe due to their “exotic” designs (Nielsen, 1980), from the nineteenth century more factories were established by European merchants in Europe¹²⁰ to produce machine-made batiks more cheaply than the expensive hand-printed originals, thereby increasing local and foreign cloth trade markets (Nielsen, 1979).

It is in this context that Javanese wax-prints were introduced to the West African coast by the Europeans through several means. During the early colonial period and throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, an initial trade-contact was attributed to the arrival of young European men who quickly engaged West African women in their businesses. The women taught them native African languages in exchange for sewing machines and instruction on their use (Nielsen, 1979). African women became, therefore, the intermediaries between European agents and local African businessmen (Sylvanus, 2007). The sale of the wax-print fabrics also grew rapidly through the influence of predominantly European merchants and companies, as previously mentioned (Nielsen, 1979). Additionally, wax-print fabrics spread widely when numerous West African soldiers and freed slaves returned to Africa after serving in the Dutch colonial army in the East Indies in Java between 1831 and 1872. The soldiers were dressed in batik cloth and brought Javanese batiks back to their African

¹²⁰ In addition to previously established European companies, led by Holland and its trade expansion, for example in India, Java, Sumatra, Ceylon and the Moluccas (Robinson, 1969, Akinwumi, 2008).

wives (Nielsen, 1979, Nielsen, 1980, van Kessel, 2005, Sylvanus, 2007, Akinwumi, 2008). Finally, Africans adopted the use of wax-printed fabrics through the influence of Christian missionaries (Nielsen, 1979), in charge of supplying the local population with “civilised” commodities (Sylvanus, 2007). By the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century the European textile export to West Africa reached its peak, with the Gold Coast, present-day Ghana, as the main market. Soon, also local African factories started to supply wax prints, together with more expensive imports from Japan (Akinwumi, 2008).

It must be highlighted that the wax fabric’s arrival in Africa from Europe via Asia underwent an important process of translation, localisation, and cultural assimilation within African consumption systems. African women played a central role in it, dominating the organisation, promotion and distribution in the hinterland of different networks of European-manufactured luxury textiles (Sylvanus, 2007). The successful growth of the market involved a long-term process of aesthetic adaptation by European producers towards African local tastes, with wax-prints becoming quite different from their Javanese counterparts (Sylvanus, 2007, Gallagher and Mudimbe, 2017). These have been integrated into a series of local structures of consumption as a status symbol, and have long held high socio-cultural meanings on African individuals, such as ethnic origin, social standing, age, and marital status (Sylvanus, 2007, Strübel, 2012). In this context, “Euro-Javanese” fabrics incorporated an “authentic African character”, as a result of a cultural transformation through which original signifiers have been reconfigured into new recognised one (Sylvanus, 2007).

African wax-prints are currently the most worn and valorised fabrics on the continent and its diasporas, been essential symbolic signifiers for the performance of stronger African identities and sense of belonging (Sylvanus, 2007, Farber, 2010). Many African women wish to possess and wear the greatest amount of expensive wax-

print clothes to identify themselves socially and to show their good taste, especially during ceremonies such as weddings and funerals (Sylvanus, 2007). In this context, the use of African textiles and other valuable materials for the manufacture of elaborate ceremonial hats often signifies a status symbol which indicate power, wealth, and social prestige within the community (Nielsen, 1979, Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995). Through a diverse range of colours and designs, wax-prints have come to illustrate that African cultural ideas are objectified and metaphorically expressed, embodying a traditional and authentic “Africanness” (Nielsen, 1979, Gallagher and Mudimbe, 2017).

It is worth mentioning that the very idea of the African wax-prints’ cultural authenticity has been often questioned due to its European, not African, origins. An interesting example is the work of the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, who uses wax-print Java fabrics, manufactured in the Netherlands and purchased in Brixton, South London, mostly to investigate the European “fabrication” of Africanness and the construction of culture (Gallagher and Mudimbe, 2017). In his work, Yinka Shonibare reflects on the history of trade between Africa and the West, and to probe the Afrocentric longing for cultural authenticity. He expresses the embeddedness, implication and mutual constitution of Africa and Europe, each appropriating and re-projecting the other (Gallagher and Mudimbe, 2017). This transcultural interpretation of the fabrics is certainly relevant to understand *Kiyana Wraps* production, where both Africa and the West are fused together, transforming the idea of cultural authenticity at its core.

The *Kiyana Wraps* “authentic” story (Marcus, 1995) lies in signifiers conveyed by the fabrics, used in the context of transnational imaginaries and Londoner’s consumption. The brand fabrics are perceived as pure objects of Africanity, belonging to an African repertoire (Sylvanus, 2007). As pointed out in interview, the selection of “authentic” fabrics for the production of headwraps has a clear intention to transmit a

Black Congolese story and to perform a strong African diasporic identity. Wax-prints connect young women with cultural memories of their homeland, often affected by an imagined and idealised idea of the DRC (Tulloch, 2004). Importantly, sourcing fabrics from the continent incentivises the selling of more products to a wider range of consumers. As Christelle said: “knowing that the fabrics come from Africa, makes the clients very curious and enthusiastic to buy something with a special story and value” (Interview: 17 December 2016). Conscious of the fact that “diversity sells” (Rutherford, 1990a), the brand intentionally evokes a Congolese journey to attract consumers interested to maintain or discover a modern African style.

The company website features a “romanticised” idea of the DRC which clearly emphasises the “authentic” story:

Whimsical fantasies of secret escapes sailing on the Congo river. Of filtered beauty into dense tropical rainforest chasing waterfalls through uncharted territories. Perfume bottles and artisan-blown glass, African folklore tales and lost kingdoms, nature, people’s histories (...) Each headdress is an exploration around the woman, and the woman simultaneously around the headdress. As such, we don’t just make turbans; we make stories. (Kiyana Wraps, 2019)

Some products of the brand are symbolically promoted as heritage-influenced customised pieces. An example is the everyday turban hat *Safi* (purity), the stylisation of which is inspired by the Congolese Bakuba¹²¹ ethnic group. The textile art produced by the Bakuba people has been considered influential in African art (Moraga, 2011).¹²² In *African Fabrics: Sewing Contemporary Fashion with Ethnic Flair*, the Sierra Leonean American fashion designer Luke-Boone, underlines that an important characteristic of the Bakuba cloth is the rhythm of the design, formed by abstract and

¹²¹ The pre-colonial Kuba Kingdom, also known as the Kingdom of the Bakuba, was established in the early seventeenth century between the Kasai and Sankuru rivers in the southeastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Kingdom of the Bakuba people, a matriarchal society, developed as a powerful and wealthy confederation of eighteen Bantu-speaking ethnic groups. These ethnicities, which still exist, share a similar mythology and culture and a similar political and ideological structure. However, each ethnic group remains independent in its internal affairs (Luke-Boone, 2011, Moraga, 2011).

¹²² Over time, the Kuba cloth has become one of the most popular African fabrics of the continent and among Western societies. Kuba cloth has affected the work of numerous Western artists, such as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Klee (Luke-Boone, 2011).

angular motifs (Luke-Boone, 2011). The Bakuba fabric is typically decorated with various geometric figures, fluidly combined. The *Safi* turban hat proposes a revised conception: different folded layers of a silk fabric constitute its architectural, asymmetrical semi-conical and soft outline. In addition, the brown/purple textile shade is reminiscent of the basic range of colours used by the Bakuba (Luke-Boone, 2011). The narrative stylisation of the *Safi* turban hat aims somehow to allegorically transmit a Congolese journey, evoking ethnic memories, as well as a specific transnational aesthetic, where a fusion of traditional African and British cultures is embodied (Dwyer, 2004a).

All the above-mentioned characteristics show that *Kiyana Wraps*' cultural and commercial production are deeply intertwined, without excluding some level of conflict, where the importance of "remembering" rearticulates personal geographies as well as aiming to involve other kind of stories from people with different backgrounds (Dwyer and Crang, 2002). Similarly to modern African-American women discussed earlier, the strong cultural aspect of the brand lies in the fact that young British Congolese women manifest a material and symbolic form of connection with those Congolese who remained in the DRC, fashioning the headwrap with the specific assertion that it is a traditional item of Congolese attire. Through their practice, they overtly valorise African descendants and reclaim a Black African cultural heritage (Bradley Griebel, 1995b). Simultaneously, and somehow conflictingly, the commercial feature of the brand equally engages with material and stylistic cosmopolitan forces (Farber, 2010), thereby showing a strategic understanding of the London environment and tracing ordinary life experiences.

4.1.5 The headwrap ritual as an everyday life practice, its “memory world” and matriarchal foundation

Following Michel de Certeau’s notion of everyday life, wearing the headwrap can be considered as an everyday life practice. He theorises the significance of examining the ways in which active individuals (users) operate through everyday practices, “ways of operating” or doing things, such as walking, reading, talking, speaking, dwelling etc., (De Certeau, 2011).¹²³ De Certeau reminds us that there are countless ways of “making do” while stressing the importance of tracing the entanglements of a concrete sense of everyday life, to let them appear within the space of a memory (De Certeau, 2011).

Taking as an example the experience of an African diasporic individual, he states:

A North African living in Paris or Roubaix (France) insinuates *into* the system imposed on him by the construction of a low-income housing development or of the French language the ways of “dwelling” (in a house or a language) peculiar to his native Kabylia. He super-imposes them and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation. (De Certeau, 2011, p. 30)

Buckley and Clark add to de Certeau’s theoretical discussion that the ways individuals dress should also be conceived as a creative everyday life practice: “Characteristic of self-fashioning and re-fashioning, this articulation of the everyday also recognises the possibility of reinvention and resistance as the fashion system is refused, re-cycled and re-defined from within the realm of the everyday” (Buckley and Clark, 2017, p. 9). Accordingly, dressing the head with a wrap represents an important everyday life ritual for many African women since it involves an ongoing repetition and routine gestures that are ordinarily calculated and embedded in users’ daily lives (Buckley and Clark, 2017). At the same time, the traditional practice of the headwrap has been transformed and re-invented by the brand and its users. In so doing, young Congolese women,

¹²³ First Edition: (1980) *L’Invention du Quotidien, I: Arts de Faire* (De Certeau, 1980).

similarly to the North African individual described by de Certeau, have found ways of “using the order” of London and have drawn unexpected cultural and business results from their diasporic everyday life experiences and in-between situations.

The ritual of wearing headwraps on a routine basis has the ability to connect young Congolese and other Black African women to what Paul Leuilliot calls “memory world” (Leuilliot and Thuillier, 1977), composed of *cultural memories* (Marcus, 1995). As Leuilliot suggests, ordinary life “is what holds us intimately” and involves a world of olfactory memory, memories of childhood places and childhood gestures, memories of the body and its pleasures (Leuilliot and Thuillier, 1977). Memories play an important role in diasporic subjects’ lives, helping to construct individual and social identities. The headwrap practice and its material form can be interpreted as a means of recording diasporic cultural memories, as a performance act through which memories are perceived as “real”, “authentic” interpretations of self, home, and history (Agnew, 2005).

It is worth specifying that *Kiyana Wraps*’ “memory world” (Leuilliot and Thuillier, 1977) does not refer to the notion of nostalgia and its negative connotations. The term nostalgia derives from the Greek *nostos* (to return home) and *algia* (a painful feeling), and is therefore often defined as the painful longing to return home (McDermott, 2002). Gayle Green makes a relevant distinction between *nostalgia* and *remembering*. While nostalgia is interpreted as a static view of the past, a conservative impulse, a form of escape from a dissatisfied present into an idealised past, remembering is interpreted as a more radical and transformative activity:

Whereas ‘nostalgia’ is the desire to return home, ‘to remember’ is ‘to bring to mind’ or ‘think again’, ‘to be mindful of’, ‘to recollect’. Both ‘remembering’ and ‘re-collecting’, suggest a connecting, assembling, a bringing together of things in relation to one another (...) In fact, nostalgia and remembering are in some sense antithetical, since nostalgia is a forgetting, merely regressive, whereas memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future. (Greene, 1991, pp. 297-298)

In this sense, young London Congolese women's cultural memories are driven by a process of remembering rather than by nostalgic reasons resulting by the desire to escape their reality in London. Young diasporic women employ the medium of fashion to fabricate memory-narratives, or memory-stories. They recall past memories as their own way "to look back in order to move forward" and to constructively change their immediate social and professional present, their everyday life experiences, in the "global city" (Agnew, 2005).

As discussed earlier, cultural memories of a Black Congolese legacy are evoked by young women through the selection of traditional Swahili names as well as through symbolic interpretations of the wax-print fabrics which also derive from Madeleine and Christelle's mother and aunts. This matriarchal transmission of knowledge, culture, and history represents an important vehicle for young Congolese women to re-construct their *life histories* and attribute *metaphorical* (Marcus, 1995) meanings to their collections. Older female generations within the family fabricate *stories* (Marcus, 1995) for younger ones, giving them access to their past and history. In this sense, cultural memories are an active process of "recalling" that can generate new interpretations of the past as well as of the present (Agnew, 2005). "Strong power" was repeatedly attributed by both Madeleine and Christelle in interview to the voices of their mother and aunts. Madeleine, for instance, described the meaning of a Congolese wax-print fabric through her mother's explanations:

This cloth illustrates a bird almost flying out of a cage. My mom told me that it was given by Congolese wives to their husbands during hard times. When a Congolese man was forced to go to work in a different region of the DRC, far away from his family, the wife would fold the fabric with the bird in the cage and put it inside the luggage. The cloth would represent a reminder for the husband of being married with a family waiting for him at home. (Interview: 17 December 2016)

The symbolic meaning of the African wax-print motifs includes temporal, cultural and historical relationships. Contemporary designs are sometimes based on original waxes

produced during the nineteenth century and have, therefore, lost their original symbolism. This has opened the way to different stories and interpretations, occasionally transmitted from generation to generation (Nielsen, 1979). The intergenerational transmission of socio-cultural knowledge represents a fundamental process among migrant mothers and daughters. This is indeed the case of Madeleine, Christelle and Josette, who deeply rely on the narratives of their close relatives for the understanding and description of the African fabrics' symbolic meanings. Older female figures become the main cultural transmitters, playing a central role in the memory process and assimilation of socio-cultural meanings (Lutz, 2002).

At times, conflicts and deficiencies are involved in the process of intergenerational cultural knowledge and transference (Lutz, 2002). The three young women, when interviewed, did not always know the symbolism of the African fabric patterns used for their headwraps. A deep interest to learn more about the topic was, however, demonstrated. For example, during interview, Madeleine and I discussed an exhibition, which we both attended, entitled "West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song", held at the British Library in 2016. The exhibition included printed textiles and Madeleine pointed out: "I was deeply fascinated and inspired by the contents of it and I would love in the future to organise some activities or just to learn more for myself about Congolese fabrics' meanings and symbolism" (Interview: 17 December 2016). Young Congolese women's process of fashion production has somehow developed as a metaphorical "rite of passage" as well as a mental, at times physical, travelling between different locales. Rather than a simplified phenomenon stuck between the here/there or the before/after, the migration experience become a "transitional involvement" during an individual's life-course, and everyday life experiences, through which cultural schemes and patterns are reformulated and reproduced (Lutz, 2002). Thus, the African wax-prints utilised by *Kiyana Wraps* embody strong cultural memories of an

“imagined” homeland as well as representing a symbolically “authentic” way of successfully promoting the business.

The first part of this chapter has, therefore, partially demonstrated how the *people* and *biographies*, the *thing*, the *story*, the *metaphor* and the *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) are embedded and expressed through the fashion and beauty performance of the African headwrap and, particularly, the *Kiyana Wraps* cultural and commercial production. The analysis of the body practice has also delineated how the “performance principle”, understood as “a showing of a doing”, should no longer be limited to the stage or to forms of art but rather considered as significant in every aspect of social life. Social realities and cultural identities were shown through the analysis of the fashion brand to be “performative”: built and enforced by “performances” rather than derived from naturally determined processes (Schechner, 2013). In their different manifestations built upon culture, time and place, performances of the body, including hairstyle adornments, are part of those modes of individual and collective self-presentation through which racialised and ethnicised identities can be voluntarily projected while simultaneously reformulated (Clammer, 2015).

The following main section of the chapter will present the impact that the London multicultural context is having on the production of the fashion brand. It will do so through a detailed analysis of one of the brand events taken as exemplary ritual space through which hybrid racial, ethnic and gender diasporic identities are lived and performed by various social actors.

4.2 The impact of London on *Kiyana Wraps*

Kiyana Wraps regularly offers services to show-case its production across London. This involves working with other stylists, models, make-up artists, photographers etc., collaborating with charities (e.g. Alopecia UK charity), participating in different events such as public fashion shows (e.g. “Africa Fashion Week London; AFWL”, “Vogue’s

Fashion Night Out, London” and “Hijab Fashion Week, London”), and business-to-business fashion gatherings. For each event *Kiyana Wraps* exhibits new collections (Interview: 17 December 2016). As narrated by Christelle, during the fashion showcase “Pure London”, one of the UK’s biggest gatherings of fashion buyers at Olympia London, *Kiyana Wraps* presented a series of turban hats and headwraps as an analogy of the Congo river, which sought to emphasise the itinerary of *Kiyana Wraps* from when it started (Interview: 17 December 2016). Another example is the *Kiyana Wraps* participation in the “Glam Africa Fashion Night”, an annual fashion show launched in 2015 and held every year during London Fashion Week, which showcases collections from different African Fashion designers. Madeleine described the evening as following:

It was one of the most challenging experiences...we had to close the fashion night with a catwalk showcasing our wraps made up in that moment...we had so many models to work with...At the beginning I had 30 seconds per model to wrap their head and let them walk.... but then the time was running out and it went down to 10 seconds per wrap... It was very difficult but I loved the experience because it showed me how I can create a variety of headwraps in a few seconds...Also, I loved it because we have worked with a great team, who were very respectful of our work... sometimes in the creative industry I found that people can be very patronising, but, in this case, it was very nice to work with people who liked what we were doing. (Interview: 17 December 2016)

Kiyana Wraps occasionally also collaborates with other high-street brands. For example, in 2015, they created headwraps and participated in photoshoots for the “#MakeBaobabFamous” campaign, led by the high-street British health and beauty brand “Aduna”.¹²⁴ The London Congolese brand also worked for the British high-street handmade cosmetics brand “Lush”,¹²⁵ creating headdresses with Lush branded fabrics

¹²⁴ *Aduna* produces healthy foods and products using African natural ingredients. It also claims to be a social enterprise which sources all its ingredients directly from rural Africa regions and creates sustainable livelihoods for small-scale African producers. In 2011, *Aduna* started a project “#MakeBaobabFamous” with the aim to make the baobab fruit into a world-recognised superfood and create a new trade industry which could help numerous households in rural Africa.

¹²⁵ *Lush* is well-established internationally. Its products are based exclusively on vegetarian and vegan formulas and the brand is famous for its campaigns in support to animal rights. Together

during a commercial event in Oxford Circus (Interview: 17 December 2016). *Kiyana Wraps*’ work has also been featured in numerous online fashion magazines such as *Glam Africa UK*, an international glossy magazine on fashion, hair and beauty, lifestyle, events and travel; *Pride magazine* or “the face of Black Britain”, focusing on representing Black women lifestyle in the UK; *New African Women* magazine, a pan-African space aiming to cover and celebrate Black African women across the continent and its diasporas; and *Black Beauty and Hair* magazine, offering hairstyle, beauty and fashion ideas for Black women in the UK. As Madeleine expressed it: “during each of these collaborations and shows, we have the possibility to get in touch with new people from all around the world and it is very common that some of them become new clients!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). In addition to these collaborations, *Kiyana Wraps* has more recently begun to offer workshops for clients and friends to have a live demonstration of its products, expand its network and teach the headwrap craft. One of the brand events “Unveil-the-workshop” will be analysed in the next sections.

4.2.1 Accessing hybrid “thirdspaces”: “Unveil-the-workshop(s)”

“Unveil-the-workshop” was part of an ongoing series of similar workshops organised across the city to showcase the company’s production. An online flier promotes these as following: “secrets and artistry of hair wrapping unravelled. Thought you’d never be able to stylishly tie your scarf? Think again: master the know-how to turban chic” (2016b). The event I attended was held at the St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, “close to the Ritz Hotel”, on the afternoon of the 17 December 2016 (Kiyana Wraps, 2016a).¹²⁶ After being received by the hotel receptionist, I was escorted towards a

with a large variety of body, face, hair, makeup, perfume and kitchen products, the company also sells scarves and fabrics, under the category *Knot-Wraps*.

¹²⁶ I followed the *Kiyana Wraps* advertisement of the workshop on social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and YouTube. Every day the team promoted online some information to attract participants. They described the “Unveil” event as one of “a series of workshops where we unravel all our secrets. This is a new concept by us; chic, effortless and

basement room. On the one side there were small rectangular tables facing the walls, filled with homemade canapés, homemade cocktails, as well as some of the *Kiyana Wraps* fabrics and scarfs on display. This was a standing area where people could interact. On the other side were three large round tables with numerous chairs in front of a TV screen. At the centre of each round table, there were several bald mannequin heads and a bowl containing different African wax-printed fabrics. This was the area where the interactive headwrap teaching took place.

Between fifteen to seventeen individuals participated in the event. The workshop was led by Madeleine, Christelle and Josette, assisted by two other young Congolese women. Some practical management (e.g. music and microphones) was handled by the only Congolese man in the room. The guests were a small group of young Black women from the African Diasporas (e.g. Congolese, Burundian and Ugandan) accompanied by some of their daughters, a few young White women from French-speaking EU countries (such as Belgium and/or France) and from Russia. The room remained a female-dominated space for the entire evening.

Almost all the guests were friends of Madeleine, Christelle and Josette who brought other friends with them. A young Black African woman was attending to support the brand's work, as her story testifies:

I have grown up with Madeleine and have known her since we were very young... I feel what she is doing is a good way to speak out without being in people's faces... is like developing your voice and showing people who you are....and also including everybody at the same time is a very powerful weapon I think and I think she is using it very wisely! (Interview: 17 December 2016)

Some other young Black African women were also attending the event “to get inspired by Madeleine” and “improve their headwrap skills through new, creative ways”

an opportunity to experience something different while mingling with like-minded people in style!”. Their wish to make it “chic” and “posh” was often emphasised by the photographic presentation of “fancy cocktails and sumptuous canapés” to enjoy during the workshop. They posted pictures of some African wax-printed fabrics for head wrapping, promised as a thank you gift for each guest. They also created a feeling of suspense and surprise in keeping the place unknown: “a secret and intimate location in the heart of London”. Details of the venue via short videos and pictures were finally disclosed only few days before the event took place.

(Interview: 17 December 2016). The few young European women were also Madeleine's friends who decided to participate to have a better insight into African culture, but mostly to try a different fashion experience and learn "from scratch how to create personalised headwraps" (Interview: 17 December 2016). The one young woman from Russia was a friend and a model who had previously collaborated with the brand through advertisement photoshoots and modelling jobs. For this occasion, she was not working for them but rather "enjoying being with Madeleine and Christelle and other nice girls" (Interview: 17 December 2016).

After a refreshment, all guests were invited to take a seat around the large tables. Madeleine started with a small introduction about the *Kiyana Wraps* brand, showing different turban hat designs. She explained that this workshop was different from previous ones, mostly dedicated to display the brand through photoshoots with various models. For this occasion, Madeleine wanted to focus on the learning process of the guests, clarifying that "the aim was to do hands-on work and to teach the participants how to create personal headwraps" (Interview: 17 December 2016) with the mannequin heads and fabrics available for practice. Madeleine wanted the event to be "a nice girls evening out, we want you to enjoy yourselves in this nice setting and surrounding!" (Interview: 17 December 2016). After the introduction, Madeleine began a practical head wrapping demonstration on Josette's head and on some other guests' heads. She then assisted the guests showing each table how to fold the fabrics and create shapes on the mannequin head and asking every participant to find a partner and practice the head wrapping in pairs.

4.2.2 The headwrap ritual to perform racial-ethnic selves and multicultural belongings

Madeleine showed a culturally hybrid process of styling headwraps during the workshop. She followed a traditional African approach (Bradley Griebel, 1995a),

although introducing some creative adjustments. She started with folding the fabric and positioning it on the crown of the head. On some models, she pulled the fabric and completely covered the hair of the guest, on some others, she left hair partially uncovered. She always left the forehead, and often the neck, exposed to leave the face visually open and enhance all the facial features. She tied the ends of the fabric into knots, either on the top of the head or on the side. She occasionally tucked the ends of the fabric into the wrap, following the African tradition (Bradley Griebel, 1995a), while often leaving the remaining fabric exposed over the head to create abstract forms.

A cultural hybridity was also emphasised by the combination of different materials. For each woman, Madeleine selected specific fabric colours and patterns inspired by personal styles. She modelled unique shapes following each guest's preferences and requests. This way of creating headwraps visibly differed from the traditional way of older generations. In interview, Madeleine expressed that, generally, older African women "wear just a piece of simple cloth, twisting/plaiting it vertically and tying/folding it in a very simple way. Also, they wear headwraps which fully match everything else. Its colours, patterns and shape always correspond to the dress, hair, shoes, etc." (Interview: 17 December 2016). On the contrary, Madeleine did not follow those matching rules but rather reinvented modern headwraps which would reflect, in Christelle's words, a mixture of different cultures: Congolese/Black African/British and more (Interview: 17 December 2016).

As Bourdieu suggests, social origin deeply determines the development of aesthetic dispositions. The acquisition of cultural attitudes often derives from familiar performances; they are accepted and inherited definitions that older individuals within the family offer to the youngest (Bourdieu, 1984). Accordingly, Madeleine has surely been influenced from an early age by the cultural attitudes of her mother and aunts to wear headwraps on a daily basis. However, those familiar aesthetic dispositions have

been, at the same time, transformed by the young woman, driven by her own sense of taste, and influenced by her everyday life experience living in the city of London. Taste itself is what Bourdieu refers to as “the sense of social orientation”, a “social sense of one’s place”, which is a “practical way of experiencing and expressing one’s own sense of social value” (Bourdieu, 1984).

During the event, Madeleine’s important role could be defined as what Bourdieu called a “taste-maker” (Bourdieu, 1984). She was aware of having the power to guide and influence certain aspects of taste of young participants in how to create headwraps through a range of personified styles. In so doing, Madeleine performed the role of taste facilitator and intermediary between the guests. She assumed a distinctive position, asserting difference compared to previous generations, getting herself known and recognised, making a name for herself and her company, by attempting to impose new ways of thinking and expression (Bourdieu, 1984). Madeleine “took the liberty” of standing outside traditional rules, putting herself forward as a marker of different rules, enunciating a new fashion, a new mode of expression and ritual action (Bourdieu, 1984).

At *Kiyana* we really want to remove the traditional perception of what a wrap is or what a wrap should be...I really want to break the traditional perceptions, barriers, limitations of, for example, the fact of wearing the headwrap which must match the whole dress code of the body.... no.... women can actually wear whatever they want and wear an headwrap which is different from their dress but still goes well to the personal style of the day... this is the reason we try to explore any kind of fabric and material that the costumers personally like! (Interview: 17 December 2016)

The African headwrap cultural practice has, therefore, been re-formulated by the brand through new styles and the perception of these. Many Black African attendees highly regarded Madeleine’s role and her work for its “creativity”, “modernity” and “innovation” (Interview: 17 December 2016). As Yvette highlighted: “*Kiyana Wraps* has a ‘catwalk high-street’ character, which literally stands out from the crowd!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). In Celia’s words: “*Kiyana Wraps* offers much more

variety (...) now we have many different materials to work with (...) Also, the use of pins is not traditional, [it] is something that has never been used by our mums or aunties. This is where *Kiyana* is very innovative!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). The introduction of pins from Islamic culture has, in fact, helped to produce modern profile headwraps. As Kizza added regarding some of the *things* used by the brand:

All the textures do speak their own language. According to the texture you might need the pins...some fabrics are rough, some other are soft...some might need the use of the pins some others not...’cause you really don’t wanna waste or ruin the material. For example, silk which is very delicate...because you might not be able to afford it again... so according to the texture you can make up the style and the use of the pins is so useful! (Interview: 17 December 2016)

Analysts point out that diasporic cultural production should be considered as the result of a physical geography of identities as well as the process through which histories of movement and a sense of connectedness (or detachment) are invoked, shaped and established as real (Klimt and Lubkemann, 2002). Thus, the headwrap ritual represented a fundamental process through which diasporic identities and transnational belongings were self-constructed and collectively sustained in the space of the workshop. In depicting the headwrap tradition as a material medium to be preserved as well as to be re-adapted, young London Black African women enacted new forms of racial and ethnic belongings both imaginatively and tangibly (Dwyer and Crang, 2002).

In particular, the performance of cultural identities by the *Kiyana Wraps* team as central social actors of the evening exposed quite conflicting meanings. On the one hand, young Congolese women wanted to be agents of an “authentically Congolese” narrative and Black African voice. This was highly motivated by the presence of other Congolese women who recalled a common origin and other Black African women who had separate, but similar, diasporic experiences. Narrating collective cultural memories mostly regarding childhood or family experiences related to the headwrap costume became part of the performance. The act of sharing the traditional African ritual and of learning new ways of performing it fortified a sense of Blackness and *symbolically*

(Marcus, 1995) maintained ties with imagined homelands (Anderson, 2001). On the other hand, the commodity culture of the headwrap also served to create alternative selves (Anderson, 2001), in order to engage with the rest of the group formed by young women with different heritages, therefore to mobilise diverse “multicultural imaginaries” (Kahn, 1995, Cook et al., 1999).

A transnational hybrid dimension was mainly performed through a personalised process of making and selling the headwraps. The brand team was performing differently, at times in conflict, depending on the London guest they were approaching and working with. For example, switching between the use of French and English and, occasionally, Swahili. In Josette’s words, a Congolese Black African identity was “injected” using traditional craft and fabrics that “they have been growing up with” (Interview: 17 December 2016). A specific cultural heritage was promoted to the audience, with the performance of practical skills to persuade young participants about the quality and “authentic” story of the brand. However, other narratives were at the same time, conflictingly, incorporated through the addition of several elements such as pins, as noted earlier, as well as popular elements from urban Western clothing style such as feathers, crystals, pearls or a Swarovski-style necklace around the knot of the headwrap.

As expressed by a Black African participant during the workshop: “Wearing *Kiyana* gives us the possibility to maintain a piece of our traditional culture, meanwhile feeling part of the more contemporary European/Western culture of London” (Interview: 17 December 2016). Some others defined the headwrap practice as “extremely timeless” (Interview: 17 December 2016). As voiced by Kizza: “our grandparents used to wear it and now we are wearing it and we feel comfortable in it” (Interview: 17 December 2016). The brand production was classified as something cross-cultural and cross-generational: “I am from Burundi and I share a similar tradition

with the *Kiyana Wraps* team. The headwrap is also part of my heritage. What I love about *Kiyana Wraps* is that brings a twist of contemporary style to a very important African tradition, which is transmitted from generation to generation” (Interview: 17 December 2016). Other stories similarly confirmed:

We grow up thinking that the headwrap was something that our mothers, aunties and grandmothers could wear but now all generation are embracing it, whatever your age is or wherever you are going (...) I have recently started to incorporate headwraps to my look mostly for *Kiyana Wraps*, which combines beauty and creativity. *Kiyana* headwraps are something personal, only for yourself! (Interview: 17 December 2016)

The cross-cultural aspect was also underlined by the brand team which, unanimously, defined its production as a “strong cultural fusion, which should not be put in a “Congolese box but open to everyone” (Interview: 17 December 2016). As Christelle pointed out, *Kiyana Wraps* aims to celebrate “a multicultural society, which does not like to be constrained to a single style, but rather prefer to experiment something new, fresh, and vibrant” (Interview: 17 December 2016).

Accordingly, a strong sense of belonging to the Congolese and the Black African diaspora, and a more general feeling of attachment to the African motherland despite physical distance, was voiced and performed in combination with a collective desire to be part of a multicultural Britain. The process through which the headwrap ritual was acted out evoked a cosmopolitan ability on the part of young African women to simultaneously inhabit multiple cultures and places, instead of being attached to one culture or place only (Tanniou, 2015). Diasporic everyday life experiences in-between two or more communities and places have provided a significant source of creative imagination for the fashion brand production and its contribution to the cultural and commercial environment of London (Abdelhady, 2011). Binary transnational attachments of “here” and “there” were challenged by the brand. Traditional notions of diasporic identities and belongings, based on collective cultural memories, race and ethnicity (Abdelhady, 2011), strategically fused, with several cultural and stylistic

inputs coming from a network of consumers of different origins. In bridging diverse fashion preferences, young Congolese women were able to speak to a wider audience and to marketize their brand without reducing their representations to cultural clichés about their homeland (Westmoreland, 2009), although also revealing *conflicts* (Marcus, 1995) in the process.

The cultural and commercial approach of *Kiyana Wraps* showed the strong impact that living in a global city such as London is having on young Congolese women's everyday life experiences and their productions, and how the fashion brand development has been situated within transnational spaces. The simultaneous evocation of a Congolese and Black African "authenticity", combined with "non-traditional" elements, exposed how the fashion brand grounded the notion of "transculturation", which questions the very idea of culture (Rogers, 2006, Slimbach, 2005). Transculturation assumes that culture itself may be constituted by acts of appropriation from and by multiple cultures. It considers hybridity as constitutive of culture and, consequently, challenges the existence of a pure, essential, single originating culture. The constitution of culture and any related cultural and commercial productions may therefore be understood as a dialogic, relational phenomenon (Rogers, 2006), an ongoing, evolutionary process (Cuccioletta, 2002) of absorption and transformation rather than being a pure essence composed by fixed, passive, configurations of practices (Rogers, 2006). Postcolonial discourses place the concept of cultural hybridity as forming the basis of diasporic cultural identity formation as it represents the fusion of meanings produced through the interaction between different cultures (Mayhew, 2015). It is through a continuous process of combination with majority cultural elements that minority diasporic identities transform and reinvent themselves (Modood, 1998). Cultural patterns are dynamic, boundary-blurring and transnationally constituted rather than spatially or nationally circumscribed and static (Maira, 2000).

Homi Bhabha, among other postcolonial theorists, discusses how the articulation of cultural identities should not be understood as the result of an original past composed of unchangeable traditions and factors. On the contrary, the experiences of diasporic individuals can only be described through a mutual involvement between cultural elements and the fusion of those moments developed in the encounter of cultural differences (Bhabha, 1996, 1994). Bhabha identifies the idea of hybridity as the “thirdspace” (Rutherford, 1990b, Bhabha, 1994), a dynamic “in-between” space of invention and transformation of cultural encounters which also involves contradictions and ambiguities where the feelings and practices of both cultural sites are appropriated and reinterpreted. In other words, during the process of encounter between two or more cultures, ideas, languages, and material goods are inevitably shared. This “in-between” space of sharing pushes cultures to engage, to adapt, to integrate and change (Bhabha, 1994). Hybrid, alternative, cultural identities co-exist “in-between” since they are shaped through an ongoing negotiation and translation of cultural meanings and symbols (Khan, 1998, Elsdon-Clifton, 2006). The “thirdspace” proposes therefore a “critical perspective that rethinks our assumptions about culture and identity from an ‘us/them’ dualism to a mutual sense of ‘both/and’” (Meredith, 1998).

Similarly to Bhabha’s “thirdspace” concept in relation to identity and culture, urban theorist Edward Soja proposes a way of thinking about space and spatiality which goes beyond any dualistic approach (Mayhew, 2015). Inspired by the spatial triad of the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre (Merrifield, 1999, Kendall, 2014),¹²⁷ Soja develops a trialectic of spatiality composed of “firstspace”, “secondspace” and

¹²⁷ Soja’s spatial theory is openly based on the interpretation of Lefebvre most important work, *The Production of Space*, where he theorises how space should not be considered as something given but rather something socially produced, a social production. Lefebvre’s defines a trialectic of social space formed by perceived space (spatial practice), conceived space (representations of space) and lived space (spaces of representation) (Lefebvre, 1991). Soja re-defines the perceived space as “firstspace”, the conceived space as “secondspace” and the lived space as “thirdspace” (Soja, 1996).

“thirdspace” (Soja, 1996). The “firstspace”, the “real”, refers to the concrete materiality of space, the physical dimension of space. It involves things that can be empirically traced, planned and mapped (Soja, 1996). The “secondspace”, the “imagined”, refers to mental ideas about space, produced by thoughts and imagination. It involves representations of human spatiality through cognitive forms (Soja, 1996). Finally, the “thirdspace”, the “real-and-imagined”, brings together at once the material (“first”) and mental (“second”) spaces of the traditional dualism and goes beyond them, becoming “a fully lived space” where everything is combined: “subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined (...) mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious (...) everyday life and unending history” (Soja, 1996). The “thirdspace” is a way of interpreting socially produced space, where the spatiality of our lives, our human geography, has the same scope and significance as the social (being-in-the-world) and historical (time) dimensions (Borch, 2002). In other words, Soja’s trialectics of spatiality illustrate the nature of social being, of human existence, which involves geography, history and society (Soja, 1996). Following this line of thought, diasporic body spaces of the headwrap practice can be understood as “thirdspaces”, spaces in-between the past and the present, the colonial and the postcolonial, produced by the encounter and dialogue of “firstspace”, the physical and material, and “secondspace”, the mental and imagined (Mayhew, 2015). The diasporic “thirdspace” of the workshop produced and consumed different lived experiences and meanings (Moles, 2008), becoming a place of enunciation and performance of hybrid cultural identities, where minority voices could speak (Hooks, 1990, Moles, 2008).

Kiyana Wraps’ hybrid and transcultural stylisation, containing ongoing, circular appropriations of elements between multiple cultures, developed “in-between” spaces, has been capable of bridging different fashion preferences. The headwrap traditional “authenticity”, certainly perceived as “real” and used by the team for brand marketing,

has paved the way for young women of a Congolese “minority culture” to recreate a sense of self from the remains of their “original” precolonial, colonial and postcolonial culture. However, the context of London, with its constant flow of people, discourses, and cultural and economic forms, has similarly stimulated young diasporic subjects to creatively “appropriate” fashion styles from diverse cultural individuals, occasionally belonging to more dominant cultures (Rogers, 2006), and make it “their own” for the production of Congolese fashion trajectories. Thus, the idea of an “authentic” Congolese and Black African culture, re-evoked and deeply felt by diasporic actors, has been concurrently altered by the encounter with a broader range of cultural subjects. This ongoing process of cultural transformation, strongly impacted by the “superdiverse” and “convivially multicultural” environment of London, has resulted in a transcultural fashion brand producing “modern” style headwraps as lived social fields (Dwyer, 2004b).

4.2.3 The headwrap ritual as a metaphor of empowerment to perform “feminine” styles and “feminist” values

On the African continent and its diasporas, as highlighted earlier, the use of textiles and other valuable materials to produce ceremonial hats has long signified a status symbol indicating power, wealth, and social prestige within the community (Nielsen, 1979, Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995). The cultural ritual of head wrapping has, therefore, not only represented a “beautifying process” of a woman’s head, simply concerned with boldly asserting African aesthetics, but has also been deployed to communicate personal and cultural knowledge and attitudes about the human experience (Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995). African headwraps have long-standing symbolised prosperity, social position and, most of all, empowerment, enabling women to project themselves into a specific environment and showing how each woman prefers to appear in front of others (Arnoldi and Kreamer, 1995, Bradley Griebel, 1995b).

In line with this, *Kiyana Wraps* models have been described as “luxury accessories which should be regarded as status symbols” (Interview: 17 December 2016). As Madeleine stressed, “our designs are directed to women who, together with embracing their cultural heritage, want to be perceived as elegant, chic, and luxurious” (Interview: 17 December 2016). A sense of power, class and social distinction is connoted not only using African cotton fabrics, but also by means of alternative materials varying from velvet, satin to silk, sometimes combined with sinamay¹²⁸ or tulle trims. To commercially link some collections to the notion of elegance and luxury, the website brand uses the French *Le Classic* and *Le Luxe* (Kiyana Wraps, 2019). As Heine Klaus discusses, luxury can be defined as something that is more than necessary and ordinary as well as desirable and meant to satisfy human desires. Luxury products are generally characterised by high prices, quality, aesthetics, uniqueness and emblematic meaning (Heine, 2012). These *Kiyana Wraps* collections thus represent a culturally-specific symbol of good taste and luxury, mostly employed as a visible sign of social distinction (Bourdieu and de Saint-Martin, 1976). More generally, the company defines its creations on the website as “the epitome of effortless elegance. We make beautiful turbans that do not follow trend but concentrate on quality and inimitable aesthetic. We want women to exude beauty and feel beautiful wearing our turbans” (Kiyana Wraps, 2019).

Similar statements were emphasised in interview by Madeleine and Christelle for whom wearing a turban hat or a headwrap allows to young African women to be noticed, admired and stand out from the crowd, while maintaining a strong cultural heritage. At the same time, headwraps represent an important tool of empowerment able to unify the most diverse women. These characteristics were also confirmed by young

¹²⁸ Sinamay is a type of straw coming from the abaca plant. It is a quite popular material for hat-making due to its characteristics: it is light but firm, it dyes well, it remain transparent and can be easily modelled by hand and attached to other fabrics (e.g. in the case of *Kiyana Wraps*) (Henriksen, 2009).

Black African participants for whom the material commodity of the headwrap signified a culturally hybrid marker (Bradley Griebel, 1995b), a sign of “symbolic ethnicity” (Gans, 1979, Naujoks, 2010) understood as an allegiance to, a love and pride for the continent. Performing the headwrap ritual became a “symbol of cultural comment” (Tulloch, 2003, p. 76) which could collectively empower young African women to explore their transnational history, to become “womanist”, and claim control over their identities. As testified by the voice of a young Congolese woman during the event: “Today being here makes me feel so proud (...) it is a very beautiful thing! With all the suffering we have been through as a nation. A day like today just shows me how much beauty can come out from so much pain (...) it just shows the creativity of young Congolese such as Madeleine” (Interview: 17 December 2016).

Together with signifying a socio-cultural desire to amplify an “otherness” (Tulloch, 2003), the headwrap ritual was also experienced as a powerful means capable of unifying women from different cultural backgrounds: a metaphorical “tool of sisterhood!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). *Kiyana Wraps* production was indeed not specifically limited to one precise group of women. On the contrary, it showed that “any women can wear a headwrap, regardless of their cultural heritage, ethnic and/or religious belongings, age, or skin colour” (Interview: 17 December 2016). Yvette from the audience claimed that “*Kiyana Wraps* is not only for Black women....it has no colour!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). According to Christelle: “any woman can mix our avant-garde dynamic designs with her outfits and be able to wear the headwrap every day” (Interview: 17 December 2016). In so doing, the brand not only involves women from the Black African and Caribbean diasporas, but also Arab and Muslim women, Europeans and women who have suffered from alopecia or cancer or who have experienced head injuries.

The social variety of the fashion brand was also reflected during the workshop. The hotel room represented a cultural blend, composed of different types of women with different looks, collaborating as a group around the head wrapping performance. It became a space of encounter between different everyday life experiences and cultural memories. As expressed by one of the people in the audience, Yvette: “What I love about these events is the fact that I meet people from different cultures...the headwrap unites people from Africa, from the Caribbean, from Europe, etc.” (Interview: 17 December 2016). Performing headwraps embodied a symbolic process through which ethnicities were reproduced but, at the same time, a process in which racialised and ethnicised individuals showed a strong desire to use their tradition to actively, although conflictingly, engage with broader cosmopolitan discourses and to blend with different cultural trajectories (Dwyer and Crang, 2002).

Most of all, the headwrap as fashion accessory represented a material form of self-confidence and self-esteem. As Madeleine underlined: “It was so fulfilling when a costumer told us that she felt different, better, when she was wearing one of our headwraps” (Interview: 17 December 2016). According to Kizza, the headwrap signified women’s metaphoric empowerment in their everyday life experiences:

For me wearing *Kiyana* means standing together as women. It’s about acknowledging during my daily routine that what I have decided to wear on my head is more than just a piece of colourful cotton fabric. It is mostly a symbol of my African history, but also my gender identity. To me the headwrap is also a way to show Black leadership, Black values! (Interview: 17 December 2016)

Similarly for other young Black African women, wearing *Kiyana Wraps* signified maintaining their custom and confidently presenting it with a modern twist as well as expressing their Blackness with pride. As Yvette put it: “When I wear *Kiyana Wrap* I feel more independent, stronger, I feel better, more comfortable with myself. I feel strong to go out into the world and I feel more beautiful! *Kiyana Wraps* is like a boost

to your ego!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). While Celia revealed the allegorical meaning associated with the ritual in her ordinary life experience:

The headwrap does make me feel more powerful. When I wear it people on the street would stop and look at me (...) it makes me feel empowered when I wear it. It is really something that attracts attention and never in a negative way! People generally are alarmed and amazed by it! (Interview: 17 December 2016)

As Stuart Hall underlined, the formation of Black cultural identities is founded on the imaginative rediscovery of a “oneness” (Hall, 1990), on the retelling of a past, of a shared essentialised culture; but it is especially through the significance of difference that cultural identities take form. It is difference that makes us “what we really are” (Hall, 1990), resulting in the empowerment and creativity of diasporic individuals who are part of a minority within other minorities in London. Thus, young Black African women self-consciously decide to dress their heads to shape new, stronger, fashion identities, employing the headwrap not only to forge an African and “cosmopolitan” cultural unity, but also to mark cultural difference (Boateng, 2004).

In addition, the brand does not promote an explicit gender distinction. In Celia’s opinion, it “attracts more women because of being more image-conscious than men”. (Interview: 17 December 2016). According to Josette, the lack of men at the event was mostly due to culturally specific reasons: “in the Congolese costume, men are not meant to wear headwraps” (Interview: 17 December 2016), unlike from other African or Arab traditions. The brand aimed to empower women, without necessarily excluding men. As Madeleine explained:

During our last event, a few men came with their date, but I think men when they come are kind of worried and they ask themselves: “I am going to be the only one in the event? Is it going to be just women? What I am going to do?” But when they try the headwrap they love it. They just don’t know how they are going to look! (Interview: 17 December 2016)

Josette explained that the team was planning to develop a long-term strategy to make the headwrap practice appealing to men and “to bring a gender revolution within the Congolese diaspora and beyond” (Interview: 17 December 2016).

Gender implications were rather indirectly expressed during the workshop. Several young women underlined that wearing *Kiyana Wraps* made them feel more desirable in front of men. Celia, for example, claimed that: “A women that carries a beautiful headwrap in a confident way would attract the right man!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). Similarly, Yvette expressed: “I think men love when I wear the headwrap. I think because I feel myself as a queen and they also look at me as a queen! They really like it!” (Interview: 17 December 2016). These statements showed how young African women’s appearance and perception of beauty are, still, strongly influenced by African men’s expectations.

As pointed out in chapter two, Judith Butler theorises that gender is not something that an individual is, but something that an individual does: “Gender as a corporeal style, an “act” (...) which is both intentional and performative, where “performative” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (Butler, 2011b, p. 190). Gender identity is indeed performed, produced, and sustained through various acts, the several ways in which a body shows its cultural signification (Butler, 2011). The ritual of the headwrap, therefore, becomes an act used by Black Africans not only to perform race and ethnicity but also to perform gender.

Feminist theories have generally criticised beauty practices as oppressive, often strengthening the burden of “lookism” upon women. It is true that women are constantly judged by how they look (Lazar, 2013) and their “femininity” is generally determined by how they present themselves, as the opposite of “masculinity” which is normally defined by how men behave (Jervis et al., 2006). However, this thesis follows postfeminist perspectives, considering the notion of “femininity” as blending with a “feminist” consciousness (Lazar, 2013). This discourse considers “feminine” styles and “feminist” values as intertwined, re-defining old feminist positions which imply a polarisation of the two characteristics. Accordingly, adorning the head with a wrap

becomes a way of creating a new kind of Black African “femininity” (Kotthoff and Wodak, 1997), with the aim to look “beautiful” and “attractive”, as well as expressing a strong feminist consciousness (Lazar, 2013). Young women’s “feminine” styles and “feminist” values are blended together instead of being polarised. The headwrap ritual is here framed as a fashion and beauty practice reclaimed as an enjoyable, self-chosen and skilled “feminine” pursuit, and considered a practice of “feminine self-aestheticisation” (Lazar, 2013). The headwrap, thus, represents a material and metaphorical form of self-confidence, empowering young Black African women in their everyday life experiences in London to become “womanist”, to express their transnational life histories, to keep alive their cultural memories, and to claim control over their self-representations.

Along with further tracing the *people*, the *thing* and the cross generational *story* (Marcus, 1995) enclosed within the fashion and beauty practice of *Kiyana Wraps*, the second part of this chapter has further demonstrated the relevant *metaphorical* (Marcus, 1995) dimension characterising the body performance employed by young Congolese and Black African women in London as well as the *conflicting* (Marcus, 1995) aspects revealed through the “multicultural” marketing strategy employed by the fashion brand. The case study has further disclosed that the human body carries strong cultural meanings. In adorning their heads with a wrap, young diasporic subjects analysed in this chapter have learned from a young age how to perform racial, ethnic and gender-specific sets of “acts”, markings of their own social group. Importantly, this performative process, “the doing of” race, ethnicity and gender, has developed differently across historical periods, generations and space, powerfully demonstrating that the configuration of cultural identities should be regarded as an intentional and performative corporeal style which is socially and spatially produced and continually reproduced through time (Butler, 1988, Butler, 2011a, Butler, 2011b, Schechner, 2013). These identities are, therefore, not stable or essentialist, but rather an “idea”, an

“illusion” shaped through the performance of bodily gestures, movements, and different types of enactments, such as the headwrap practice, always conditioned by dominant discourses of a given society, or group, and its culture, history and geography (Butler, 1988, Baldwin et al., 2004).

The fashion brand has been, in a way, multiply inhabited (Dwyer, 2004b), embodying a “sociological, aesthetic and commercial engagement with the multicultural” (Dwyer and Crang, 2002). The representation of diasporic memories and the connections with a real and imagined homeland in the DRC and with other Black African transnational diasporic individuals was extended beyond these specific, racially and ethnically boundaries, involving consumers who were not necessarily members of the same racial and ethnic communities. The headwrap ritual fabricated instead a more encompassing notion of transnationality, developing relations with imagined markets. Additionally, the brand was transformed into a multi-dimensional (Dwyer, 2004b) geography involving: a cultural and economically driven social practice; a form of African heritage and memory; a synthesis of hybrid discourses and aesthetics; the symbolic stylisation of the everyday and of social distinction; the representation of multiple diasporic identities and sense of belongings; the embodiment of social relations between producers and consumers and, most importantly, a symbol of racial-ethnic and gender empowerment.

The case study has confirmed the idea that the formation of identities and belongings should be considered as dynamic processes formed within socio-cultural relations, something which is socially constructed and performed rather than a fixed, primordial, and essential characteristic that people have (Probyn, 1996, Bell, 1999, Savage et al., 2004, Kumsa, 2005, Yuval-Davis et al., 2005, Anthias, 2006). It has shown the necessity of investigating under which conditions transnational identities and belongings are produced and narrated, instead of assuming them as something natural

and a priori (Desai, 2004). In the contextual circumstance of “Unveil-the-workshop”, the headwrap practice involved the act of performing identities and “doing belonging” (Skrbiš et al., 2007). It involved a process of material and symbolic re-negotiation by young diasporic subjects which conveyed a certain level of ease within several cultures and places at once (Gutiérrez, 2011). Racial, ethnic and gender self-representation were differently enacted, exhibited and, in some cases, exaggerated through the body space of the headwrap (Skrbiš et al., 2007). This was particularly visible in the behaviour of Madeleine, Christelle and Josette who stressed their Congolese and Black African heritage in combination with a multicultural, hybrid approach to involve everyone in the room, reinforce credibility among old friends as well as trying to attract new long-term consumers. The body ritual performance during the workshop was experienced as a medium of “being in place” while the hotel room represented a temporary construction of a social “thirdspace” (Bhabha, 1994, Soja, 1996, Ehrkamp and Leitner, 2006). The production and consumption of other kinds of young Congolese diasporic “thirdspaces” in London will be described and analysed in the following chapters of the thesis.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

Although the bodily practice of dressing the head in African societies certainly precedes the European colonisation of the continent, low-priced European-produced cloth became more accessible to a broader African population between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who adopted it to satisfy their natural aesthetic needs and personal choices (Lynch and Strauss, 2014). The headwrap gradually developed as a popular accessory among African and overseas communities especially with the introduction and adaptation of African wax-print fabrics along West African coasts. Dressing the head with a wrap by women belonging to the Black African diaspora has historically functioned as a “helmet of courage”, as a symbol of a truly perceived communal Black African identity and as a uniform of rebellion signifying complete resistance to loss of

self-definition (Bradley Griebel, 1995a). A need to seek a symbolic connection to their ancient homeland and to inscribe onto the body a sense of pride and love for being Black African has been for a long time performed through the headwrap ritual (Boateng, 2004, Strübel, 2012). It is within this historical framework that the fashion production of *Kiyana Wraps* lies.

To trace young London Congolese women's transnational geographies and diasporic experiences in the metropolis, each multi-sited ethnographic field (Marcus, 1995) was analysed in relation to the commodity culture of headwrap fashion. The main *people* and *biographies* (Marcus, 1995) from the fieldwork interviews were the three migrant Congolese young subjects, Madeleine, Christelle and, partially, Josette. They were firstly introduced through a history of their fashion brand. The performance of their identities and multiple belongings were then investigated in the workshop context. Other African and European diasporic voices were, in addition, investigated. These young women represented a section of the company's consumers, directly involved with multicultural spaces through the brand's services across London.

The *thing* (Marcus, 1995) was the commodity culture of the headwrap. After having highlighted the historical significance of dressing the head and the development of the headwrap practice in Africa and its diaspora, new headwraps produced by *Kiyana Wraps* have been investigated as the main objects of embodiment of young Black African women's transnational and multicultural experiences in London.

The *story* or *plot* (Marcus, 1995) was traced by the ways in which young London Congolese women defined and sold their practice (Dwyer, 2004a). The cultural and commercial "Congolese story and journey" and the emphasis on its "traditional authenticity" was outlined through the African wax-prints history and through the ways in which cultural memories and transnational attachments were strategically used by the team for the marketing of their products. A Congolese and Black African story was also

traced through the performance of the headwrap ritual during the workshop taken as an example. Narratives of everyday diasporic and transnational experiences and collective memories were also brought to light especially via the presentation of the selves, performative manners and public interactions between the *Kiyana Wraps* team and workshop attendees as consumers of the brand.

The *metaphor* (Marcus, 1995) involved the strong socio-cultural meanings and symbolic values associated with the headwrap practice. The historical symbolic roots of the traditional African headwrap laid the basis for the metaphorical understanding of the *Kiyana Wraps* production. Examining the brand's website contents and the performance ritual during the workshop revealed how headwrap models were promoted and often experienced as a Black African status symbol and sign of social distinction in a "superdiverse" space of London. The ability of Madeleine to combine the Congolese Black African heritage with a hybrid taste depending on each participant's preferences as well as the audience perceptions of *Kiyana Wraps* contribution, showed how the ritual of dressing the head embodies racial, ethnic as well as gender symbolic metaphors of empowerment.

Finally, the *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) was the dualism embedded in *Kiyana Wraps*, being a fashion brand culturally and financially driven at the same time. The ways in which the production of the brand was promoted on-line and performed off-line was occasionally ambiguous, exposing a friction between cultural legacy and commercial profit. The heritage story and the imaginary transnationality behind the company was often accentuated to broaden economical fulfilment. The brand team consciously overstated a "Congolese story and journey" to sell more products and to attract more participants to events. Meanwhile, a multicultural strategy was also applied to reach out to a more diverse clientele, affecting the validity of a Black African "authenticity".

Chapter Five – Counter-aesthetics, counter-narratives: The ritual performance of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*

5 Introduction

This chapter presents the third case study of the thesis. It examines the cultural and aesthetic ritual performance of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, which takes place every year within the young Congolese community in London, aiming to reveal the dynamic socio-cultural and political meanings embedded in the body practice. The case study highlights two major issues of investigation. Firstly, it demonstrates how the diasporic pageant represents a contemporary form of individual and collective cultural representation produced by young London Congolese to embody “traditional” Congolese customs and values and to display a transnational and “imaginary” sense of belonging to the DRC. Secondly, the case study illustrates how the body practice is transformed into a performance which openly engages with everyday concerns affecting the young London Congolese and other Black African diasporas. The pageant arena serves to contest conservative beliefs perpetuated by elders, tackling and advancing controversial disputes regarding Black African women’s rights, gender equality and socio-cultural stigmas. Additionally, notions of Black beauty and the “natural” body are embraced as alternatives to conventional Western beauty ideals. Therefore, the meaningful and contradictory site of *Miss Congo UK* enables the public performance of “new” racial, ethnic and gender identities and the configuration of a progressive mentality among young London Congolese.

The chapter is divided into two major sections. The first main section presents the historical development of national, international and local beauty competitions and their transformation as sites of identity production and cultural agency, especially among minority groups. The section then continues with an introduction of *Miss Congo*

Beauty Pageant UK, showing how it developed as major community event in London. The pageant casting and training process held during the months preceding the competition's final show are then investigated, especially through the voices of young organisers and participants, highlighting the supposedly "intellectual" dimension of the contest. The second main section of the chapter describes and analyses the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* final gala night of the 2017 competition. A detailed description of the spectacle involving traditional wear catwalks, talent shows, the question and answer presentation, evening gown catwalks and the winner's coronation is presented. Some of the rituals incorporated in the show's segments and performed on stage by young contestants and other performers are taken as most meaningful and analysed more closely. An overview of the general reception of the evening by members of the audience is finally included.

5.1 The cultural and aesthetic ritual of the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*

5.1.1 Performing beauty as a process of cultural production

Beauty pageants represent an extremely popular phenomenon that span many different countries at a local, regional, national, and international level, and acquire standard characteristics within the most diverse societies and cultures (Cohen et al., 1996). A similar format is followed, usually once a year. It begins with a process of selection of the participants, who then embark upon a period of intense rehearsal until the final public event where each contestant performs and is judged in front of a large audience. The winner is finally selected to serve as a symbolic representation of the community or nation's collective identity during the following year (King O'Riain, 2008). Importantly, beauty queens are chosen and *made* very differently depending on socio-cultural settings and judging criteria characterising each ethnic or national community (King O'Riain, 2008).

The rich and interdisciplinary literature on beauty pageants follows diverse arguments, more or less critical, pointing out how these competitions should be considered not merely as forms of entertainment, but as dynamic places where specific socio-cultural groups define, modify, and represent their cultural meanings (King O’Riain, 2008). Drawing on thirteen beauty pageant case studies from very different cultural contexts worldwide, Cohen et al. (1996) argue that pageants have a controversial nature, evoking passionate interest and engagement with political issues: “struggles over beauty contests are also struggles over the power to control and contain meanings mapped onto the bodies of competitors” (Cohen et al., 1996, p. 9). Similarly, Banet-Weiser’s work on pageants in the USA highlights how these are “profoundly political arena[s], in the sense that the presentation and reinvention of femininity that takes place on the beauty pageant stage produces political subjects” (Banet-Weiser, 1999, p. 3).

Beauty pageants are thus very interesting cultural sites where local identity and culture are publicly performed and made visible (Cohen et al., 1996), where meanings of race, ethnicity (Moran, 1996, Craig, 2002), class, gender, and nationalism are rearticulated, and where conceptions of conventional, nationalised “femininity” and idealised “beautiful” bodies are reflected (Banet-Weiser, 1999, Balogun, 2012, Riverol, 1992, Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). Pageants also provide a discursive space for the production of moral, religious (Faria, 2010) and global dynamics (Oza, 2001, Crawford et al., 2008).

5.1.2 The controversy embedded in beauty pageants: A site of oppression or a site of identity production and cultural agency?

It is not surprising that national and international beauty contests have frequently represented sites of controversy, often being interpreted as cultural forms of oppression both in Western and non-Western countries (Crawford et al., 2008, King O’Riain,

2008). Some studies emphasise the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. These see pageants as exploitive spaces of profit-making that perpetuate patriarchal images of unrealistic beauty and bodily appearances and that indicate a loss of women's purity and modesty (Wolf, 1991, Faludi, 1992).

The controversy is rooted in the way that the phenomenon originally emerged in the USA. The first beauty contest on record, *Miss United States*, was held in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, in 1880,¹²⁹ to attract tourists to the beach resort. Subsequently, beauty contests were frequently organised on the East coast resorts during the summer season (Cohen et al., 1996). However, the prototypical beauty competition as we know it today (and which is still operating in this way), took place in Atlantic City, in 1920-1, with the name of the *Miss America* pageant. This used a similar commercial strategy intended to extend the tourist season at a seaside resort (Cohen et al., 1996, Crawford et al., 2008). From this early stage, beauty competitions in the USA took place at carnivals and beach resorts, with contestants aspiring towards Hollywood rather than the professions (Cohen et al., 1996). It was only during World War II that contestants became patriotic, and showing interest in careers, scholarships, and college educations (Cohen et al., 1996).

Despite the lack of historical documentation concerning its precise international spread, pageantry contests were quickly adopted in Europe in the 1920s-30s, especially in England (Cohen et al., 1996). From the 1930s and the years following WWII, beauty

¹²⁹ Cohen et al. (1996) outline how a detailed historical account on beauty pageants has not yet been written. Beauty competitions go back to Greek mythology when Eris began the Trojan war with a prize "For the Fairest". In medieval Europe "Queens of the May" and other festivities chose men and women to represent royalty (Cohen et al., 1996, p. 3). More information on beauty pageants is available on the USA modern era, when beauty was employed in the service of nation-building. Beautiful young women were recruited for contests, fairs, and public celebrations and their appearance was the focus of attention (Cohen et al., 1996, p. 3). It was the American showman P.T. Barnum who recognised the potential of beauty as spectacle in the mid-nineteenth century. He tried to stage a beauty contest in his theatrical sideshow of curiosities, but he failed to attract "respectable" women to take part. He therefore substituted real women with their images, opening the way for numerous newspapers to hold photographic beauty contestants by the end of the century. Beauty contests were introduced onto the public stage with the acceptance of female public bathing (Cohen et al., 1996), by the late 1800s (Williams, 2005).

contests proliferated in other parts of the world, as part of decolonising and nationalistic processes, with South America, Southeast Asia, and the Caribbean as leading areas. Those separate national contests were then unified (as well as also being held separately) under the international British-organised pageant *Miss World*, founded in 1951 (Crawford et al., 2008, Balogun, 2012). In this sense, the US and UK models shaped today's standardly recognised beauty pageants around the world, becoming a global phenomenon held annually in numerous countries (Crawford et al., 2008).

Regardless of their popular success, early contests immediately triggered intense public scandals and criticism, especially from first-wave North American feminists and church groups who stood together against the “vulgar and degrading” *Miss America* pageant, seeing a queen as “a prize cow, a slave, or a coveted piece of candy” (Cohen et al., 1996, p. 7). Second-wave feminists staged a famous demonstration against the pageant held in Atlantic City in 1968. In publicly discarding symbols of “femininity” such as bras, aprons, and makeup, they argued that the competition objectified and commodified women, displaying them like cattle for their physical attributes, therefore imposing harmful body images and promoting self-hatred (Crawford et al., 2008, p. 62).

Such conflicts took place also in non-Western societies when, for instance, a White South African woman was selected as one of the finalists at the “Pan-African” beauty contest while many Africans claimed that the “face” of Africa had to be Black (Crawford et al., 2008). The resistance against *Miss World* caused even more violent social uprising and mass riots. In 1996 in India, groups of students, farmers, and women's organisations articulated numerous forms of dissent. The opposition from religious groups included strikes and threats to destroy the venue of the pageant (Oza, 2001). Another instance of violence happened in 2002, where *Miss World* was planned to take place in Nigeria during the month of Ramadan and provoked a serious inter-

religious insurrection that ended with the death of more than two hundred Christians and Muslims (Oza, 2001, Whalen, 2003, Crawford et al., 2008).¹³⁰

While the damaging consequences and well-argued critiques embedded within the beauty pageant spectacle should be taken seriously, the culture, time, and context in which these competitions take place must also be considered. Pageants can assume opposite meanings and develop conflicting receptions among diverse societies within different individual and collective circumstances (Crawford et al., 2008). Beauty contests featuring numerous racial, ethnic, and diasporic communities, organised by and for individuals who belong to those specific minority groups, can become valuable vehicles in conveying collective identities, rearticulating cultural authenticity and difference (McAllister, 1996, Borland, 1996).

Maxine Leeds Craig, in “Ain’t I a Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race” (Craig, 2002), highlights that African American beauty pageants in the 1960s represented sites of cultural agency, with participants exposed to the judgment and the winner elected by the Black public (King O’Riain, 2008). The first *Miss Black America* pageant was staged by the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in the Atlantic city in 1968. This was an “all-Black” event that aimed to celebrate Black culture as well as representing a sign of protest against the exclusion of Black women from the *Miss America* title (Craig, 2002). In wearing un-straightened Afro hair, performing an African dance, claiming middle-class status, supporting the civil rights movement and demonstrating racial pride, the winner symbolised an emergent Black identity (Craig, 2002). Notions of Black beauty were directly used as a counter-response to dominant representations of Western beauty (Craig, 2002, King O’Riain, 2008), from which Black women were either left out or included in images that strengthened Eurocentric ideals. Pageants served as arenas for

¹³⁰ Only afterwards *Miss World 2002* was moved to London.

Black African women to contest centuries of stereotypically racist depictions of them as ugly, vulgar, and sexually available (Craig, 2002). The display of their natural beauty, that put Blackness and African “authenticity” at its centre, developed as part of the symbolic repertoire against racial exclusion and in assertion of racial difference (Craig, 2002, Faria, 2010).

The mushrooming of beauty competitions among diasporic minority groups similarly resulted from an active reaction against the exclusion experienced in host societies. These stood as a validation that ethnic women and their cultures should be considered equally beautiful to women belonging to dominant cultures. Pageants were produced for metaphorical resistance and to claim greater acceptance (Barnes, 1994, King O’Riain, 2008, Faria, 2010). Organisers, participants, and audiences belonging to the same racial, ethnic or national group have frequently experienced beauty competitions as cultural forms to imaginatively express a connection to their distant, original homelands, and to display “authenticity” (Wu, 1997, Siu, 2005, Mani, 2006). In addition, local pageants within racial, ethnic and diasporic communities provide safe public spheres for debating concerns and issues in ordinary social life affecting the group and allowing women to voice their individual everyday experiences, interests, and ambitions (King O’Riain, 2008, Borland, 1996). In this sense, the pageant can be defined as “a local adaptation, a refashioning of a dominant cultural form to the particular needs for representation within the community” (Borland, 1996, p. 75). Diasporic transnational beauty competitions particularly operate to reproduce socio-cultural norms involving gendered, racial, and ethnic ideals and to raise awareness around cultural identity stories while revealing internal conflicts and differences between diasporas (Faria, 2010).

This section of the chapter has shown how racial, ethnic, national/global, gender, moral, and religious issues can be differently reflected through pageants according to

the community's socio-cultural knowledge, ideology, and practice. The performance of beauty contests deserves therefore to be analysed at the local level and in connection with those specificities that characterise each social group (Cohen et al., 1996, Crawford et al., 2008). The next sections will thus extend the work on diasporic beauty pageants through a detailed investigation of *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, deeply concerned with the reformulation and representation of cultural meanings.

5.1.3 *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK: an introduction*

Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK is a Congolese, London-based, beauty competition held annually during winter-spring season since 2010.¹³¹ The community event is today organised and promoted by its main founder Luke, owner of *Disk and Jockey Entertainment* (2019), a Congolese events management company.¹³² Luke is a thirty-three year old Congolese who describes himself as “an entrepreneur, a businessman, an event organiser”, who is also the founder of the *Voice of Congo* (2019), a Congolese diaspora-based web news platform. He was born in Kinshasa and arrived in London at fifteen/sixteen years old. In interview he narrated that his father left the DRC for the UK due to political reasons and his direct involvement with the UDPS.¹³³ Luke re-joined his father with the rest of their closest family members, “just after the second war started”, at the end of 1999, as referred to in chapter one. He gained a diploma from Redbridge College in Sport Studies, then attended a year of ESOL courses to improve his English proficiency, and finally, he received a second BTEC qualification in Sports and Exercise Science. In remembering his school years, Luke expressed:

I never really felt integrated into the British society. I was almost all the time surrounded by Congolese and other Africans, I was always among people with different origins than British. I only had few British friends (...) I have always

¹³¹ From 2010 it became an annual event, although the first beauty competition was held in 2006.

¹³² Fashion and music show, night club events, business launches, etc.

¹³³ The anti-Kabila political party introduced in chapter one, lead at that time by Étienne Tshisekedi.

been very close to my Congolese origins. I feel strongly Congolese! (Interview: 21 April 2017)

In discussing the *Miss Congo UK* project, Luke explained that he formulated the idea while he was still studying, when some of his friends were displeased about the quality of previous Congolese events in London: “They were complaining that they paid a lot of money, but the music was bad (...) they kept complaining but I am a kind of person that doesn’t like just to complain but likes to act and be part of a solution so I suggested to organise something!” (Interview: 21 April 2017). The project developed as a joint venture among a small group of young Congolese and other young African men such as Ethiopians, Nigerians, and Ghanaians: “we were firstly thinking to organise a fashion show then we thought that *Miss Congo UK* had not been organised in London since 2006 so we decided to do it. We found a small night club as a venue; we did the flyers and promoted the event and a lot of Congolese friends that before were doubting joined” (Interview: 21 April 2017). Early in the following year, Luke faced some issues with other organisers regarding the goals he wished to achieve: “we had a totally different vision! My vision was to empower Congolese women to have a queen who would become an ambassador for the community, who would represent the Congolese community in the UK, but those guys were more interested to make the girls their own girlfriends”. As he described the dispute: “we were close to the finals, we had fifteen contestants and we wanted to keep only ten. When we started to decide on who to eliminate some of the guys on the team started to protest, trying to keep their “own” girls so I told them that we were trying to conduct a business and not a relationship camp!” (Interview: 21 April 2017). Luke decided therefore to “get rid of most of those guys” and to introduce young women as the main organisational team players.

The beauty competition was initially held in conjunction with the Congo annual independence celebration on the evening of 30 June. It was only from 2013 that the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* became a community event per se. Up to the present day,

the organisational team is composed by a small group of young London Congolese men and women. These are considered to be intellectual experts in their fields and successful professional figures within the young community. Along with Luke, they lead the casting and training process of the pageant as well as participating in the final event either as performers, hosts or judges.

5.1.4 The casting process: an initial disputed arena

Similarly to other beauty pageants, the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* involves a participant selection process, an intense grooming period, and a final public event ending with the queen's coronation. The 2017 casting process took place in an office at the Print House, Dalston, where one of the organisers currently works. The first part involved two afternoon group meetings between the organisational team and the young women participants. These meetings aimed "to find out their level of thinking, their knowledge" as expressed by Luke (Interview: 21 April 2017). The *Official Miss Congo UK* YouTube channel (2017) documents how young women were initially asked to present themselves through personal questions regarding their studies, hobbies, and professional future plans and to explain the reasons behind participating in the competition. General topics of discussion were then suggested, including individual language proficiency, experiences of travelling back or visiting the DRC for the first time, preferences about Congolese music and dance, opinions and relationships with Congolese men compared to other Black African men (e.g. Nigerians), as well as current political issues such as Brexit, racism, and gender inequality. Following these interviews, every participant was invited to perform what Luke in interview called a brief "testing walking skill" along the building corridor.

The second part of the casting was composed of "one-on-one meeting sessions" where each contestant had three individual meetings with the main organisers separately. Subsequently, the organisers decided which participants to keep. As

explained by Luke: “for the ones that we decided that do not have the ‘right level’ for the year we suggested them to come back the next year or stay within the organisation team and share the work that we are doing” (Interview: 21 April 2017). Despite the organisers’ emphasis on the “selection process” and the event being promoted as a “national” pageant of the Congolese diaspora in the UK, inviting the participation of not only young women living in or outside London, but also those settled in other UK cities, e.g. Luton, Birmingham, and Manchester, the pageant attracted a restricted number of contestants. The *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017* featured nine¹³⁴ young Congolese women between eighteen and twenty-five years of age, who were mainly university students settled in London. Very few of them were born in the DRC and only one was born in London. The majority were born and grew up in other European countries such as France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany before moving to London and had never visited the DRC.

Luke justified the small number of participants as following:

At the beginning of this year [2016/7] we had between thirty to forty girls who applied and from all over the UK but not all did follow through. Some dropped out or some did not show up. You know, it is a quite intense process, they must come to London every week and follow everything. They have to be able to have their own talent and for some of them it is very challenging to create something artistic and to present it at the finals. (Interview: 21 April 2017)

It is worth underlining here that, despite the *Miss Congo UK* representing a “small-scale” local beauty pageant compared to other national or international competitions such as *Miss RDC* in the Congo or *Miss World*, it currently stands as one of the best attended cultural community events among the Congolese in London.

However, as explained in interview, the event faced an initial *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) within the diaspora, mostly based on controversies over morality among the elders which resulted in a lack of involvement of both contestants and audiences. Until

¹³⁴ The initial number of participants was eleven but two of them attended only the casting process and dropped out afterwards.

2012/13, organisers struggled to find young women interested to take part in the competition and to attract a wide audience. This was mainly due to the older generation's beliefs on the event as promiscuous and degrading Congolese traditional codes of integrity. A large section of the parents prohibited their daughters from participating in the contest. Through Luke's memories: "many Congolese were thinking that girls who were taking part of it were promiscuous because they were going to show their bodies and they blamed us for exposing their daughters to other guys" (Interview: 21 April 2017).

A similar experience was confirmed in interview with Lucrèce, the winner of the 2016 competition. She is a twenty-year-old Congolese woman who was born in Paris and moved to London with her parents and siblings in 2005 at the age of eight. She is currently studying medicine at St George's, University of London. In delineating her family history, she explained that her Congolese maternal grandmother was already living in Paris and she could "bring over" the rest of the family from the DRC in the 1980s. Her parents decided to migrate since professional opportunities were "opening up" in France and they wanted to guarantee a better higher education for their future children. While discussing her past experience of participating in the pageant, Lucrèce pointed out that the event was regarded by the elders as having harmful effects on Congolese women's integrity: "They just had a deep fear in their minds that, you know, in participating and winning girls would start to be posing naked for magazines, we would degrade our self as women (...) but it is important to show that this is not what *Miss Congo* is about. I did not do anything like that!" (Interview: 25 May 2017).

The conflict over bodily display and morality inevitably shaped the pageant format. Luke, for example, explained that the Western-styled bikini swimsuits catwalk, which was a section of the pageant during early years, had to be eliminated from the process due to the profound disapproval expressed by the community. Many elders

expressed reservations about Congolese women being objectified (Crawford et al., 2008), considering the Western-styled bikinis to be “too revealing” and rallying against the “cheap” display of women’s bodies (Mani, 2006, Balogun, 2012). Organisers were reminded of the political condition of Congolese women “back home, being already victims of rape and abuse”, and they were criticised for “putting their women on a stage as sexual objects” (Interview: 21 April 2017).¹³⁵ They were therefore induced to “police” the amount of skin contestants showed to the public during the training and the finals and were urged to ban the use of Western-styled bikinis from the programme. These were substituted with the wearing of traditional Congolese-styled bikinis, composed of thigh shorts and singlets, during the swimsuit segments of the competition. In so doing, some of the anxieties that the more “conservative” section of the community felt about bodily display in pageantry (Balogun, 2012), claiming the protection of women’s “ideal” and “traditional feminine” modesty (Mani, 2006), were placated.

Additionally, according to the organisers, most of the collective preconceptions and misunderstandings regarding the pageant were probably fomented by the fact that, until 2013, the final public show was the only aspect officially promoted through flyers and on-line spaces. None of the information regarding the months of training preceding the evening performance was offered. In 2014, organisers therefore developed a more holistic promotional strategy to give a “more realistic” perspective on “what the pageant was truly about”, to change the perception among elders and to encourage wider participation. To restore the story behind the beauty pageant, they deployed a virtual approach by documenting and publishing on social media (e.g. YouTube, Facebook,

¹³⁵ Due to permanent political conflicts, cases of sexual and gender-based violence against Congolese women in the DRC, particularly in the Eastern region, are documented among the most horrific in the world (Godin, 2016). This relevant topic will also be discussed in chapter six.

Instagram) all “the hard work of the girls” and the activities that were taking place during the months before the finals.

In so doing, Luke remembered how parents:

Saw that we were actually teaching to the girls Congolese culture, history and traditions. Some of these girls when they come to *Miss Congo*, they only know a small side about Congo so when the parents saw that the daughters started to do research about the Congo, talking more about the Congo then they were very happy. Even grandparents and children started to attend from that year, you know, big families. Even Pastors came. Before they thought that women were wearing bikinis, so it was not a holy thing for them! For me it was a big achievement and it has been improving every year. (Interview: 21 April 2017)

The “new” on-line representation resulted in 2014 being a “break-through” year, with the older generation beginning to approve the participation of their daughters in the body performance and encouraging a more diverse public to attend the finals.

5.1.5 The training process: “Beauty, knowledge, power, talent, and culture!”

The training process, usually spanning a period of three months, was held in various places within the same building where the casting took place, the Print House, Dalston, such as private offices or basement areas, shared halls and corridors. It involved a series of workshops to prepare the contestants for the final show, mainly aimed at motivating the personal development of the young participants.

Some were physical activities, including an intense fitness boot camp programme to “lose weight and get fit,” as well as dance classes, documented in the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* Facebook Page (2017e), to memorise a traditional Congolese choreography later performed in the finals. Participants were also guided through one-to-one “grooming” exercises focused on learning how to perform with self-confidence on stage. They were for instance taught how to walk tall and strongly, to dress “sharply” with high heels and tight jeans, to place their hands in specific places while walking and posing, and to keep their chins “up” whilst smiling, to “enjoy” the walk or be “showing it” to the judges and audience (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003, Balogun,

2012). On the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* Facebook Page, Luke motivates young participants as follows: “I don’t think you need to be shy or scared because that’s what women do, no? They walk with high heels! Think of walking beside a guy that you like (...) you need to be confident on the stage. We will support you but the real improvement depends on you!” (Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK, 2016). A desire to have more walking practice to reach better “feminine” movements of the body was subsequently expressed by young contestants.

An “empowerment programme” was also part of the training. It was run by Mya Odja Ilunga (stage name *La’Sheek*), a twenty-five-year-old Congolese woman and Ornella Jefferson, a young woman originally from Burundi. They are the two founders of *She’s King Empire* (2019), a Black African network that champions gender and racial equality. Their programme for the pageant involved “life and self-confidence coaching lessons” and was focused on guiding young women in learning how to trust people who surrounded them, but ultimately, to learn how to trust themselves in order “not to fall and stand firm in this world” and to develop “a responsibility to take care and support other people”, as documented on the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* Facebook Page (2017i). An exemplary exercise consisted of each young woman writing down reflections about another contestant’s character, commenting on her strengths and weaknesses, and giving some “honest” suggestions and advice on how to improve. The aim of the assignment was described by one of the tutors as learning “to be able to critically analyse someone they think they know and to see themselves from another point of view”; to learn to “review, love and criticise themselves (...) to know who they are in order to adjust, adapt, and grow” (Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK, 2017i). Lucrèce in interview defined the programme as: “very productive! They were guiding us to bring up our strengths and to focus on our qualities” (Interview: 25 May 2017).

Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK has significantly been cast by Congolese organisers, participants, and audience members as a “cultural pageant” (King O’Riain, 2008), “insisting” mainly on the intellectual dimension of the contest, in order to portray a well-educated, middle-class and open-minded trajectory of the community (Balogun, 2012). Such interpretation was made very clear to the contestants from the casting process documented in the *Official Miss Congo UK* YouTube channel. As expressed by one of the organisers, Vava Tampa, a community political activist founder of the charity *Save the Congo*:¹³⁶

Miss Congo is definitely not just about you being pretty, believe me we had so many pretty girls applying. We want more than prettiness, we want substance! So here are a couple of hints: you need to be informed and aware of what is going on across the world, you should mention watching the news and read papers, learn about new Congolese stuff! This is gonna be beyond being gorgeous and ‘having the body’ or being ‘pretty’, is gonna be beyond all of that! You need to have what people say in French - and forgive me because I am gonna sound very colonial – the *bagage intellectuel* (intellectual baggage, knowledge). This is gonna be about bringing that *bagage intellectuel* which can also simply mean ‘having something in your mind’. So just go home and look around and be sure to come back and bring that here! (Official Miss Congo, 2017)

In accordance, organisers were mostly oriented to stimulate candidates’ intellectual abilities and to assess young women’s determination to become active agents of improvement both in the London diaspora and back home. Contestants were offered educational lectures on the history, culture, and politics of the DRC, with the aim of expanding young women’s knowledge and passion about their Congolese heritage. In Luke’s words in interview: “we want to teach them everything they need to know on the Congo” (Interview: 21 April 2017). As well as testified by Vava on the *Official Miss Congo UK* YouTube channel: “only when you understand your story, your history, where you come from, where you were before, only when you enter that image it becomes much easier to kind of dream large and big and to sort of being ‘confident’” (Official Miss Congo, 2017).

¹³⁶ Cited previously in chapter two and three.

5.1.6 An empowered representation of London Congolese women?

Among the most important aims of the cultural competition, according to the organisers, was to empower and renegotiate the role of young Congolese women in London. A similar point of view was echoed by contestants who shared how enrolling in the competition became an opportunity to improve a sense of self-confidence. For example, Anna, a 24-year-old British Congolese graduate from the London School of Economics and contestant of the 2017 show, expressed her experience as follows:

I entered the pageant 'cause I wanted to challenge myself to do brave things, to boost my confidence out of my comfort zone (...) because I knew we had to do a lot of public speaking, interaction with people and I can be awkward sometimes with this. I strongly believe in personal development and I thought it would be helpful! (Interview: 15 April 2017)

Lucrèce similarly noted that the 2016 contest provided her with the “perfect opportunity” for experiencing something new, something that she “would never feel comfortable on doing. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it, so I went for it but to me was impossible to actually win. I guess that was just a lack of confidence with myself and of who I was!” (Interview: 25 May 2017).

Individual and collective agency was often highlighted by contestants, positioning themselves and being acknowledged by the organisers, as “independent, intelligent, strong, and ambitions-orientated” figures. Participants never considered themselves, and were never considered by organisers and audience, as “passive recipients” on display, as commodified figures. On the contrary, contestants were seen as a “modern” generation of Congolese women with the power to simultaneously retain cultural origins while heralding modernisation (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003), although this perspective inevitably reveals *conflict*.

Self and collective confidence among the young women was particularly perceived in connection with the emergence of a deeper sense of pride in the Black Congolese heritage. In remembering one of the last training sessions where the

participants were asked to reflect on what they had gained from the experience, Lucrèce pointed out, “before I had the same beliefs, but I was much more scared to stand up and say what I thought. Now I feel like showing how much I love Africa and the Congo, my country! This love should be embraced even though I still identify myself as British and French as well. I had already those beliefs but now I am so engraved on them!” (Interview: 25 May 2017). Despite being partially aware of the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial history of the DRC, from community and church gatherings or from individual interests, young women further expanded their knowledge about their homeland through pageant seminars. They acquired more useful information on the DRC’s vast natural resources, such as the Coltan mineral used for electronic devices, and on Congolese human right campaigners, for example Mama Masika.¹³⁷ In Lucrèce words: “I learned more about the Belgian Congo and King Leopold and all the atrocities (...) and if we did not provide [Coltan], basically the whole technology would be dead!” (Interview: 25 May 2017). She also explained that contestants were shown a short 2011 movie, *Unwatchable* (2011), a reconstruction of Mama Masika and her family’s true story of rape in the Congo. Lucrèce remembered: “it was the first time I heard about her story and it hit me (...) if this was to happen to a Western girl it would be like a national crisis so why is it unheard of when is happening in the Congo?” (Interview: 25 May 2017).

In addition, some young women expressed that the process enabled them to further appreciate and improve their fluency in indigenous Congolese languages, occasionally being encouraged to interact in Lingala. This linguistic re-discovery reveals a deep cultural shift between generations. As Luke narrated from his everyday life experience, older generations of Congolese used to deter their children from speaking in “native” languages, as they believed these to be “for street people”, and

¹³⁷ Cited previously in chapter two.

reminiscent of a colonial mind-set. French, on the contrary, has maintained its colonial legacy in being considered a language for “intelligent and educated people”, and has for a long time been imposed upon new generations of Congolese. However, Luke continued, currently many Congolese seem to have changed their attitude, appreciating it if their children “learn Lingala or other tribal languages but for them is becoming difficult to teach so they are happy for the daughters to participate to *Miss Congo* because sometimes we push them to speak in Lingala” (Interview: 21 April 2017).

According to young participants’ claims, they could also connect with their own diaspora through the contest. Some narrated that their interest in the pageant began when realising that it was not necessarily about beauty, but about what they could offer to the community and they became inspired by the experiences of other young queens: “like Lucrèce last year who is studying medicine! How amazing considering we barely hear about Black medics let alone Congolese ones!” (Interview: 15 April 2017). Lucrèce indeed described the pageant as “a catalyst, a revolution in my head” (Interview: 25 May 2017). In her individual experience, winning and making symbolic appearances during her reign empowered her social and professional life in London. Figuring as the young community “ambassador”, she collaborated with the London Congolese *Passion for Motherland Foundation* as well as with other Africa-related organisations, such as *Cancel Cancer Africa* and *Stand Up for Africa*.

Furthermore, Lucrèce’s year-long reign increased her “pro-women” and “pro-Black” attitude resulting in the foundation of a collaborative project called “I am Black excellence”, developed with two other Congolese queens of previous years. The initiative is dedicated to organising a series of events that aim to increase the self-confidence of Black teenage girls whilst guiding them towards educational interests. In interview, Lucrèce presented the project as an idea based on the collective concern that young Black girls have regarding their hair and the connection that “good hair” has to

feeling self-confident in everyday life. “I am Black excellence” thus uses the “hair emphasis and passion” to attract teenage attention, “making them listen”, and network with older, educated, and successful Black women working in the hair business but also other professional fields such as law, medicine, etc.

In describing the events’ structures,¹³⁸ Lucrèce explained that each event panel would begin with a thematic line on “good hair experiences” of older Black women based on general questions (e.g. what does good hair mean to them? How does having good hair make them feel?), but mainly providing a window for sharing their professional stories, drawing the focus on how they have reached their current successful position in London. The aim is to show teenagers the presence in London of Black professional women who can be taken as “role models”. In this sense, the project aims to channel the young women’s passion for hair towards other potential interests to gain a “new confidence” and to aspire to educational success: “we want them to understand that they don’t have just to look towards exterior beauty, but they can get educated, get connections” (Interview: 25 May 2017). “I am Black excellence” also includes workshops based on a mentoring after-school scheme for young Congolese and Black girls to support their work under the national curriculum as well as providing a space for teaching Black and African histories and cultures: “to explain to them where they are coming from and trying to guide them through the path that we went through because it can really help mentally!” (Interview: 25 May 2017). Lucrèce’s desire to become a “Black female role model” for Black teenagers figured as a practical way to “give back” to her original homeland.

It is here important to briefly point out that, despite all the above evidence collected from the field depicting the pageant as a cultural form of empowerment for

¹³⁸ The first of this series of events was promoted on social media as: “I am Black Excellence. Growing up Black. A night with special guests telling us their stories on how they overcome adversity and were able to be successful in their lives” (2017). It was held at Lucrèce’s university, St George’s, University of London, on 26 October 2017.

young London Congolese women, it could still be argued that the training did employ and promote bodily gestures and appearances which strictly reiterated gender heteronormative performativity. As reported earlier, the process included, for example, an intense fitness boot camp programme to get thinner and fitter as well as “grooming” exercises based on “feminine” movements of the body such as the “tall and firm” walking and posing practice, the exercise on dressing “sharply” with high heels and tight jeans because, very arguably, “that’s what women do”, according to Luke’s input. Therefore, the collectively-described “cultural event” embeds a strong conflicting dimension since, to some extent, it could still be interpreted as reproducing the commodification of young women’s bodies and nationalist gender manipulation and expectations as part of an oppressive patriarchal system.

The first part of this chapter has partially demonstrated how the *conflict*, along with the *people*, *biographies*, and the *story* (Marcus, 1995) are enclosed and manifested through the cultural and aesthetic ritual of the *Miss Congo UK*. Keeping in mind the Black African diasporic experience and its narratives of displacement within a postcolonial and globalised world, the case study has confirmed that cultural identities arise from the feeling of belonging to distinctive racial and ethnic groups (Hall, 1992). The formulation of racial, ethnic and gender identities by members of the young London Congolese group can be said to be performative and performed by the doing rather than the being. These emerged as ritualised, “acted out” and continuously repeated and recreated through different, previously learned and often mutual, performative acts in everyday life. Importantly, they have been fabricated within the limits of socio-cultural expectations and pre-existing structural positions (Speer, 1992, Clammer, 2015). Through cultural performances such as beauty pageants, which differ in relation to the social matrix and cultural traditions of a given community, individuals give cultural consistency to the community they feel they belong to. They interpret their

own world, keep learning, and transforming, their own culture and give life meaning beyond the near present, as the first part of this chapter has partly shown (Speer, 1992). The following main section of the chapter illustrates in detail the finals of the 2017 competition. Particular attention is given to some of the performances which took place during the evening, by both young contestants and other performers, demonstrating that the spectacle of the pageant served as a platform for young London Congolese to formulate new racial, ethnic and gender diasporic identities.

5.2 *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017 final gala night*

5.2.1 Showcasing Congolese beauty: a warm-up

The *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017* final gala night was held in the “prestigious” Stratford Town Hall venue, in Newham, on the evening of 1 April, from 7 p.m. to 12 a.m. It was promoted on the official pageant on-line booklet (2017g) and additional introductory social media video (2017h) as: “A gala night to celebrate Congolese beauty and empower Congolese women. One of the most prestigious African beauty pageants in Europe”, involving “beauty, knowledge, power, talent and culture”. Standard (20 £) and VIP (35 £) tickets were sold on-line and double-checked at the building entrance. Spacious stairs on both sides of the hallway guided audience members towards the first-floor corridor. Here local business-owners had assembled a few stands displaying and selling skin and hair products, as well as ginger drinks and Congolese music CDs, for example a CD by the London-based Congolese musician Joe Taty Lianza.

A couple from the management team welcomed the guests at the end of the corridor to enter the main ballroom where the pageant took place. The space was divided into two main areas. In the first half, placed centrally in front of the stage, was a rectangular table with small flags of the DRC where the judges sat. On each side of the judges’ table were big round tables where “VIP” guests were placed. In the second half,

further from the stage, there were four rows of chairs, with twenty-four seats each, for “standard” guests. The ballroom could approximately accommodate two hundred and fifty individuals.

While waiting for the full guest list to arrive, waitresses were serving snacks and encouraging attendees to buy drinks and traditional Congolese dinner dishes at the ballroom bar. DJs on stage were playing very loud Congolese music and images advertising London-based Congolese businesses and charitable groups were projected onto a white screen. Logos and adds from the organisational team’s groups were displayed, such as *Disk and Jockey Entertainment*, *The Voice of Congo*, *Save the Congo* and *She’s King Empire* as well as from other sponsors such as *Flora by Grace* (2019),¹³⁹ *Luv Events* (2019),¹⁴⁰ *The ‘Boss Brothers* (2019)¹⁴¹ and *Airwane* (2019).¹⁴²

In interview Luke confirmed that the event was sold out and attended by both generations of London Congolese. These were mainly family members and friends as well as community leaders and businesspeople who had come to support contestants for the title. Attendees at my table¹⁴³ included, for example, a middle-aged Congolese woman with her teenage daughter and girlfriend; and a young Congolese man and woman, between twenty-five to twenty-seven years old, who recently moved from Brussels to study in London. Members of the audience also included individuals from other Black/African diasporas such as Nigerians, Ghanaians, Jamaicans, Caribbeans, Ugandans, and Sierra Leoneans. The VIP table behind mine was, for instance, occupied by a Nigerian family, who had spread the flag of Nigeria as their tablecloth. As said by

¹³⁹ A Congolese, Camden-based organisation which provides services ranging from weddings and birthdays planning to tailoring, fitting curtains, and hair dressing.

¹⁴⁰ A Congolese, London-based, events planner (e.g. music concerts, fashion shows, weddings, baptisms, funerals birthdays, bachelor parties etc.).

¹⁴¹ A Congolese television channel and media company running weekly programmes on various topics (e.g. music, religion etc.) with invited special guests and with the aim to be the chain of connection between the Congolese diaspora and the DRC.

¹⁴² A Congolese, London-based, branding agency which provides graphic, web, and print designs.

¹⁴³ I was the only European at the event and I was given a VIP place by Luke, despite having a regular ticket.

Luke, the presence of other Black African communities demonstrated that beauty pageants are lived as a reciprocal way to support each other's professional and cultural achievements, while the lack of Europeans was also mentioned. In Luke's words: "We also go to other African pageant shows when they invite us but there are no British at our events. I think this year you were the only European. You know, they don't really like this type of stuff which is quite sad because I think it would be a great opportunity for them to come and understand our community" (Interview: 21 April 2017).

The final gala night commenced with an hour's delay and continued for about six hours. The competition followed a standard format of segments similar to other beauty pageants. Traditional wear catwalks, a talent show, questions and answers, an evening gown catwalk ending with the winner's coronation. In addition to the young contestants' appearances, performances, and speeches, music concerts and a poetry recital also took place, together with short speeches by the former *Miss Congo UK*, other African beauty queens, members of the audience and those promoting upcoming Congolese events.¹⁴⁴

The night opened with the appearance of the three hosts on stage: two young Congolese women, who also run the training process, and a young Congolese man. They warmed up the audience with a short description of the event, mostly presenting in English, with some rare injections of French, and interestingly joking about using some "Linglish" (Lingala and English) words too. As a form of entertainment, they travelled between VIP tables with microphones to present some guests. The first VIP table to be in the spotlight was the closest to the stage, where winners of other competitions were sited, such as Congo France, Miss RDC Internationale 2017, as well as Miss Uganda UK, Miss Ghana UK, Miss and Mr Nigeria UK, Miss Diamond in London, Miss Pride

¹⁴⁴ For example, *The Best of Congo Awards* (2019), an annual ceremony which acknowledges the contribution of some Congolese professionals' and their achievements for the community. At the 2017 ceremony, held in Ealing, West London, the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* team received several collective and personal awards.

of Africa UK 2016, Miss 2nd Runner Up, Miss Teen Africa, and Miss Black Africa in Britain. Each queen was briefly introduced by the hosts, as documented on the event Facebook Page (2017d), while a few more minutes were given to Miss Congo UK 2016, Lucrèce, to share her experiences of the past reign. The hosts then continued talking to other members of the audience.

Finally, the three invited judges were introduced (2017d): Benjamin Kitoko, a young male Congolese fashion designer, Marie-Claire Idikayi, a young female Congolese co-founder of *Congo Fashion Week*,¹⁴⁵ and the political activist Vava Tampa who had also guided the training process. In interview Luke explained that the selection of the judges was mostly based on their professional contribution to the community, potentially offering a collaboration with the selected queen. Together with his commitment to the diaspora, the presence of Vava Tampa was meant to guarantee an “insider” point of view on the contestants.

In interview, Luke highlighted that young women’s conduct throughout the training had the same importance as the final performance in determining the winner.

We do write a report for each girl at the end of the months to show their behaviours, attendance, general participation to the workshops and passion. Then we give it to the judges... so the girls can be brilliant during the night but if they were not consistent, if they were not attending some of the rehearsals the judges will know that the contestant is not gonna be a good queen because she is not gonna be able to attend or respect deadlines for the collaborations etc. (...) During the first years the queens selected were not good to work with. It was very difficult to deal with them because after winning their personalities changed, the fame got to their heads and they started to do things that were not in line with our brand. This is why we decided to document the entire journey to select the right person to work with. Of course, the performance on the night does count because the audience is there to enjoy, so the winner has to be good at both! (Interview: 21 April 2017)

This holistic approach, developed from previous negative experiences, aimed to guarantee the selection of the queen and future “ambassador” of the young diaspora not only based on her performance at the finals, but especially on her consistency and

¹⁴⁵ Her *biography* and *story* are outlined in chapter six, where the *Congo Fashion Week* case study is analysed.

discipline demonstrated during the months of training and her ability to get involved with the community.

5.2.2 Embodying ethnic “authenticity” and performing racial and national sense of belonging

The official competition began with the hosts announcement of the nine contestants’ arrival on the scene. The lights were turned down to create excitement as young women made their first appearance in the ballroom from the main door-entrance. With their heads and hips wrapped in African wax-print fabrics of the same colours and patterns, they stood still in line for a few minutes with their left arms raised towards the ceiling and their fists closed. Slowly, the contestants traversed the ballroom performing a lightly choreographed parade, following Congolese music rhythms, smiling broadly, and throwing colourful confetti to the audience. The first and the last young woman in the parade were waving wide DRC flags. Emotional participation was also emphasised through bodily practices performed by the audience, who stood up and enthusiastically encouraged the contenders with applause, whistles, cheering whoops, and with the use of small carnival toy trumpets. Once on stage, contestants performed the ten-minute traditional dance choreography learned during their training. By the end of their performance, documented on the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* Facebook Page (2017f) and cited here as a form of creative production, they stood in a line up and were asked by the hosts to introduce themselves and to briefly explain why they had decided to participate.

The contenders then reappeared several times on stage walking individually down the catwalk with their personalised sash. They were firstly adorned in traditional wear, with garments made from African wax-prints, differently tailored from one another, both in casual and elegant styles. This segment also included the traditional swimsuit catwalk, with contestants wearing Congolese-styled bikinis composed of thigh

shorts and singlets and designed with African wax-print fabrics. Their confident bodily behaviours during catwalks coincided with the rhythms of Congolese music played in the background, before they stopped for a few seconds in the middle of the stage to be observed and photographed.¹⁴⁶ Kyle, a twenty-seven-year-old Congolese man sitting at my table explained: “the way our girls are moving is the typical *sapeur* catwalk!” (Interview: 1 April 2017), as analysed in chapter three.

Catwalks were interspersed with a music performance by a male Congolese singer, defined by some members of the audience as a *sapeur*. He sang a song in French while dancing, and during informal conversation that night, he pointed out that he had travelled to London from Belgium expressly to perform at the 2017 finals. The traditional segment concluded with contestants re-assembling together in a row and being asked to specify to which Congolese ethnic groups they belonged and to describe some characteristics of each social group. Ethnic pride was also shared by members of the audience who, alternatively, loudly supported the young woman who represented their group.

The pageant continued with the talent show segment, opened by thirty-one-year-old British Congolese man JJ Bola. He is a well-established poet, writer, educator, and political activist of the young community and that evening he performed one of his spoken word pieces, *Something Beautiful*:

Something beautiful is happening.
Right here, right now, in this room.
Lifting the gloom from our consciousness,
like when the light of the moon
reflects off open water into the night.
Something beautiful is happening.
Caterpillar to butterfly, rose blossom,
spring bloom. Two star crossed lovers' eyes

¹⁴⁶ Interestingly, the dance performance and bikini segment of Miss RDC 2017 held in Paris, and documented on Facebook (2018), took a very different shape. All the young Congolese contestants entered the stage wearing high heels and bespoke coats which were progressively opened up, and finally taken off, to show Western-style bikinis underneath, while performing a Western pop dance choreography to a Britney Spears song.

meet for the first time from across the room.
 I dreamed, when I was two, my grandmother sat me
 on her knee and said *mokili oyo ezali ya yo
 na maloba na yo oko komisa yango kitoko*.¹⁴⁷
 And just like you, I didn't understand what was
 she said, but the feeling stayed with me
 and when I got older, I asked my father and he
 replied your grandmother talked because she
 didn't have much time left.
 I haven't seen her since,
 but wherever she is, she stays with me.
 A woman that I never knew.
 On that day,
 something beautiful happened.
 When I first wrote poetry, the ground no
 longer knew the weight of my feet.
 I felt my soul rise,
 eternally. My footprints
 were erased from the earth's memory.
 I started at infinity and retraced my steps
 back to the beginning,
 so, I knew both where I was going
 and where I had come from.
 Where I belong,
 to the constellation of dying stars
 whose light does not shine bright enough
 for this world to see.
 Because like the universe, I am mostly darkness,
 and darkness dwells alone,
 in the corners of dimly lit rooms
 or the backs of your mind.
 Darkness is unknown, undiscovered,
 unrelenting. (Bola, 2015)

The piece is taken from JJ Bola's third published book, a poetry collection entitled *WORD* (Bola, 2015), which includes thirty poems mainly exploring his diasporic experience. JJ Bola arrived in London from the DRC as a refugee with his family when he was six, in 1992, obtaining British citizenship in 2007. His spoken word poetry represents an expression of literary activism aiming to encourage refugee voices and rights. Stigma and stereotypical ideas against refugees are more easily deconstructed when people start to hear to actual voices (Godin and Doná, 2016).

¹⁴⁷ English translation: "The world is yours, in your words you can make it beautiful".

As JJ Bola explained during an interview conducted by *Africa Wrap Rewind*¹⁴⁸ and published on the *BlackRook Media* YouTube channel (2017),¹⁴⁹ he preferred using poetry, over rap, to narrate his story to break down “limitations that people have about what is associated with poetry and who it belongs to (...) It is often seen as Western Eurocentric middle-class art and is not that at all!”. In discussing the book *WORD*, he stated that it was inspired by his specific story, released during Refugee Week, in June 2015, as a statement to raise awareness of the ordinary experiences and the contributions that refugees “have made to the planet”. Poetry represents an attempt to challenge, transform and “humanise” the stigmatised narrative on refugees portrayed by the mainstream media. In sharing his everyday experiences, he aims to show that refugees “are people who live around us”, connecting individuals from different origins, races, or beliefs.

Accordingly, the poem that JJ Bola chose to perform in the pageant context reflects a story of self-discovery, delineating his diasporic transnational trajectory. From the dreamed attachment to the homeland where he encounters his Congolese grandmother in his imagination to his perpetual search for identity in conversation with his Congolese father in London. He is aware of having partially lost his Congolese, Black African roots, highlighting his inability to understand the native language, Lingala, while addressing the problem to many other young Congolese in the audience who probably share similar feelings. The figure of his grandmother could also be interpreted as a metaphorical reference to the “myth of Mama Africa”, the collective idea that the ancestral African continent exists as a nurturing spirit inside every Black individual (de Santana Pinho, 2010). The narrative poetry plays a symbolic connecting role with African cultural memories while also echoing a conflicting “double consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903), of being both Black African and British in one body.

¹⁴⁸ A Nigerian London-based TV channel with a focus on African contents.

¹⁴⁹ A broadcast and production consultancy specialised in making television programmes.

JJ Bola's performance during the pageant could be described as a multi-sensory experience, emphasised by his tall and strong bodily presence, the escalation and sudden drop of the tone of his voice, the very fast or very concise pace of his reading, and the gesture of his right hand often close to the chest. In so doing, JJ Bola probably aimed to resonate a collective transnational narrative, performing for the Black African community, defining his own racial and ethnic identities (Craig, 2002).

Once JJ Bola left the stage, the nine contestants were then individually reintroduced by the hosts for the talent show segment. Each young woman was allotted fifteen to twenty-five minutes to perform their acts, elaborated and rehearsed during the training. These, documented on the event Facebook Page (2017j, 2017k), ranged from singing to spoken word poetry, and stand-up comedy to dramatic monologue.¹⁵⁰ A few contestants performed songs which they perceived as significant, in English often mixed with French and Lingala. For example, in introducing her performance, Stacey Loseke explained that her song was produced in 1960, the same year as Congolese independence, experiencing it as a symbolic representation of change for Congolese people. Another contestant re-entered the ballroom from the main entrance, walked towards the stage, sat on a chair and began to perform a dramatic monologue, written by herself, which addressed mental health issues among Congolese women in the homeland and its diasporas. The talent show segment concluded with the music performance of another male Congolese singer and once again defined by Congolese at my table as a *sapeur* for the dark shades he was wearing. He danced and sang a song in English, and in conversation he told me he was based in Paris and was currently on a short music tour in the UK.

After a brief intermission, the nine young women made another appearance on stage, this time for the question and answer segment. Judges addressed questions to

¹⁵⁰ A spoken word poetry and a monologue performed by two of the contestants are analysed later in this chapter.

each contestant mostly concerning the homeland, such as history, geography, politics, religion, gender empowerment, cultural production, charitable work, and future plans. Some contenders were asked, for instance, to remember the number and the names of all the neighbouring states bordering with the DRC, to explain the reasons behind the capital of Kinshasa's (DRC) and the capital of Brazzaville's (Republic of Congo) geographical proximity,¹⁵¹ while others were asked to give personal opinions on why the DRC has not yet had a woman as President or describe who was the religious leader, Kimpa Vita.¹⁵² The last common question addressed to all was to explain individual action plans if they were crowned as winners.

The pageant segments described above clearly attempted to present a night of cultural "authenticity" (McAllister, 1996) through fashion and beauty practices, with the "authentic" notion relating to how cultural identities are constructed in the present (Schackt, 2005). Sets of traditional Congolese cultural practices and knowledge, such as the display of folk fashion clothes, dance movements, poetry enacted and discussions of key information regarding the homeland, were "preserved" and "reinvigorated" (Schackt, 2005) by the contestants and other performers, and exercised within a communal gaze (King O'Riain, 2008).

¹⁵¹ The proximity and rivalry between the two African capitals lies in colonial roots, when the capitals were established in the nineteenth century. The French and the Belgian colonial empires were competing for the conquest of the strategical geographical area, the last possible point where ivory, rubber and other goods could be carried by ships on the Congo river and the best spot to build railways to the Atlantic Ocean. When France founded the capital city of Brazzaville on the northern bank of the Congo river, in 1880, King Leopold II ordered his own explorer Henry Morton Stanley, both presented in chapter one, to establish Léopoldville on the southern Congo river bank, in 1881 (Pakenham, 2015). The legacy of European imperialism has brought these twin capitals to be the symbol of the current strong competition between the two Congos (Burke, 2017).

¹⁵² Kimpa Vita was a Congolese woman who lived between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She founded and lead the Antonian Movement, a mass Christian and political movement with thousands of followers, which aimed to end a long-lasting civil war and restore the broken monarchy of the Kingdom of Kongo, presented in chapter one. It also represented a popular movement which fought against the slave trade. The Antonian movement was violently suppressed and Kimpa Vita was burned as heretic in 1706 (Thornton, 1998b).

In displaying a spectacle that had many “authentic” elements of the Congolese heritage, organisers and performers satisfied audience expectations that they were taking part in an “originary” *story*. The staged performance of racialised and ethnicised bodies became allegorical signifiers of a Congolese cultural identity as well as of a communal Black African selfhood. The finals were designed to represent and celebrate the very essence of what it means to be Congolese, African and Black in the diaspora, therefore produced as a vehicle to reclaim a transnational narrative of everyday experiences.

5.2.3 Constructing “feminine” and “masculine” roles while promoting gender equality

The last segment of the show before the final results involved the evening gown catwalk. Each of the young women re-emerged on stage wearing very elegant, floor-length Western style dresses, each different from the others. For the first and only time, the young women were accompanied by young Congolese men who were also elegantly dressed in different Western-style suits, collared shirts, and neckties. The “idealised couples”, with their garments, slowly displayed their formal looks on the catwalk, pausing at the centre of the stage for a few seconds to be photographed and observed by the judges and the audience.

The performance and performativity of clearly defined “femininity” and “womanhood”, portraying a heteronormative perspective, were publicly constructed by the nine contestants throughout the duration of the evening. A set of “feminine” skills, such as the ways of walking, the bodies postures and grooming, hand gestures, facial expressions, and etiquette were performed on stage. “Feminine” and “masculine” heterosexual performative roles were also reinforced by other performers and by the three hosts who themselves changed their elegant garments more than once during the show. At the same time, a gendered distinction and related beautifying practices were

also collectively performed off-stage. Symbolic of this was the first VIP table, where all the winners of other beauty competitions were “femininely” seated, wearing elegant, tight, and floor-length gala dresses, complete with high heels and pronounced facial makeup. “Diamond” tiaras and sashes were also exhibited as accessories. Both the ballroom and the outside spaces, such as the entrance hall and corridors, were populated with men, women and children of all ages wearing their finest, well-coordinated, evening garments.

While marking conventional “feminine” and “masculine” bodily gestures and aesthetic appearances based on an heteronormative performativity (Oberhauser et al., 2017), the concern for gender inequality was simultaneously, although *conflictingly*, extended into the realm of the beauty pageant. As discussed previously, the pageant training deployed a “liberal, feminist discourse” (Crawford et al., 2008) which aimed to empower young Congolese women and to encourage self-confidence and self-esteem. The finals also partially reflected the subjectivity of each Congolese young woman. In so doing, conservative female roles persisting within the older Black African diaspora were in some way challenged, even though a heteronormative gender distinction was re-proposed.

In debating gender roles within the community, Lucrèce expressed:

Congolese parents are known to be strict with their children but one thing that I realised is that they are a lot more strict with girls than boys. In my household or other Congolese households, girls always have to help to take care of the house, cleaning, cooking etc., we must learn how to look after our household while boys are not obliged to do that! This is something that we always discuss with my friends and we see the fact that within the community boys would get away with many more things than girls. A girl would be treated differently, badly, in doing the exact same thing as a boy! You know, I think this is because older women have fear or it's just the way they were brought up in the Congo and they want to pass the same values to us. (Interview: 25 May 2017)

A similar experience was described in interview by the winner of the 2017 competition, Horcelie Sinda Wa Mbongo. She is a twenty-two-year-old Congolese student, with interests in photography and filmmaking, who received a foundation degree in Fine Arts

from Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London in 2016 and a BA from the Chelsea College of Arts. While waiting to embark on her MA studies, she works part-time as class assistant at elementary and secondary schools as well as a receptionist. Horcelie was born and spent her childhood in Kinshasa. She came straight to London from the DRC in 2004 at the age of nine, with her parents, four brothers and one sister. The family moved to find new educational, professional, and financial opportunities, and, finally, “to find stability”. For similar reasons, most of her extended family is now settled in Angola, France, Belgium, Germany, and Canada. For the last thirteen years she has been living in South East London, in different locations but always in the borough of Greenwich (Interview: 19 June 2017). While discussing gender roles in interview Horcelie explained:¹⁵³

Most Congolese are Christians and there is the perspective that the man is the head of the family and he is the one who makes the decisions and when a man says something the woman can’t object to him. Many older women fear their husbands because a lot of men use their authority to suppress women, so instead of loving the husband they fear him, and they can’t say anything, and can’t object to what he says and always have to obey to what he says. (Interview: 19 June 2017)

Despite a conflicting performance of “femininity” and “masculinity” at the finals that seemed to some extent patriarchal and “old-fashioned” (Faria, 2013), the male organisers claimed to be rejecting hegemonic practices of “manhood” and “masculinity” promoted by the older community, which rely on possessiveness and authoritarianism.

In Luke’s words:

To be a man in my community you must be authoritarian, you have to be strong, you have to have money, means and definitely a good job, you have to dress well, you have to have a nice car...it is not really focused on the intellect but is mostly about appearances. A lot of old Congolese men, but also some of the youngest, want to keep women under them, want to be dominant, they want women to stay at home, they don’t like independent women, they are afraid of free-thinking women, they would rather have women that they can manipulate. This issue is still ongoing and deep for older generations where almost all women are dominated by men. Men are the forefront of everything even though I met extremely intelligent women. Everything women do, the men push them down,

¹⁵³ Horcelie’s story will be further analysed later in this chapter.

they don't want them to speak! This goes also to the fact that the majority of Congolese old women are not educated enough, not integrated into London society. When they came, they didn't make enough effort to learn English, to attend universities or colleges to learn. They still use Lingala during daily life, and they don't integrate. So, when you have a man that goes to work and brings home the money, he inevitably becomes a dictator like Mobutu. He tells you what to do and what to expect. But this issue is also very bad for us because when people talk about Congolese women, they say that they are lazy, they are not integrated, they are not intelligent! (Interview: 21 April 2017)

Luke pointed out the necessity of promoting Congolese women's independence.

Younger women have a different mindset, they see things differently and now some of them are waking up, the society of London has given them more power, they are embracing the feminist movement, they want their qualities to be recognised, which is good. They are starting to become more ambitious but there is still a vast majority which is still not striving to do better for themselves, to make their own way as women. They are not seeking their equality! (Interview: 21 April 2017)

Regarding slow improvements among the younger generation, Horcelie's ordinary experience in the metropolis was highlighted as follows:

Girls who grow up in London are realising that a woman can be a mother, a sister, a housewife but still work hard to find her own identity. Young Congolese women now are recognising their rights to have a good education, to say no and stand up against their husbands, but the stereotypes of Congolese women being housewives who are good at cooking, cleaning or being at home earlier than their brothers are still there. It really depends on how you were raised at home, what your mum, your father and siblings told you that determines how you define yourself as a woman in general, in society but also within the community. But despite all of this, despite the ways people have been raised some Congolese have a greater persona which has developed differently from the family. Young girls are working hard, and they don't just want to have children, they want to have good career achievements, they want to build their own businesses, they are entrepreneurs, they are doing stuff for themselves now. For example, I know some young Congolese women who do sports professionally which is something unacceptable to the older generation or, in my case, I really want to open my own art gallery. Older women thirty years ago did not have the same opportunities or the rights as much as we do, so now we are trying hard to build a platform of responsibilities for ourselves and the next generation as well because we are not gonna be young forever! (Interview: 19 June 2017)

Accordingly, the space of the pageant tried to promote new notions of "womanhood" based on young women's independence and education as well as new perceptions of "manhood" based on sustaining women's rights. By showcasing young Congolese women's agency and valuing their voices in a public arena, both the training and the

finals sought to open a generational distinction within the diaspora. The gender representations of educated, professional, creative, open-minded contestants attempted to move beyond a well-established patriarchal system in the Congolese Black African group and committed to an improvement on gender equality. However, the final performance spectacle revealed once again a strong *conflicting* dimension since it publicly endorsed performative acts, such as gender-specific bodily gestures and fashion appearances which strictly reiterated gender heteronormative roles among young London Congolese. Therefore, in contrast to what has been strongly claimed by the people involved, the pageant, some can argue, kept reproducing the commodification of young women's bodies and nationalist gender expectations as part of a new, equally oppressive, patriarchal system.

5.2.4 Crowning a queen with “a cause to fight for”: a symbolic statement towards a cultural change

With a throne in the middle of the stage, the contest came to a conclusion as all pageant organisers, judges, former *Miss Congo UK* winners, other beauty queens and hosts clambered on stage to announce the final results. As reported on the event Facebook Page (2017a), the nine contestants were individually re-introduced in their evening gowns, and five of them were rewarded with flowers and symbolically awarded specific sashes of “Miss Best Talent”, “Miss Popular” and “Miss Personality”, followed by the final runners-up being honoured as “Second” and “First” Princesses 2017. Finally, the new queen was officially announced, as documented on Facebook (2017b, 2017c). While receiving flowers and sitting on her throne, Horcelie was crowned by former queen Lucrèce, who passed onto the head of the new queen the “diamond” tiara symbolising the reign. As the new “ambassador” of the young Congolese community was identified, many members of the audience climbed on to the stage, dancing, singing, kissing, and taking selfies with their new queen.

Predictable scripted behaviours and bodily practices were standardly performed both on stage and off stage. This included holding hands, crying tears of joy (no tears of discontent permitted, it is not “lady-like”) among contestants, while cheering (never booing) and appearing “shocked and pleased” when the queen was announced to the audience (King O’Riain, 2008). However, the final public crowning of *Miss Congo UK 2017* symbolised a much broader socio-cultural political significance. Being affected by the HIV virus and well-focused on her “cause to fight for”, the winner embodied a quite controversial mentality and cultural shift among young London Congolese. The queen was chosen not only as a symbol of “authentic” culture but also as a symbol of cultural progress.

In interview Horcelie explained her biography, being born HIV positive through mother-to-child transmission. On arrival in London, her mother was found to be seropositive for HIV and Horcelie was as the only child among her siblings to be affected. She only discovered her health status during her second year in London. In remembering her childhood experience in London, Horcelie explained:

When I was ten, I started to drink a liquid medicine every morning before going to school. I was also going in and out of hospital and I had no idea why. But when I turned eleven, one day I went to a big hospital and all of a sudden, I was lead into a room and I saw my mum was left outside the room and that’s when I sat down and a nurse began to speak with me about what HIV was and at that age I had no idea. The word ‘seropositive’ I never knew what it was, I only knew the word SIDA which is AIDS in French but never heard about HIV. So she just kept on explaining ‘this is what HIV is, this is what does to your body’ and all of a sudden she paused, she looked into my eyes and that’s when I asked her ‘that means that I have it?’ and she said ‘yes’, that was when I learned I had HIV. (Interview: 19 June 2017)

While discussing her memories and everyday life experience, Horcelie explained that she had to keep her health issue confidential for quite a long time especially due to Congolese parents’ mentality.

I knew I had something that was a lot different and very heavy compared to all my Congolese and other African friends at school but none of them knew what it was. I did not want to tell them ‘cause they would go to tell to their Congolese mums and they would start with a lack of trust (...) My mum also told me that I couldn’t

tell people because she knew about the stigma and the fear. Congolese know that HIV and AIDS exists but what they don't know is the right information. So, when you tell them that you have got it, they are immediately 'gonna think that you are going to die. (Interview: 19 June 2017)

Resulting from her life history, Horcelie is today a health and HIV and AIDS campaigner within the Black African diaspora in London. She began her journey as a volunteer in 2016 through the *International Citizen Service Project* which lasted nine months and included a placement fieldwork in a South African village. Once Horcelie was back to London, she began a collaboration with the *Restless Development* charity,¹⁵⁴ and participating in the pageant served as part of the ICS requirement to receive the final certificate. Her aim as a volunteer and contestant was to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS in the Congolese and the Black African diaspora in London: “this is why I did *Miss Congo*, to be able to see a change and to be myself an active part of that change!” (Interview: 19 June 2017). Horcelie revealed her health status to the pageant group during the training, when each participant was asked to write a motivational speech, to describe themselves and anything that they found challenging in their lives. She then organised some internal workshops with a focus on HIV and AIDS for the team and sent the material to the *Restless Development* charity to gain the ICS credentials.

During the talent show segment of the finals, Horcelie performed a semi-autobiographical play, written by herself. The play was set in a secondary school in Kinshasa and was acted out in collaboration with other two seventeen-year-old Black African girls, affiliated to Horcelie's church. The first scene included the appearance into the ballroom and on stage of the three young women interpreting fifteen-year-old classmates during an ordinary day at school. They were all dressed in female school uniforms composed of white shirts and knee length dark blue skirts. The play's dialogue

¹⁵⁴ *Restless Development* is a charity working across the world in Africa, Asia, the UK and the USA, with its mission helping young people to have a voice and make lasting change in their communities.

revealed that the young girl played by Horcelie was experiencing verbal abuse and discrimination for her health condition by the two schoolmates.

The second scene of the play portrayed Horcelie reciting a monologue, *The gift of time as suffering*:

The day time stood still was the day I knew myself well. It was then I saw everything I missed. It was then I heard every beating of my heart. And every beat reminded me it was time to be healed. For when time is divided it reveals to man the things in life doesn't show. And so it is, time treat us all differently. For some kindly and others harshly. And at times tearful for us all. And forgiveness, oh forgiveness tears us all apart. When time is asking you and I to forgive it is difficult to surrender to it freely. But even if it means crying, I must cry. Even if it means dying, I must die. For the death of every man is his pride. Time whispered in my ears, though they've done you wrong you must forgive. For the death of every man is his pride. Though it has caused you grief, you must forgive because the death of every man is his pride. *Kombo na nga Horcelie. Ba boti na nga ba kolisa nga na maloba oyo; kozongisa mabe na mabe te. Libisa ba oyo ba sala yo mabe. Mwana tango abotamaka na pasi ayebaka pasi te.*¹⁵⁵ Through pain a child is conceived but pain is not known to the child. What I'm trying to say? In this human life pain is inevitable but a gift to the human soul. A gift to the wise, a gift to the poor, a gift of mine. This innocent cry of a new-born child is my new beginning, the definition of my name.

Hi, my name is Horcelie Sinda Wa Mbongo and I am one among other 2.5 million children in Africa that were born HIV positive. My bravery is not telling you that I am positive, but my bravery is that I chose to live as HIV positive woman and for that, therefore, I am a very vulnerable woman.¹⁵⁶

Horcelie's performance aimed to describe the everyday experiences, signed by many difficulties, of living with HIV in Africa and among its diasporas. It emphasised how HIV positive Congolese and Black African individuals are still victims of a deep social stigma which results in bullying and discriminatory behaviour, bringing suffering and isolation from a young age. Horcelie's final poem also embodied a spiritual message, referring to the role played by Christian beliefs in her life and the significance of learning how to truly forgive. Performing on stage, in her own narrative, became a form of prayer.

¹⁵⁵ English translation: "My name is Horcelie. My parents taught me this lesson; not to seek revenge. But there is so much pain. Through pain a child is conceived but pain is not known to their child."

¹⁵⁶ The text was obtained in communication with Horcelie via WhatsApp, on the 2 December 2017.

In the play, Horcelie alluded more precisely to her own childhood experience of social discrimination in the DRC. She remembered what school peers have said or done to her during childhood when she was not aware of her condition.

We had no idea I was positive, but some spots started to appear on my skin and I remember a morning I went to school, and I was early and when you are early for school in the Congo you have to follow a long pair queue where you have to stand beside one girl or one boy and wait to get in. That morning I remember nobody wanted to stand next to me and they were saying stuff about my spots and they thought they would catch the same and they did not want any contact with me. At the time I did not know it was HIV, but I remember no one would play with me at school. So, I had to stay at home for one or two months until all the spots kind of disappeared. I did no blood test in the Congo, I don't know if it was because my mum couldn't afford it or because everyone kept telling me that it was nothing and they called it Bakoko. So, traditionally they would take a rock which is in Kinshasa and is called *libanga ya jaune* which means yellow rock and they would crash it down to make a sort of yellow liquid and they would add water and other herbal stuff. They called it an herbal healing and that's what they did with me, they put this cream onto my skin and the spots surprisingly disappeared after a while. I don't know how but they did! Only when I grew up I realised the reason why I had those spots on my skin. (Interview: 19 June 2017)

Similar memories of verbal and physical segregation experienced in the Congo were re-evoked in the first scene of the play, when the two classmates derogatively described Horcelie's character as "the girl with AIDS", mentioning they had to wash their hands after touching her or to avoid touching or speaking to her for fear of catching the disease. Significantly, the spectacle of the pageant represented a platform to finally disclose her disease to friends and relatives who were not aware of it.

I never thought about the beauty aspect and in general I always thought that beauty pageants are generally fake, and all my Congolese friends were actually asking me 'why are you doing a beauty pageant? You know how Congolese stuff is?!' but they didn't know about my HIV problem and I was just telling them 'but, you know, I really want to work with the community, so the best way is to do *Miss Congo* because they work with people, with charities and that can connect me with the work I did in South Africa' (...) After the *Miss Congo* night I received phone call after phone call from everyone. One thing that I realised is that if I had told them when I was younger, they would have rejected me out of fear, or better their parents would have told them to reject me! So, I am glad they know only now. (Interview: 19 June 2017)

Some discovered Horcelie's story at the finals and others after hearing her interviews with *Africa BBC* and *BBC Afrique* (2017). These online reports were discussed

internationally, not only in the UK but also in Denmark, Michigan (US), Makurdi (Nigeria), Sierra Leone, Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) and Doha (Qatar).

The beauty pageant represented a battlefield for Horcelie to articulate cultural and political agency.¹⁵⁷ Winning it and being in the “spotlight” for some time acted as a reinforced metaphorical springboard for her campaign on raising local and global awareness on AIDS and HIV and speaking about her story. She is now part of the *Save the Congo* team and her mission as Congolese symbolic “ambassador” is to actively participate in talk shows, volunteering activities and church cultural events organised by and outside the community in London, Manchester, Birmingham, etc. In October 2017, Horcelie was, for instance, a speaker (2017a) at the launch of the *Positive Faith* website from the Catholics for AIDS Prevention and Support (CAPS),¹⁵⁸ which addressed HIV and Christianity in the UK. In November 2017, Horcelie took part in the 5th Anniversary event (2017) of the non-profit Congolese organisation, *Revive Congo*.¹⁵⁹ Currently, Horcelie is one of the campaigners for the UK youth-led movement *Youth Stop AIDS*.¹⁶⁰ She was one of the four HIV positive speakers for the “UK Speaker Tour campaign” (2017b), which included discussing the global HIV/AIDS epidemic with various government bodies and UK universities. Additionally, Horcelie’s story and volunteering work was featured in Black African and other magazines in support of her campaign. She, for example, figured as model on the cover page and was interviewed by *Mambo*, issue 19 – winter 2017, published as part of HIV Prevention campaigns in England. She was also featured in *Metro Magazine* (Mills, 2017) and *Huck Magazine* (Segalov,

¹⁵⁷ This is also the case for other beauty pageants around the world. For example, *Miss Peru 2017* where contestants denounced violence against women, listing hard-hitting statistics in the South American country, instead of stating their body measurements (Collyns, 2017, BBC News, 2017).

¹⁵⁸ A network of Catholics in Britain and Ireland promoting HIV prevention and support.

¹⁵⁹ Mentioned in chapter two.

¹⁶⁰ A network of young people across the UK dedicated to engaging governments, global institutions, and corporations in regard to HIV and AIDS issues.

2017), as well as being nominated by NAZ charity, for a *nOSCARS*¹⁶¹ Black African Caribbean award 2017, to acknowledge her work on HIV and AIDS activism (2017).

Furthermore, in 2018, Horcelie founded a Congolese health and wellbeing community organisation, *Lobiko ya Congo*,¹⁶² based on educational lectures to open the discussion not only on HIV/AIDS but also on mental health, sickle cell disease, diabetes, disabilities, etc. affecting the Black African diaspora.¹⁶³ *Lobiko ya Congo*'s first event took place at the Waterloo Action Centre, on 13 January 2018, attended by a small group of Congolese such as Horcelie's mother, siblings, friends, and relatives with their children, and a few other Ghanaian and Nigerian friends. It involved a three-hour panel discussion, chaired by Horcelie and led by two middle-aged Congolese women, a food consultant and a gynaecologist, and a young South African HIV positive woman. These were invited to discuss the importance of having correct nutrition in preventing or solving health issues, to illustrate their charity work in the DRC, to share experiences of self-stigmatisation, to denounce the Congolese diaspora's stigmatisation and exclusion of HIV positive individuals and how London Congolese parishes should begin to advocate sexual health together with marriage values.

Horcelie's aim in her everyday life is to fight the socio-cultural stigma, fear and shame associated with the illness and to open up a well-informed conversation about it among the Black African community. In another of Horcelie's memories:

When I was fundraising (...) and knocking house by house, there was a Congolese woman who used to come to my church (...) I went [to her house] to explain what kind of job I was doing, and she told me that one of her friends died of AIDS (...) She discovered that she was HIV positive when everyone in the church community was spreading the news through gossiping, instead of helping that person. They were throwing knives at the person. There is a lack of empathy, sincerity! People heard that she contracted HIV from her husband even before she [herself] knew about it. It came into her ears through that gossip and she said it

¹⁶¹ A sexual health charity providing support specifically to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities in London. The *nOSCARS* ceremony celebrates the achievements of people working with NAZ.

¹⁶² English translation: *Aid for Congo*.

¹⁶³ From communications with Horcelie via WhatsApp, on 10 January 2018.

wasn't true and that she trusted her husband and she never went to the doctors until one day she just died. That lady died because of the community discrimination, because no one was there to support her. So, people contract HIV, but they don't wanna know about it (...) they'd rather die, even when they are very young (...) Congolese immediately assume that with AIDS you die and some commit suicide because of it. They need to learn that you can actually live more than others! (Interview: 19 June 2017)

In addition, taking care of personal health is also stigmatised and quite uncommon in the Black African diaspora:

It is a shame to go to the clinic. People would brag about how many people they have slept with, but nobody would say if they went to the doctors. Even the ones who go, they do it very rarely despite being sexually active (...) I understand in the Congo people die because there is no clinic, there are no nurses and there are no health treatments, but here we have the NHS and it's free and you can go anytime. (Interview: 19 June 2017)

Therefore, Horcelie's symbolic coronation at the pageant as a leading "ambassador" of the young London Congolese community *metaphorically* (Marcus, 1995) signified a willingness from the organisers and judges to trace a counter-story on how to deal with HIV/AIDS issues, therefore portraying a forward-thinking narrative of the young London Congolese community.

5.2.5 Questioning the community's ideologies and trying to subvert global standards of beauty

In opposition to many national and international pageants which request participants to meet quantifiable bodily measurements, such as specific heights, weights and, sizes, bodily specifications were one of the least important aspects required to participate in *Miss Congo UK* and to be selected as queen of the year. The Congolese competition thereby criticised the strict boundaries placed on women's bodies in standard pageants (Oberhauser et al., 2017), demonstrating that international beauty concepts should include a broader variety of appearance ideals (Balogun, 2012). As Anna's experience testified: "I am 5'10 and quite curvy and I am not typically model or pageant material" (Interview: 15 April 2017).

Although Anna was the only young Congolese woman with a curvaceous body, while all the other contestants were relatively slim, tall, and sporty, her presence, and the claimed openness towards other women with similar shaped bodies, showed the willingness of the organisers to promote diversity and naturalness. Because of the cultural approach as central story behind the pageant, young women were not excluded based on their looks, and selected for their “thinness and tallness”, but rather for their interest to appreciate their Congolese background and to actively influence a progressive mentality within the community. As testified by Horcelie in interview: “we were all different body sizes and that’s what *Miss Congo* is trying to show (...) We had curvy girls, we had some short girls and I am also not tall enough to be a model. [The pageant] mostly [focuses] on how much you want to know about your own community” (Interview: 19 June 2017).

Importantly, *Miss Congo UK*’s inclusivity sought to metaphorically question and practically push forward internally the community’s ideologies on beauty expectations. In conversation with other contestants it emerged that, until recently, the Congolese diaspora’s preferences on women’s appearances have been deeply influenced by Western criteria of beauty, not only concerning body measurements, but also regarding other physical attributes such as skin tonality and hair texture and colour. According to Lucrèce, women with “fair skin and straight hair” have always been considered “more beautiful and attractive” in the DRC and the Congolese European diasporas: “mixed race girls, especially mixed with Whites, have usually been favourite!” (Interview: 25 May 2017). For this reason, older generations of Congolese women and men would commonly bleach their skin using very popular cream products. Lucrèce remembered how stereotypical ideas on skin bleaching in the DRC and its diaspora negatively impacted her self-confidence whilst growing up in London. She brought to light an episode where she was discussing with her Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Ugandan friends an

online advert representing women from various African countries and, beneath each of them, mocking slogans referring to corresponding clichés. Under the Congolese woman the advert said: “all Congolese women bleach”. As Lucrèce recalled: “my friends were repeating that what Congolese women were able to do was bleaching their skin and my problem was that I could not defend myself (...) it hurt me because it was my country they were talking about and there was nothing positive about it in the conversation” (Interview: 25 May 2017).

Lucrèce’s ordinary experience was shared by Victoria Bangu, a young contestant in the 2017 competition. During the talent segment, she performed on stage a five-minute spoken word poem, documented on the *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* Facebook Page (2017j), entitled *You are pretty, but...*, which targeted the skin lightening issue. Its symbolic socio-cultural and political message was to openly persuade the Black African members of the audience to be proud of the beauty of their skin and of their “Blackness” as a whole. Victoria opened her talent act, highlighting to everyone that “no matter what shade you are, you should always know that you are beautiful!” and she continued to recite:

‘You are pretty, but... you’d be prettier if you was lighter!’ he said to me. - I was sixteen then, I am now twenty-four, but those very words are haunting me for the longest of time. - Why is everyone in the Congolese community trying to be yellow? But... do we all have to rock our Black palms? For you see, no matter how light you become and no manner what your tone, your kids when you birth them *bako funda yo!*¹⁶⁴ - How are we to raise our daughters and our sons to appreciate their melanin, appreciate the skin they are in, if we’re yet to understand that beauty is not defined solely by the shade your skin is in, [beauty] is indescribable. - Nah, you’re no pretty for a dark-skinned girl, pretty for a Black girl, ‘cause your beauty cannot be confined, it cannot be defined solely by the colour of your skin, the shade you are in - ‘cause you’re Black, Black is beautiful to a shade that is unrecognisable. For we are coming newer shades, let’s embrace it, proclaim it! (Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK, 2017j)

In accordance with Victoria’s performance, reported above as a form of creative production, several studies demonstrate that skin whitening is a widespread habit which

¹⁶⁴ English translation: “They will tell on you!” or “they will accuse you!”.

extend across races, ethnicities, gender, and age. The use of bleaching cosmetics aims to reduce or interrupt the physiological production of melanic pigmentation of the natural skin (Kamagaju et al., 2016, Abraham, 2017). Despite the severe side effects resulting from the use of skin lightening products,¹⁶⁵ the practice is extensively used in numerous African countries, especially among the dark-skinned sub-Saharan African population,¹⁶⁶ and Black African diasporas in the West (Petit et al., 2006, de Souza, 2008, Thompson, 2014, Kamagaju et al., 2016, Cooper, 2016, Global Industry Analysts, 2017, Abraham, 2017).

This very complex habit results from the collective cultural assumption that, as expressed by Lucrèce, “lighter skin is better than darker skin”, (Interview: 25 May 2017). Giovanni Vassallo underlines that the mass consumption of expensive bleaching cosmetics in the DRC indicates that a big section of the population seems to believe that “whiter” is “more beautiful and healthier”, with light-skinned pop stars such as Beyoncé often taken as a reference point (Vassallo, 2011). These cultural beliefs are deeply reinforced by billboard advertising, print and electronic media messages in Africa which still often portray White-skinned individuals as “icons” of beauty (de Souza, 2008, Cooper, 2016). Thus, the percentage of Congolese people who have experienced collateral effects from voluntary de-pigmentation is very high (Vassallo, 2011).

Contributing reasons to the spread of the concept of skin bleaching throughout the African continent and its diasporas can be found in history and, as a consequence, in individuals’ *cultural memories*:

Memories of historical overtones of colonisation, slavery, discrimination, mistreatment, and colour rating in social class—against dark skin—and better job

¹⁶⁵ These often contain hydroquinone, a potentially carcinogenic ingredient, and mercury derivatives. Consequently, its use results on various cutaneous side effects which may be permanently disfiguring and other systematic health issues including the increasing prevalence of high blood pressure, diabetes, hypertension, damages to the kidneys and brain. Despite bleaching products have been legally banned or restricted in several countries, the practice still represents a significant global health issue (Petit et al., 2006, Abraham, 2017).

¹⁶⁶ As well as in Asia, mostly southern regions, in the Middle East, in Latin American regions and Caribbean islands such as Jamaica and Haiti.

opportunities, executive positions, and chances in beauty pageants favouring those with less skin pigmentation are factors that upheld the supremacy of white skin. (de Souza, 2008, p. 27)

During the slave trade and colonisation, White supremacist and hegemonic ideologies, based on the assumption that Western cultures were “racially superior” to other cultures and dark skin had an “inferior” social meaning, strongly shaped a “colour caste system” (White, 2005, p. 295) which divided social groups, where an order “from high to low parallels the skin colour from light to dark” (Westerhof, 1997, p. 574). Next to Whites in the social structure, were (and still are) mixed-race individuals, estimated to be of a superior class to the full-blooded Africans (Cooper, 2016). These ideas, or stories, among Congolese, persist and endorse “a hierarchy that suggests the more European one’s features - the lighter one’s skin, the less ethnic one’s facial features and the straighter and longer one’s hair - the greater one’s social value” (White, 2005, p. 295). The system has, consequently, institutionalised racist dynamics and incentivised the internalisation of self-hatred and low-esteem behaviour within Black African communities and their diasporas (White, 2005).

Drawing, once again, on Frantz Fanon’s seminal work (1952), the skin bleaching phenomenon developed in Africa and its diaspora can be related to the inferiority complex of Blacks in relation to Whites perpetuated during colonialism (Vassallo, 2011, Begedou, 2014). As mentioned in chapter three, Fanon examines how the complex of inferiority was indoctrinated by colonists into the minds of the colonised through psychological mechanisms of racism. “Whiteness” was a symbol of purity, justice, truth, virginity, defining what it meant to be civilised, modern and human, while “Blackness” represented the exact contrary, a symbol of ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality, ignorance, and inferiority. Colonised subjects inevitably began (or were forced) to identify themselves through the eyes of colonisers. They experienced a dynamic of internalisation of this inferiority, which Fanon calls “epidermalization”,

where their self-esteem and self-motivation evaporated. Black men started to emulate their oppressors, to wear “White masks” in an attempt to “turn White”: pushing away the negative connotation of Blackness to gain recognition and be accepted as men by the colonisers (Fanon, 1952, Sardar, 2008).

The legacy of slavery and colonialism has profoundly shaped the ways in which many Black Africans have come to see themselves and experience their everyday lives. Many have maintained this “distorted view” believing in their “ugliness” and in the possibility of being “beautiful” and less discriminated against only through a lighter skin colour (Begehou, 2014). Explanations behind skin bleaching, therefore, include an assumed direct connection between light skin and beauty, health and advanced social status (Kamagaju et al., 2016). The practice has for a long time been experienced as a means through which becoming more attractive, accepted and economically strengthened (Westerhof, 1997, Petit et al., 2006, de Souza, 2008, Vassallo, 2011), with Africans in Europe, not only continuing the practice but also spreading it among individuals who never performed it in their native countries (Petit et al., 2006). For example, the 2019 series *Shades of Black*, published by *The Guardian* (Sewell et al., 2019), explores many stories from Black African women who have experienced the politics of skin colour in their everyday lives, at times practicing skin bleaching (Yeboah, 2019). These testify how the legacy of colourism, the discrimination against subjects with a dark skin tone, persists within the Black community and has a harmful impact on young individuals’ existence and perception of themselves (Greenidge, 2019, Wise, 2019, McClinton, 2019).

Similarly to skin bleaching, Black Africans also modify their natural hair towards Eurocentric standards. Within the aforementioned coloured caste system, natural hair, together with skin colour and facial features, carries deep historical and social baggage (White, 2005). As expressed by Lucrèce in interview, Congolese often

use unhealthy and expensive chemical products to relax the hair texture and obtain a straightened hairstyle and/or to dye the natural colour and switch it to a lighter one. Adding hair extensions or wearing full scalp wigs is also a common habit. Regarding her mother's generation of Congolese women, Lucrèce noted: "first thing is the hair, they usually have very eye-catching and bold hairstyles (...) they would do a very bright blond sort of thing but also sometimes red, sometimes they would dye their hair using the colours of the DRC flag" (Interview: 25 May 2017). However, a difference between generations was also pointed out: "this is not everyone because now actually, so many young people are ditching those trends and just go for who they are!" (Interview: 25 May 2017).

Accordingly, the *Miss Congo UK* pageant aimed to highlight a generational distinction within the community regarding how a stereotypically beautiful Congolese woman should look, thereby embracing a counter-story on beauty standards. It sought to symbolically support younger generations to eliminate the negative bleaching and straightening cultural habits. Self-representation of the body, involving how a woman wears her hair, dresses and uses cosmetics, whether she decides to use or not skin-lightening creams and whether to straighten or not straighten her hair, is strictly connected to the cultural values of her community (Faria, 2010). Although some contestants still straightened their hair, the winners of both the 2016 and 2017 competitions had very dark skin and natural curly hair, embodying a naturalness, appreciation, and symbolic pride in their origins and also in their aesthetics. In discussing natural beauty with Lucrèce, she stated: "I did not see myself winning so when I won I thought 'Wow so that actually means that I am beautiful!'" (Interview: 25 May 2017). On the same topic, Horcelie expressed:

We had girls with short hair like me and with our own natural African hair. Yes, some of them had extensions or straightened hairs but I think *Miss Congo* wanted to show the original Congolese beauty with not too much make up (...) to show a natural culture ...'cause there are many women in the Congo that have never

worn make up or do not know anything about it so I think the pageant wanted to show also that side of the culture. The pageant brought us back to our roots, showing where we come from, where our ancestors came from also in terms of beauty. They wanted to show young girls that our beauty started way before the standards of the Western world which now defines what beauty is. (Interview: 19 June 2017)

The forward-looking story of younger London Congolese was manifested during the community event, and its metaphorical meanings have probably been shaped by the current social debate on beauty standards. Western criteria in relation to bodily appearances are slowly shifting towards a wider global diversity and inclusivity, as reported daily in the media.¹⁶⁷ The relative exposure to more diverse beauty images, especially in cyberspace, seems to inspire young Black Congolese women to recognise, appreciate and embrace their physical and cultural features. In Lucrèce's experience:

On the internet you see a lot of documentaries about people who tell how they used to bleach their skin and relax their hair but now they've stopped and maybe part of it is because we can actually see darker skinned models or actresses with natural hair in magazines (...) this is helping us to see the beauty of our colour, of who we are and how we were born (...) because how can you appreciate yourself if you don't see yourself in magazines that are considered beauty magazines? (Interview: 25 May 2017)

Occasionally, *Miss Congo UK* contestants themselves became promoters of "new" standards of natural beauty images, displaying their dark skin and curly hair. For example, Lucrèce got involved with the promotion of *Knatural*, a Caribbean London-based hair brand which specialises in the production of human hair extensions for Black women. The brand aims to encourage Black women to enhance and embrace their natural hair textures and Lucrèce featured as one of the models on the company catalogue. She posed on the frontpage with a product called "Afro-kinky" (2017), referring to the type of Afro hair textures which most Black women naturally have.

¹⁶⁷ Exemplary is *The Real Catwalk Show*, held in New York, in December 2017, featuring women of different cultures, sizes, skin tones, sexual orientations, and ages. Wearing bikinis, without covering "lumps, bumps, rolls, or cellulite", they made their runway to celebrate the diversity of their bodies as a form of empowerment (Zaydenberg, 2017, Ritschel, 2017).

As Lucrèce's personal experience in London testifies, Black women can, therefore, assume an important role in the daily proliferation of cultural meanings. In positioning themselves as active agents in the production of Black natural beauty images, they acknowledge their racial and ethnic identities and reshape notions of Black "womanhood" and "femininity". Lucrèce's contribution, in particular, has confirmed the idea that race and ethnicity are socially rearticulated during day-to-day cultural life, and are co-constructed with gender and class rather than being the products of nature, entirely constituted biologically in the body. More generally, European American beauty standards reified in *Miss Universe* and *Miss World* competitions were subverted through the story embedded in *Miss Congo UK*. The pageant has attempted to symbolically challenge Western conceptions of bodily appearances, showing how the performance of racial, ethnic and gender identities is always demarcated through a fluid interaction between individual practices and collective actions (Craig, 2002).

5.2.6 Re-imagining the homeland and trying to re-claim the representation of the community in the UK

In examining the ways through which *Miss Congo UK* took place, a specific vision of the DRC nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) was performed, partially revealing a strong desire for a "new" transnational narrative of the Congolese diaspora in the UK. Craig emphasises how racial and ethnic meanings are re-evaluated from the "bottom up" in the practice of everyday life as well as from the "top down" through imagination and language deployed by the mass media (Craig, 2002). As stated by the organisers, the pageant aimed to trace a reversed story regarding their minority group in London and, in showing "a different side of the Congo", to reproduce a "beautified" image of the homeland. It aimed to address negative mainstream representation of the DRC, often on the news due to its political and economic instability, and to rectify enduring stereotypical preconceptions of Congolese people in

the UK, mainly known for their refugee status. While conversing about his everyday experience in interview, Luke made clear his point of view on this: “The media focuses on negativity, but instead the positive activities that we do don’t get published as often, and this is what we are trying to show by organising different stuff that there are Congolese women and younger people out there that are doing better stuff and contributing to the UK society!” (Interview: 21 April 2017).

Importantly, stigma, stereotypes, and prejudice against Congolese women are also rooted within the community itself and especially propagated by older generations. In Lucrèce’s teenage experience, she used to be warned by her mother not to make any Congolese girlfriends at school in Paris and London, “’cause they are gonna be trouble, they will always start the trouble!” (Interview: 25 May 2017), strongly affecting the ways Lucrèce used to negatively perceive female Congolese peers. Lucrèce continued explaining how the community event served to eradicate those stereotypes and to “gladly” meet other educated, professional and creative Congolese young women: “I found other Congolese girls like me... most of them were going to university and doing interesting things in their lives. It was nice, we had a ‘sisterhood’ and sort of ‘togetherness’ feelings and then I talked to my mom about it!” (Interview: 25 May 2017). Similarly, Anna from the 2017 event expressed: “The best thing about joining the pageant was meeting the girls. Some of them were amazing and did have their own plans to make a big impact on the community” (Interview: 15 April 2017). The pageant also guided Horcelie to change opinion on her own group, to learn about the contribution of Congolese individuals in the city and to build new friendships.

I never put myself forward because I know how we are like, one day Congolese are your friends, the next day they are not. This is why I never let Congolese really know me. Some only do things ‘cause they want their names on it, they do it for themselves but not actually for the community. There are two words in the term ‘community’ one is ‘come’ and the other is ‘unity’ and my perception is that people come but there is no unity and is tough because we still having to tackle a lot of issues. So, for me and the girls *Miss Congo* meant learning about many of us who do things (...) it was nice to have that Congolese friendship because we

had similar ways of thinking, we could share some “up-bringing”, similar faiths and some of those experiences as young Congolese. (Interview: 19 June 2017)

In conversation during the finals, Sabine, a thirty-year-old Congolese woman, described her experience in collaborating with the *Miss Congo UK* team and emphasised the strong sense of community that the pageant aimed to evoke. She was born in Kinshasa and arrived in Europe at the age of three. She lived most of her life in Jülich, Germany, before moving to London to “pursue her study dream” at the age of twenty-two. In 2016, she graduated with a BA in Media and Communication from the London College of Communication, University of the Arts London. She has been part of the pageant team for years and hosted the 2014 and 2016 competitions. In discussing her experience regarding what the pageant meant, especially to the younger community, Sabine pointed out:

The thing I like the most about it is that it brings [together] Congolese girls who do not know each other. They get to meet, know and learn how to work with each other (...) the only competition moment is during the final show but during the rest of the previous months it's not competition but more about 'sisterhood'. We train them about being themselves because some girls don't have older sisters, so we become the older sisters, we become their shoulders for crying (...) we are there to help them without judging but just to listen to their stories and maybe advising them. They become a group who support each other, who cry, laugh, and eat together. Sometimes we help them to write CVs, applying for job positions or with university assignments. So, this is what I love the most... 'cause we build a 'Congolese sisterhood' which is not there, maybe sometimes in church or with other groups of professionals but *Miss Congo* is a place where for every single thing we just come together. (Interview: 1 April 2017)

As Sabine continued in illustrating her opinion on the final gala:

[It] brings to life everything they have learned throughout the training season. [It] is something classy where people put a lot of effort in. [It] is something where people should go and see the future because those young girls represent the future. So, the wider Congolese community should come and see those people who come up with good plans and are improving with organising events. In this way, they can get inspired to organise something themselves and learn how to help the community. They can also come and realise that there is help if one day they will seek help. (Interview: 1 April 2017)

The personal experiences described by some other Congolese members of the audience during the finals matched Sabine's point of view, encapsulating a communal attitude.

For many, attending the evening signified creating a stronger sense of community, as explained by Adam, a thirty-five-year-old Congolese man, raised in France and settled in London in 2012 to become the founder of a coaching, consulting, and business development agency. He attended:

To support my close friend [Luke] and his amazing project. This is not my first time, I attend every year. Coming to this event is always good for me because we can meet and see our network and the people we love. This evening was pretty nice and every year the organisation is better. I felt the emotions through the contestants' speeches, that was very deep and sincere. People came to support, and all the team was amazing. People like our "Congopreneurs", for example Marie-Claire [Idikayi] and her sister, Luke, *The 'Boss Brothers*, Benjamin [Kitoko] and all the others have all my respect. We are pushing hard to make things happen and you will change the stereotypes. (Interview: 1 April 2017)

An imaginary transnational attachment to the homeland was also evoked by Adam:

With *Miss Congo* we can celebrate together our love for the Congo. I loved the entertainment, the contestants, the staff, the venue, and food. We were like in the Congo! I felt like home and I loved it! I love my country, I love this network and will always support and push it. I am proud to be Congolese. With these kinds of actions, we are empowering the youths and inspiring the elders! (Interview: 1 April 2017)

Alice, a twenty-five-year-old Congolese female student, stated: "I find it very important for the Congolese diaspora to have such a thing 'cause people can stay in touch with the motherland. Any *Miss Congo UK* is full entertainment while educating people!" (Interview: 1 April 2017). Alice was also one of the contestants in *Miss Congo UK 2014* and, after participating in the pageant, she founded her brand, *Melanated Motherhood*, which aims to empower the Black community in providing advice on parenthood and facilitating Black families' reunification.

According to some of the organisers and participants, the pageant sought to change the ways in which the Congolese community is often perceived by other Black and African diasporas in London, Nigerians and Ghanaians being the most commonly named. In Luke's experience, they often label Congolese in London as "lazy" (Interview: 21 April 2017). Therefore, the cultural event sought to subvert the story behind their minority group in the metropolis, to:

Showcase that is not just Ghanaians, is not just Nigerians, is not just Jamaicans but there are also many Congolese professionals that grow up in the UK and have excellent skills, abilities and they are working for good companies, earning good salaries. So, we are also trying to promote them, so people can see that we are fighters, we struggle, we are warriors! (Interview: 21 April 2017)

In interview, participant Anna expressed a similar point of view. Conforming to her experience in London, Congolese are generally named as the Black African group “only good for partying, dancing, making music, for being boisterous and wearing fake or real designers we can’t afford! So, the *Miss Congo UK* proves that also Congolese can actually run their own organisations and initiatives like other Africans” (Interview: 15 April 2017). While the experience of attendee Adam confirmed:

This kind of event is necessary to show that between us we can achieve great things. Yes, as Congolese, we can also be distinguished by the results. We need more events like this and need to learn how to concentrate our strengths to deliver exceptional results. Some of us are doing it, but not all. (Interview: 1 April 2017)

A positive reception was pointed out by another attendee belonging to a different Black African group. Mark, a thirty-two-year-old Nigerian male student, in conversation said that his friendship with Luke made him participate in the final night almost every year: “I really enjoy coming. I like beauty and beautiful people and it is something that presents the DRC country and the Congolese community in a good light. I would describe the evening as prestigious. I liked the fact that it was grand in its appearance and very cultural and informative for me” (Interview: 1 April 2017).

Supposedly conceived as an entertaining activity, *Miss Congo UK* therefore tried, within given limits, to publicly expose a “beautified” representation of the London Congolese diaspora and its homeland. According to data collected from the field, the body performance was generally experienced as an acknowledgment and celebration of a collective Congolese consciousness and sense of belonging to the DRC, while also metaphorically questioning and practically tackling issues affecting the diaspora. The spectacle sought to symbolically challenge reiterated pessimistic assumptions about the young Congolese contribution to the “superdiverse” fabric of London, in the gaze of

members of the older generation as well as of other Black African groups. However, a conflicting dimension was in fact revealed by the clear limitations within which the pageant was circumscribed. Along with how *Miss Congo UK* was produced and conceived, the show also exposed frequent subtle feelings of “inferiority”, and somehow of rivalry, identified by Congolese in conflict with better-established London Black African diasporas, and the Nigerian group particularly. In this regard, the “beautifying” message of the pageant did not in fact exceed the boundaries of its own community since only a few attendees belonged to London Black and African groups other than the Congolese. It can, therefore, be argued that the event did not produce a real impact outside its own diaspora.

More broadly, in maintaining the historical roots of beauty pageants among Black Africans in the diaspora, the public spectacle of *Miss Congo UK* became a meaningful, at times contradictory, site for young London Congolese through which to act out “new” cultural identities. The show not only served to select the new queen as “ambassador” to the community, but it had a many-sided and unconventional significance. On the one hand, in presenting a performance that had many “original” elements of Congolese customs, such as the introductory dance performance, and the showcasing of many, different, traditional garments, organisers strove to portray and celebrate a night of cultural “authenticity” through the reproduction of traditional aesthetics, gender configurations, and representation of racial pride. They designed a ritual performance that could manifest a transnational and “imaginary” attachment to the original homeland in the context of postcolonial displacement and could illustrate the very essence of what it means to be Congolese, African and Black in the diaspora. In so doing, some well-established ideals of “traditionalism” were inevitably reproduced. However, on the other hand, those same socio-cultural “authentic” values were in fact deeply contested and re-claimed throughout the pageant, where a symbolic re-imagining

of Congolese women's agency in contemporary cultural meaning-making and diaspora-building was also promoted (Faria, 2010). Through the presentation of young women who embodied the values of education, hard work, passion, and creativity (for example in the field of medicine and arts), *Miss Congo UK* sought to reclaim an entrepreneurial narrative of upward class mobility for the community (Mani, 2006). The cultural event represented a significant site of political intervention (Oza, 2001), serving as a local and global platform for the younger generation to try to disturb and overcome conservative beliefs and internal preconceptions perpetuated by elders. It aimed to tackle and to advance controversial disputes regarding Congolese and other Black Africans women's rights, gender equality and socio-cultural stigmas. Significantly, the pageant deployed Afro-diasporic alternatives to Euro-Western beauty and body standards, disseminating notions of Black beauty and the "natural" body, and seeking to become a tool to overcome Western systems of cultural representation.

Judges and organisers "created" and crowned an "idealised" woman not necessarily based on her exterior appearance, but rather on her multifaceted, at times contradictory, positionality. Horcelie was indeed capable of recognising and internalising her origins, showing pride in her natural Black body, reproducing, and appreciating "authentic" cultural norms, as well as performing traditional "feminine" roles. At the same time, she mediated ideals of tradition with notions of modernity, negotiating an independent identity that embraced education and individual career aspirations within the field of the Creative Arts, itself a career path considered of little value by many elders of the community. Finally, she was determined to work for improvements within and outside her own community and to become a role model for future generations. Being affected by the HIV virus, the queen consciously prepared herself to take an active stand towards awareness, advancement, and possible resolutions in the field of HIV treatment. In addition, Horcelie being a practicing

Christian, her activist campaign in favour of HIV education and in support of HIV positive individuals' acceptance and inclusion within the community could seek to moderate prejudice and hostility within Congolese parishes, shifting a cultural perspective resulting in a positive impact on the lives of younger generations of Congolese. Therefore, Horcelie represented more than just an actor performing a ritual of shared cultural identity (King O'Riain, 2008). She became the configuration of powerful socio-cultural forward-thinking values of the young Congolese community in London. Her body served as cultural bearer of traditions as well as symbol of modernity and politics (Yuval-Davis, 1997, Balogun, 2012).

Analysts argue that one of the ways individuals make sense of themselves is through the narratives they tell and enact in "definitional ceremonies" (Myerhoff, 1992). These represent a means of collective self-definition and self-construction through staged display in front of an audience (Labrador, 2002). Telling stories via definitional ceremonies provides an important means for people, and especially migrants, to formulate a kind of boundary-marking and "home"-making. Experiencing and narrating the self through cultural performances thus become closely connected to creating a sense of place, affiliation and attachment. The enactment of public performances displays cultural, racial, ethnic and gender identity claims and, at the same time, addresses issues of power, voice and visibility (Labrador, 2002). Accordingly, the story told through the cultural production of *Miss Congo UK* can be understood as an "identity tale" illustrating one of the ways in which young London Congolese distribute ideas concerning their own community, culture and sense of self (Labrador, 2002). What occurred in the space of the public body performance was, on the one hand, a type of self-representation or "cultural mirroring" where a community reflected its understanding of a collective sense of itself, while, on the other hand, the pageant also reflected a process of cultural renewal, or a type of "cultural activism" (Ginsburg,

1997), taking place through the stories presented by diasporic young women on stage and the ways they, along with organisers and attendees, constructed a sense of home in London and attachment to the homeland (Labrador, 2002).

Along with further tracing the *people* and *biographies*, the transnational *story* and the *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) revealed by the aesthetic and cultural ritual of *Miss Congo UK*, the second part of this chapter has further followed the *things*, some of the fashion commodities showcased, as well as some of the creative productions performed by young London Congolese at the finals. *Metaphors* (Marcus, 1995) embedded in the body performance have also been revealed and analysed. The case study has additionally exemplified through empirical data what Goffman theorised concerning the structure of social encounters in everyday socio-cultural “theatrical” performances (Goffman, 1959a, Goffman, 1967). According to Goffman’s notion of “performance”, which emphasises the face-to-face ways that individuals employ to present themselves in front of others, being co-participants or observers, the self is expressed through a repertoire of strategic ordinary performances which are suited to its social and geographical settings (Duffy, 2005). These everyday life performances of individuals, based on different ways of interacting, are interpreted by Goffman as a social mechanism which shows a specific socio-cultural reality of a given community (Goffman, 1959b), framed in this thesis as the young London Congolese.

A detailed analysis of the *Miss Congo UK* final gala night has shown the three different elements of what he calls, using the analogy of the theatre, “the front” (the stage) as individual presentation of themselves, or performances, before others (the audience). The first element, “the setting”, or the environment where social interactions take place, was the indoor space where the final spectacle was held. The second element, “the appearance”, formed by those stimuli which indicate the social status of the performer and the temporary ritual state of engagement during social activities, was

illustrated by bodily expressions, dress and aesthetic looks displayed during the gala night. Finally, the last element, “the manner”, shaped by those stimuli which indicate how the interaction role of individuals is carried out, was investigated through the close examination of Congolese performers both on and off stage (Goffman, 1959b).

Overall, performative reiterated acts of the body can either conform to the community’s ideas, therefore be interpreted as expressive of conventional, legitimised cultural identities or, as was partially the case of *Miss Congo UK*, go against the group’s expectations (Butler, 1988). Thus, the case study has confirmed that the formation of racial, ethnic and gender identities should be looked at as something that subjects do, enacted also through the body, rather than just as a verbal expression of what they are and, most importantly, as a process always potentially open to be challenged and to change (Bell, 1999, Lloyd, 1999).

5.3 Concluding remarks

Along with being forms of entertainment, beauty competitions constitute dynamic places where specific socio-cultural groups define, modify, and represent their cultural meanings (King O’Riain, 2008). Racial, ethnic, gender issues can be differently mirrored through the performance of pageants according to the community’s knowledge, ideology, and practice. These arenas deserve, therefore, to be analysed at the local level and in connection with those specificities that characterise each social group (Cohen et al., 1996, Crawford et al., 2008). Among Black Africans in the diaspora, pageants historically resulted from an active reaction against racial exclusion. The performance of displaying natural female beauties and putting Blackness and African “authenticity” at its centre, developed as part of the “symbolic repertoire” in assertion of racial and ethnic difference (Craig, 2002, Faria, 2010). Minority groups’ beauty contests have been produced to claim resistance from the mainstream, to validate equal beauty of ethnic women and their cultures alongside women belonging to

dominant cultures, and to imaginatively express a sense of belonging to their distant homelands (Barnes, 1994, Siu, 2005, Mani, 2006, King O’Riain, 2008, Faria, 2010).

To continue tracing the transnational geographies of young Congolese informants and their everyday life diasporic experiences in London, all multi-sited ethnographic fields (Marcus, 1995) relating to the fashion and beauty practice of *Miss Congo UK* were analysed throughout this chapter. The main *people* and *biographies* (Marcus, 1995) were the three migrant young London Congolese, Luke, Lucrèce and Horcelie, whose individual life histories and viewpoints have been crucial to delineate and document multifaced meaning embedded in the community event. Several other young London Congolese diasporic experiences were additionally followed, involving the voices of various organisers, contenders and attendees. To further highlight the transnational dimension of the body performance, Congolese performers based in Paris and Brussels were also briefly cited as well as the perception of the event of some attendees who did not specifically belong to the Congolese diaspora but rather to other London Black African diasporas.

The *thing* (Marcus, 1995), or material commodities, were the various tailored fashion garments displayed during the final gala night. The performance of some of the young London Congolese creative productions was also illustrated, including the traditional dance choreography performed at the beginning of the evening as well as a theatrical play monologue and spoken word poetry from some of the contenders and other performers.

Narratives of everyday life experiences and socio-cultural memories, defined by Marcus as the *story*, *plot* or *allegory* (Marcus, 1995), were traced by the ways in which the pageant was defined by the organisers and by some of the contestants as a cultural performance not precisely focused on bodily appearances but rather on raising awareness and portraying a Congolese cultural heritage. A Congolese transnational

story involving narratives of everyday diasporic experiences and collective memories was also traced through the detailed analysis of some of the final gala night performances.

The *metaphor* (Marcus, 1995) involved the correlations of socio-cultural and political values and symbols associated with the fashion and beauty pageant. The performance in fact emphasised the importance not only of embracing the natural Black body among youngsters but especially of portraying the Black female beauty as a medium to, potentially, overcome Western standardised beauty ideals and to propose a more inclusive representation of female body differences. A symbolic dimension also emerged concerning the ways in which the body performance of the pageant was promoted and often experienced as a form of empowerment to perform new, more subversive, diasporic London Congolese racial, ethnic and gender identities in front of elders and other London Black Africans. In promoting young London Congolese women's sense of independence, level of education and creativity, the performance aimed to challenge traditional gendered expectations and deep inequalities endured by older generations. Moreover, young contestants supported by the young organisational team, with Horcelie and Victoria taken as exemplary voices, aimed to openly tackle and subvert the narrative on fundamental health issues, stigmas and cultural habits still affecting the Black African community.

Finally, the *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) was the very contradictory significance embedded in *Miss Congo UK*. Along with a delineated controversy rooted within beauty pageant competitions throughout history, the development and transformation of the pageant space among the Congolese diaspora in London also encapsulated various stages of cross generational conflict. It firstly revealed antagonist sentiments among the older community, who perceived the event as promiscuous and degrading traditional codes of morality. It subsequently took shape as a performative language able to

deconstruct these initial prejudices and to solve discrepancies that emerged between elders and youngsters. Controversy was additionally brought to light on how organisers aimed to empower young women while still exposing their bodies on stage following a framework of bodily gestures and appearances which strictly reiterated gender heteronormative performativity. Furthermore, a shared ambiguity was also exposed on how organisers, contestants and members of the audience collectively defined the show as a cultural celebration of a Congolese heritage and sense of attachment to the DRC. They experienced the pageant as a “beautified” representation of the homeland and professional representation of the diaspora in the city to disrupt negative assumptions about the role played by Congolese in contributing to the multicultural fabric of London. The show, therefore, also disclosed recurrent subtle feelings of subordination perceived by Congolese in comparison to larger and more integrated London Black African diasporas, the Nigerian group especially. However, only a restricted section of members of the audience in fact belonged to other London Black African groups, while most attendees belonged to the Congolese group. The “beautifying” message of the pageant, therefore, did not exceed the boundaries of its own community and, it can be argued, did not produce a real impact outside of it.

Chapter Six – From local production to global relations: The *Congo Fashion Week* and London catwalk pre-show 2017

6 Introduction

This chapter presents the fourth and final case study of the thesis. It investigates a Congolese international fashion event, *Congo Fashion Week*, held every year in the DRC since 2012, with a particular focus on its one-day introductory pre-show held for the first time in London in September 2017. The case study investigates two major issues. The first central issue, which can be defined as a “double-bind”, concerns the various ways through which Congolese fashion event organisers and designers and other African fashion designers find themselves situated within the contemporary fashion industry. This involves a multifaceted, often contradictory, positionality between ways of dealing with the “Western gaze”, the reproduction of cultural “authenticity” and the contestation of the limiting discourses of Western exoticism. On the one hand, Congolese fashion show organisers, designers and other performers are inevitably influenced by Western and non-Western power relations and structures through which the global fashion industry, historically developed in and currently dominated by the West, operates. On the other hand, they simultaneously embody and perform an “original” cultural identity, emphasising the expression of an “authentic” African narrative as well as resisting or trying to subvert stereotypical boundaries dictated by the West in association with African fashion styles through processes of counter-exoticism. The second core issue concerns the simultaneous entanglement between the cultural/aesthetic, the commercial and the political aspects which characterise *Congo Fashion Week*.

The chapter is divided in three major sections. To give a broader context to the case study, the first main section begins with an historical framework about the

development of modern fashion runway shows, the establishment of the concept of Fashion Weeks and, in particular, focuses on the understanding of the proliferation of African Fashion Weeks both in Africa and in the West. The section then continues with an introduction to *Congo Fashion Week* (CFW), covering its evolution as international fashion event in the DRC, especially through the testimony of two young Congolese women as the main actors involved, together with the voices of other participants. Finally, the organisation and development of the *Congo Fashion Week London 2017* pre-show (CFWL), as exemplary site of observation of the CFW team's cultural production, is presented. Through a detailed examination of the fashion evening, organised by and for different cultural actors, the subsequent two main sections of the chapter investigate the core issues introduced above. These are demonstrated and framed in sequence with what Dorianne Kondo classifies as the three main moments of Orientalist discourses: firstly, "Western Orientalising", secondly, "self-Orientalising" and, finally, "counter-Orientalism" (Kondo, 1997). While following Kondo's theorisation, I decided to reformulate these three moments more specifically in accordance with the African context, referring to them throughout the chapter as the three moments of exoticising discourses: "Western exoticism", "self-exoticism" and "counter-exoticism".

6.1 The transnational space of *Congo Fashion Week*

6.1.1 Framing the presence of "African fashion" in the global fashion arena

The role played by the African continent in mainstream fashion production and the "arrival" of African fashion designers on the global scale is a relatively new, but growing, phenomenon. As Helen Jennings, editorial director of *Nataal*,¹⁶⁸ puts it: "Africa is fashion's new frontier" (Jennings, 2011), developing now, more than ever

¹⁶⁸ A global media brand celebrating contemporary African fashion, visual arts, music, travel, and society.

before, into “the most exciting emerging fashion sector in the world” (Jennings, 2015, p. 44). Fashion from Africa is surely not a new cultural practice and it is as deep and diverse as the continent itself, having made its influence felt for centuries (Jennings, 2015). However, what is relatively recent is the phenomenon “Africa in Vogue” (Twigg, 2017), used to highlight the presence of a generation of African designers and image-makers operating with autonomy on the world’s fashion scene, whose styles are on view at Fashion Weeks across and outside the continent, providing creative evidence of ongoing local-global interaction (Jennings, 2011, Udé, 2011). This new wave of African designers harmonise contemporary fashion’s search for new trends with an appreciation of the ideals of beauty and adornment of the body deeply rooted in Africa’s socio-cultural consciousness (Jennings, 2011).

To understand better the reasons behind this “new” entrance of African fashion onto the international scene, led by Africans themselves, it is necessary to look back at historical dynamics. The fashion market for modern garments in the Western world began in mid-nineteenth-century¹⁶⁹ in Paris and since then this city, together with Milan, New York and London, have been considered the most influential fashion axis worldwide (Weller, 2006, Rovine, 2009). Therefore, the concept of fashion, in reference to changing style trends over time (Rovine, 2009), has for a long time been conventionally associated with Western societies which have dominated international fashion industry, in opposition to established and static forms of dress (Baldwin et al., 2004), often affiliated with non-Western societies. In this regard, Jennifer Craik, whose work aims to reduce straight dichotomies between Western and non-Western, modern and traditional, fashion and costume, reminds us that:

¹⁶⁹ The fashion industry developed first in Europe and then in America between the mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Clothing became mass-produced in standard sizes and sold at fixed prices through the rise of modern technologies such as the sewing machine, the rise of global capitalism and the development of the factory system of production, and the proliferation of retail outlets such as department stores (Steele and Major, 2017).

Techniques of dress and decoration in non-Western cultures are distinguished from fashion. They are regarded as traditional and unchanging reflections of social hierarchies, beliefs, and customs (...) In accordance with the way anthropology has conceptualised non-Western cultures as timeless and unchanging, so too techniques of dress and decoration have been regarded in the West as fixed. (Craik, 1994, p. 18)

Therefore, the power of the West over the question of what could be seen and defined as “fashion” has influenced a widespread scholarly tendency to privilege Western exceptionalism in the field, denying any non-Western agency in the development of fashion systems, seen as static, in international fashion discourse (Hansen and Madison, 2013). It was not until the 1980s that East Asia became an exception, where non-Western Japanese and Hong Kong fashion designers emerged as leading players in influencing mainstream fashion (Skov, 2002, Rovine, 2009, Jennings, 2011). In this context, African fashion has been confined by mainstream fashion for over half a century only as a source of aesthetic inspiration (Jennings, 2011), with African-inspired styles appearing in international fashion circles from the mid-twentieth century through the works of Western haute couturiers,¹⁷⁰ who often referred to the continent to create their collections. On the contrary, many creative African designers have generally received much less attention from the international fashion press (Rovine, 2009).

This socio-cultural paradigm, however, seems to be gradually shifting, as mentioned earlier. The idea that fashion should be considered a Western phenomenon has more recently been largely contested in and outside academia (Li, 1998), with the investigation of non-Western fashion systems as an expanding field of study (Sun, 1997, El Guindi, 1999, Dogbe, 2003, Nagraath, 2003, Grabski, 2009, Rovine, 2009, Farber, 2010, Jansen, 2016). As anthropologist Karen Hansen states: “fashion no longer is an exclusive property of the West. Contemporary fashions are created rapidly and in great volume from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, redefining both consumption and

¹⁷⁰ Jean Paul Gaultier, Donna Karan and Dolce and Gabbana to name a few.

fashion itself in the process and propelling multidirectional style shifts across the globe” (Hansen, 2004, p. 370).

6.1.2 The growth of African Fashion Weeks

The development of modern catwalk runways and spectacular Fashion Weeks as we know them today lies in the 1960s and 1970s,¹⁷¹ coinciding with the rise of womenswear and menswear ready-to-wear designs (Evans, 2001). The format of traditional couture shows, based on relatively discreet daily presentations to private customers and the press, with an aura of luxury and exclusivity, was increasingly revolutionised (Steele, 2004, Idacavage, 2016). The 1980s marked the beginning of the European fashion shows as entertainment theatrical spectacles on a huge scale (Evans, 2001), organised in unusual locations (e.g. stadiums) to embrace youth culture and mass-consumerism (Idacavage, 2016). The “London Fashion Week” was launched in 1984, as the first English-speaking series of events to use the term “Fashion Week” (Blanchard, 2018).¹⁷² From the “big four” recognised fashion capitals, Paris, Milan,

¹⁷¹ The concept of fashion shows in the West developed in Paris out of modern high fashion design by mid-nineteenth century and owes a great deal to the contribution of the British couturier, Charles Frederick Worth. He introduced the idea of displaying garments in retail through in-house models as a promotional tactic (Evans, 2001, Kawamura, 2004, Craik, 1994, Blanchard, 2018). From the 1860s, models were exhibiting his latest collections for elite customers inside and outside the salon (Craik, 1994). Worth’s idea was consequently established throughout Europe and the US. Well-organised and well-attended “theatricalised fashion parades” inside major couture houses and at public social events developed from the early 1900s, becoming a regular source of marketing strategy as well as popular forms of spectacle and entertainment (Evans, 2001, Kawamura, 2004, Craik, 1994, Soley-Beltran, 2015). Three leading British and French haute couturiers largely contributed to shaping and paving the way for today’s fashion show. Lady Duff-Gordon regularly organised “dramatized” fashion parades inspired by theatrical plays, in London and, later on, Paris and New York (Evans, 2001, Blanchard, 2018). Paul Poiret staged fancy-dress balls and costume parties, while also taking his models on tours in theatres, department stores and chic resorts in European capitals and Russia (Craik, 1994, Kawamura, 2004, Blanchard, 2018). He additionally introduced models’ photographs in fashion magazines (Craik, 1994). Similarly, Jeanne Paquin was also showcasing her collections at horse races, gala evenings and the opening nights at the opera (Kawamura, 2004, Dirix, 2016). By the 1920s, modelling parades in public spaces became more popular (Fortini, 2006).

¹⁷² The first “Fashion Week” was held in New York, in 1943, known as the “Fashion Press Week” and displayed the work of American fashion designers under a seasonal timeframe, but not yet in a single location. The “New York Fashion Week” consolidated into a single location between the 1993-4 (Fortini, 2006, Tiffany, 2011, Blanchard, 2018). In Paris, more centralised

New York and London, acting as “switching centres” for the gravitation and transmission of fashion ideas and knowledge (Weller, 2006), the concept of holding seasonal Fashion Weeks proliferated around the world.

Although still relatively young, the African fashion industry has seen the emergence of Black African Fashion Weeks in many African countries (e.g. Ghana, Nigeria, Angola, Senegal, Niger, South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Lagos, Soweto etc.) and Western cities (e.g. Paris, London, Barcelona, Lisbon, Amsterdam, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston etc.). The global visibility and contribution of Black African designers to the international fashion industry has accordingly improved over the past few decades, currently receiving more attention in the press (Kuwala, 2016). Exemplary is the three-day festival *Africa Fashion Week London* (AFWL), held annually in London since 2011, which directly inspired the establishment of the *Congo Fashion Week*.

A useful framework for the understanding and analysis of the CFW is provided by Dorinne Kondo’s *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theatre* (Kondo, 1997), where she argues that various forms of Orientalist discourses are “reinscribed and contested” through the work of Japanese fashion designers in a global context. The concept of Orientalism, firstly introduced by Edward Said (1978), refers to the general patronising attitude of the West towards the non-West, where non-Western societies are depicted as static, undeveloped, essentialist while, in opposition, Western societies are seen as fluid and developed. In so doing, the Oriental paradigm propagates and establishes a “Western superiority”. Based on this conceptualisation, as cited above, Dorienne Kondo more specifically classifies three main moments of Orientalist discourses: “Western Orientalising”, “self-Orientalising” and “counter-Orientalism”

fashion shows have been held since 1945, with the birth of the Parisian “semaine de la mode” in 1973. Milan became the Italian fashion show’s main centre with the inauguration of the Milan “settimana della moda” in 1958, substituting Florence where the fashion scene developed from the early 1950s (Blanchard, 2018).

(Kondo, 1997). Kondo's framework was then re-applied by Sumati Nagrath (2003) in her study on the India Fashion Week 2002 (Nagrath, 2003).

For the African context of this chapter, the first Orientalist moment is reconceptualised as the first exoticising moment and redefined as "Western exoticism". This refers to the ways through which the old Orientalist tropes of the "exotic" and the "uncivilised" are inevitably recirculated. More specifically, it indicates the ways in which African fashion, similarly to Japanese and Indian fashion, is perceived and received at a global level. This provides the framework within which Congolese fashion show organisers and designers as well as other African fashion designers are said to find themselves, and where their success is determined by the recognition they receive in the West (Nagrath, 2003).

The second Orientalist moment is reconceptualised here as the second exoticising moment and described as "self-exoticism", also termed as "autoexoticising" (Savigliano, 1995) or the exoticisation of the self (Nagrath, 2003). This arises directly from the "Western exoticism", from an internalisation and adoption of the Western gaze. Kondo refers to the ways in which cosmopolitan Japanese fashion designers appropriate a Western point of view and for whom "Japanese-ness becomes exoticised and located in particular places and in particular objects emblematic of Japanese tradition" (Kondo, 1997, p. 81). Similarly to the Japanese and Indian context, this moment results in the exoticisation of African fashion motifs by African designers for African consumers (Nagrath, 2003).

The final Orientalist moment is redefined in this chapter as the final exoticising moment and called "counter-exoticism". This indicates situations where fashion designers, consciously or unconsciously, try to oppose and deconstruct the Orientalist and exoticised boundaries within which they are situated (Nagrath, 2003).

Kondo's framework, when transferred onto the African and diasporic context where the *Congo Fashion Week* develops, can guide the analysis of the relationship between African fashion production and various forms of exoticised discourses. As for the case of Indian fashion, attention has mainly been focused on the "new arrival" of African fashion in the West and how this has been received within high fashion Western systems. However, less consideration has been given to the influence that this "new popularity" of African fashion on a global scale is having on the ways that fashion productions and practices take shape and are understood by African designers and fashion show organisers both in Africa and among its diasporas. The approach through which, historically, African fashion has been confined within the Oriental gaze, therefore looked at as something of a lesser value, somehow different compared to Western fashion, should not be dismissed (Nagrath, 2003). What is particularly relevant is the understanding of the level and shape through which the internalisation of this Oriental gaze is embedded and becomes apparent within Congolese Black African fashion practices. The next sections will introduce the origins and development of CFW, followed by more detailed attention on its 2017 pre-show held in London among the young Congolese community.

6.1.3 *Congo Fashion Week*: an introduction

Congo Fashion Week is an international fashion event held annually in the DRC since 2012. The event is organised and promoted by its CEO and main founder, Marie-France Idikayi and her older sister Marie-Claire Idikayi, as co-founder. The two Congolese women were born in Kinshasa, from a big family composed of seven siblings. They moved, together with their middle-brother, to London in 2004 (Interview: 24 February 2018). In Kinshasa, Marie-France studied Journalism and Public Relations at the Institute of Information and Communication Sciences, where she graduated in 2003 (Mukendi, 2014). She then undertook internship work for the Congolese daily

newspaper *Le Potentiel* and worked for private TV stations in Kinshasa, such as “Antenne A-TV”, “Raga TV” and “CMB Digi TV”. When Marie-France moved to London, she firstly studied Travel and Tourism (Bolumbu, 2015), while developing a passion for organising events, which brought her to begin a BA degree course in the “Production of live events and television” at the University of the Arts London, graduating in July 2014 (Mukendi, 2014).

Both sisters grew up with an interest in the field of fashion and with a passion for sketching their own clothing style designs. Their mother was a seamstress and while Marie-France was in secondary school, she enrolled in a supplementary course in learning sewing skills, although always preferring the design aspect (Bolumbu, 2015). Similarly, in interview Marie-Claire emphasised her childhood and teenage memories:

I remember in my free time I liked to draw a lot. I was always drawing and sketching my own designs to be tailored. I have always wanted to be unique in my outfit so every time that a party was up, I used to design my clothes and then to bring it to the tailors and they would do it for me. I was doing the same even for my sisters and my cousins. I remember when I went back to the Congo, I found all those sketches. I actually wanted to be a model because I was tall and slim, and I was requested for walks so many times, but my dad did not want it because I was so clever in school, I was doing very well, I was most of the time, you know, first in my class and for him doing fashion design or modelling, you know, it was not that clever! So, for him, I needed to do something ‘more serious’ so in the UK I started studying accounting business at the Association of Accounting Technicians and I got my degree from there and this is why I have an accounting background. (Interview: 24 February 2018)

In introducing her role as co-founder, Marie-Claire clarified that, although she had to study accounting, she did not want to lose her passion for fashion. Therefore, when her sister was keen to start the CFW, she supported her decision and worked with her (Interview: 24 February 2018). Initially, Marie-France did not have the full encouragement of her parents regarding her decision to work within the fashion industry, beyond household tailoring. They changed their approach only after her success:

My dad was always calling it a distraction. Like ‘yeah, I like that, it’s nice to occupy your time doing that but, you know, you need to do serious things.’ One

day he was watching the news on national television and he saw me having a talk with the Minister of Culture and he looked at me and was like ‘oh, okay, that’s my girl there.’ Mum was like ‘your work stresses me. I don’t like this kind of work where you don’t rest. You’re just up and down and you go early in the morning and you come back late and tired. What kind of work is this? (...) I said mum; this is who I am supposed to be. This is who I am. So those were the challenges then. But now they’re very supportive. (Bolumbu, 2015)

In her study on Hong Kong fashion designers, Lise Skov highlights the symbolic negative devaluation of fashion practices by non-Western parents (Skov, 2002). A similar discourse can also be applied to an African context (Chiwanza, 2017), as the life experiences of Marie-France and Marie-Claire testify. Skov highlights that Chinese parents commonly influence the education and career path of their children, generally directing them to study academic disciplines with stable and substantial future incomes (e.g. medicine, law or computer science) while almost never encouraging them to embark on the practice of fashion. Numerous working-class and middle-class parents of designers do not consider fashion as a secure field of work and do not understand the strong emotional involvement with it (Skov, 2002).

Despite Marie-France and Marie-Claire parents’ initial discouragement, the idea of creating a collaborative fashion project between the sisters, under the name of *Congo Fashion Week* (CFW), was conceived in 2011, when Marie-France was asked to develop a practical assignment as part of her BA course at the UAL, focusing on a sector that was yet to be discovered (Bolumbu, 2015). Attending the first edition of *African Fashion Week London* inspired the project. She decided to produce something similar, discovering that there was no Fashion Week in the Congo and thinking: “If they can do it, why not me!” (Bolumbu, 2015). The premiere of *Congo Fashion Week* in 2012, was firstly launched in Congo-Brazzaville, in August 2012, and secondly in Congo-Kinshasa in September 2012, as Marie-Claire described in interview. Since then, all other editions have taken place in Kinshasa. The annual Fashion Week is generally composed of different fashion activities, e.g. advertising campaigns on TV shows,

exhibitions, talks, and culminates in the actual fashion runways spread over the two or three days of the weekend (Interview: 24 February 2018).

The CFW website (2019) depicts the main event as an international platform that showcases and promotes the work of upcoming and established African, predominantly Congolese living in the DRC, and international fashion designers, either Congolese settled abroad or from other African diasporas. The event aims to contribute to “the fast ever growing [fashion] international market (...) This is far more than just clothes presented on the runway, it is the implementation of the Congolese dream: the fashion business (...)” (Congo Fashion Week, 2019). CFW’s mission is to present an opportunity for buyers, members of the public, local and international media and investors to discover the latest trends in Congolese fashion. In so doing, the event seeks to contribute to the economic development and empowerment of the country. Nowadays, CFW is funded by the Ministry of Tourism, the Ministry of Arts and Cultures and by the Hotel De Ville De Kinshasa as well as being sponsored by many other groups such as *Africell*,¹⁷³ *Beaufort Lager Beer*, *Pigma Communication*¹⁷⁴ etc.

Additionally, as described in *Molato Magazine 2017*,¹⁷⁵ for the launch of the sixth edition of CFW in 2017, a new concept, *Congo Fashion Week Days*, was

¹⁷³ A telecommunication African enterprise working across the continent.

¹⁷⁴ Communication services company based in Kinshasa.

¹⁷⁵ *Molato* is an online Congolese, London-based, fashion and lifestyle magazine produced and edited by the Idikayi’ sisters since April 2014. As explained in interview by Marie-Claire, *molato* means “fashion” in Congolese Lingala and the idea behind the magazine is to share the work of Black African individuals working in the fashion and beauty industry, designers, makeup artists, models and bloggers. In Marie-Claire’s words: “We write about beauty tips as well as empowerment. Recently we added sections such as *Molato Entrepreneur* and *Molato Empowerment* because we want to positively inspired people ‘cause positive stories will always bring encouragement and push people and guide someone who is thinking to start something (...) we want people to read the magazine not only to be entertained about fashion but also to be empowered”. In Marie-Claire’s experience, there is a lack of African Magazines in the fashion market and most of them are produced by Anglophone Africans “who have found their ways”, and especially by Nigerians, “who are known more than anybody else (...) So we thought that it would have been good for us to have our share of the market (...) ‘cause it is harder for people coming from a Francophone African country. Francophone Africans don’t really have a voice or someone, something which represents them, so we wanted to be their voice”. When asked to expand on the disparities among the African diasporas in London, a conflicting issue which

introduced, involving one-day preliminary fashion shows organised in other cities during the months preceding the main fashion week in Kinshasa. The premiere of “CFW Days” was held in the city of Lumumbashi, the economic capital of the DRC, in July 2017 (Kini, 2017), while the second CFW pre-show was held in London in September 2017. introduced and analysed in the next section of the chapter. The evening performance mainly involved standard fashion runways, showcasing works by various Black African designers worn by young Black female and male models. The event also included live music concerts and dance performances, short talks from the hosts and the “key” Congolese model selected as “the face of CFW 2017”, as well as a written appreciation speech from the organiser Marie-Claire, on behalf of her sister Marie-France. The CFWL is introduced and analysed in the next section of the chapter.

6.1.4 *Congo Fashion Week London 2017 pre-show*

The *Congo Fashion Week London 2017* pre-show was organised for the first time in London on the evening of 21 September 2017, from 6:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. The show was conceptualised by the CFW team as an introductory “glance of a greater event”, which would take place the following month in “the heart of the Congolese capital”. It was promoted on social media platforms, with tickets sold for £25, and the location was initially kept secret, a “Private Location in The City”, to create suspense and curiosity. The online CFWL booklet officially described it as an evening: “For a stronger fashion industry in the Congo. A night of fashion shows and live performance with an exclusive

emerged recurrently from other informants of this thesis (in chapter five especially), Marie-Claire added that many Africans do not recognise that *Molato* is a Congolese magazine: “When people say that it doesn’t look like a Congolese magazine at all I feel insulted!”. She clarified that many Congolese from the older generations did not attend universities and “did not achieve much (...) but now the youngest are going to Uni and few years down the line are picking up and they are completely different. So, this is why young Congolese who grow up here I think they have a ‘bad image’ from their parents and other Africans kind of never expect people from our Congolese generation to do something very good ‘cause they have not seen much of that, so it is surprising for them. So, we are featuring Congolese in the UK who are really doing well, and we put them in our covers, then we share it and that’s how we promote awareness” (Interview: 24 February 2018).

London crowd” (Congo Fashion Week, 2017d). Three days ahead, the site was finally revealed as Christ Church Spitalfields, a restored Baroque Anglican Church on Commercial Street in Tower Hamlets, which currently also functions as a venue for large-scale events.

The night of the show, early guests could access the building from the back-entrance and were invited to spend some time at the crypt café situated on the ground floor. Nearby, a separate private room was used as a backstage area by designers, models, make-up artists, hairdressers, performers, photographers, organisers, and hosts, with all the necessary tools for preparation available and the garments hanging in a corner. When the main church entrance officially opened, other audience members gradually began to arrive. The security team stood at the door doublechecking tickets and welcoming attendees into the fashion show main space, while early guests were also escorted from the crypt to the church’s first floor. The space was divided by columns in three oak-panelled naves, the spacious central grand nave and two narrower lateral naves, with a high ceiling lit by chandeliers. The whole of the night’s performance was organised within the grand nave. The seating arrangement, provided by a Congolese, London-based, activities planner company, *Luv Events*,¹⁷⁶ involved six rows of elegantly covered chairs, three rows with approximately sixty seats on each side, facing one another, which could accommodate one hundred and twenty individuals. These formed an empty, central corridor-space, where various fashion catwalks, other performances and talks later took place. The music, photography and video services were also provided by Congolese, London-based, companies,¹⁷⁷ with the settings assembled close to the vestibule side of the nave.

¹⁷⁶ Introduced in chapter five.

¹⁷⁷ *MCMedia London* introduced in chapter three and *The Voice of Congo* introduced in chapter five.

Ninety minutes after the event was supposed to start, the photographers, video makers and the sound team were still setting up the lightening and acoustic systems. The DJ then started off by playing a mixture of R&B and Jazz music. After a while, a White European young man entered the scene and began to play his saxophone, improvising to complement the rhythms from the DJ in the background, walking slowly and casually through the middle of the nave whilst guests were finding their seats. Almost halfway through the evening, the complete list of attendees, formed by Black African members from different generations, was sited. The number of women and of young people, with an average age between 20 and 35 years old, was higher than the number of men and elders. Most attendees were originally from the DRC. Many were elegantly adorned for the occasion: some women wearing tight and/or traditional attires with high heels and some men wearing suits with or without ties.

The night's performance represented an almost four-hour-long spectacle. The show officially opened with the appearance of the two young Congolese hosts standing together in the grand nave on the side close to the presbytery and briefly describing into microphones the event format in British-English and American-English, occasionally using a few French words. The first host was Nancy Kondo (2017f), a twenty-eight-year-old Congolese woman. As her "the Fancy Nancy" blog (2018) describes, Nancy is from Canada. She lived with her family in Ottawa before moving to Toronto. She then relocated to London to attend law school in September 2017. She launched her food and lifestyle blog in January 2015, wanting to reach women of colour and "inspire them (...) to pursue their dreams", and "to show [them] that no matter what their budget or circumstances are, they can always add a little dash of Fancy to their lives" (The Fancy Nancy, 2018).

The second host was Audrey Madeleine Badibanga (2017e), a twenty-five-year-old Congolese woman who was born in Metz, France, and moved to the UK when her

father found work in 1998. Since 2015, she has worked as a Marketing Executive at a medical clinic called Express Medical. During her spare time, she is a blogger and the content creator of a Vlog called “Miss Audrey Bee”, founded in 2012. The blog (2018) focuses on promoting natural beauty, makeup and hair (e.g. videos describing her transition from having thin relaxed hair to natural hair and clips on how to braid long and healthy curly hair and on easy daily washing routine techniques), on documenting Congolese Black African culture (e.g. videos recording a Christmas day in a Congolese home, Congolese food, traditional engagements, group videos on challenging negative stereotypes of Congolese women, discussing shared opinions on growing up in African households with other young African women with strict parents, and on pride in being African). Through the vlog, Audrey also reports on her travels back to the DRC or to other places such as Jamaica, Ghana, France etc. and discusses the experiences of other African young women when travelling to Africa (e.g. Congo, Angola, Ghana, South Africa). In an interview, Nancy and Audrey explained that Marie-France and Marie-Claire contacted them a few months before the event through their blog/vlog works and expressed their interest in having them as hosts of the London pre-show. Consequently, both hosts travelled to the DRC to attend the official *Congo Fashion Week* in Kinshasa in October 2017 and Nancy was also appointed as the new “face of CFW” for the 2018 edition.

The first part of this chapter has, therefore, partially shows how the *people*, the *thing*, the *story*, the *metaphor*, and the *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) are embedded and expressed through the CFW and CFWL. The next sections will examine the first main issue of the chapter, still applying a multi-sited ethnographic approach. The analysis will demonstrate how Congolese fashion show organisers and designers, the *people*, inevitably assume a dual positionality, both dealing with the “Western gaze”, the reproduction of cultural “authenticity” and the deconstruction of limiting Western

discourses, in fabricating, advertising, and retailing their work, their *things*. This *conflicting* “double bind” consists, on the one hand, of their desire to be included and recognised within the structures of the dominant Western global fashion industry, thereby reinscribing the “Western exoticism” as part of their *stories*. On the other hand, Congolese fashion show organisers and designers simultaneously have a strong desire to establish cultural “authenticity” and to produce and portray an “original”, collective, Congolese identity, thereby enacting a language of *symbolic* “self-exoticism” while also *metaphorically* (Marcus, 1995) opposing Western clichéd conceptions on African fashion design through “counter-exoticism”.

6.2 The “double-bind”: Dealing with the global Western gaze while producing cultural “authenticity” and contesting Western stereotypes

6.2.1 Chasing international attention: “Western exoticism”

When presenting the *Congo Fashion Week* first edition, held in 2012, through the online coverage of the *Congo Worldwide Service* YouTube channel, Marie-France highlighted that the event was meant to expose the “finest” of Congolese fashion production to and within an international scene: “it is about time we don’t worry just about politics and the economy. We want the culture as well to be seen, we want to be seen for what we have, and the Congolese music is really out there but we want to have our fashion recognised internationally” (Congo Worldwide Service, 2012). In Marie-France’s point of view, the main problem of fashion shows organised previously in both Congo Brazzaville and Kinshasa was the lack of an international gaze. She described these shows as a “sort of ghetto” since they were “just” for and with Congolese people, with “no international media, magazines, TV or radios involved”. On the contrary, Marie-France highlighted how CFW was planned to revolutionise this and to feature the work of designers coming from Paris, Brussels, Nigeria, Ghana, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, London, Canada,

etc., and, therefore, to bridge fashion cultures between “Africa, Europe, America and the rest of the world”.

For the same *CongoWWS* coverage (2012), Russian model Maria Samoylova described the invitation to model for CFW 2012 as an interesting opportunity to collaborate with models from the Congo, London, and France, as well as to travel for the first time to Africa and have photo shoots with African designers. With a parallel enthusiasm, Lisette Mibo, a Congolese model living in London explained:

I am extremely excited to go back to Congo for CFW 2012 and see how things are done there, how people are doing, how they are working and for me also to be able to put what I have learned here out there (...) going back to Congo to work there I look at it as an adventure, I look at it as something to discover, something new so I am really excited to be able to use what I have learned here, all my experience (...) to be able to apply it there. (Congo Worldwide Service, 2012)

In concluding this first edition presentation, Marie-France appealed to the Congolese people, portraying the CFW as a collective bond for the whole community to get involved, to make it “well presented”, “well sold” and a success in front of an international market. As she put it: “we are gonna have an international audience who wants to see what we present and how we do things so let’s make it an opportunity to think properly and do it well!” (Congo Worldwide Service, 2012).

For the second edition, in 2013, during an interview with journalist Susan Mwongeli that was published on the *China Global Television Network Africa* YouTube channel (2013), Marie-France repeated that the goal for the CFW team was to gain a place on the international scene and to show that “Congo is making its mark” amongst other major fashion capitals of the world such as Paris, New York, and Milan and stimulating a “new cultural image” of the country. The desire to attract an international gaze was also shared by some of the designers and attendees, whose voices are reported below. As reported by Susan Mwongeli on the same night, some participants highlighted the importance of showing Congolese talent to the world. When describing the Fashion Week, Grace Kelly, a Kinshasa-based stylist, for example expressed: “It

allows people to see that we are capable of doing ready-to-wear clothes not only for Africa but also for the West, for the Chinese, for everyone (...) ideally we should be able to see everyone dressed in African fabrics mixed with modern outfits while remaining true to Africa”. Similarly, a fashion show guest, Given Tshilanga, said: “I think we should encourage these designers, we are here to encourage them so at least the world will see that Congo is increasingly making steps towards modernity because I know that it is happening around the world, in Italy, France and so on” (China Global Television Network Africa, 2013).

During an interview conducted and published by *Vox Africa UK* in 2016, Marie-France once again reaffirmed that what particularly informed her decision to pioneer CFW was the recognition that, despite Congolese people being famous for *la sape*, on the technical side of fashion Congo was “backward” and “left behind”, without a national level platform recognised internationally (Vox Africa UK, 2016). More recently, Marie-Claire confirmed the same story-frame, describing CFW as a channel to position the DRC on the mainstream map of fashion. As she puts it:

We are looking to promote our industry because look at China today, most fashion brands produce their outfits and all their designs from China today so we want to have that share of the market internationally because we also have designers that would be as good as Coco Chanel, so we want Congolese designers to be able to reach that level in the international market, to be able to become a respected brand and be able to mass produce. We want Congolese in the Congo and in the diaspora, overseas, to feel proud to wear brands and outfits produced by Congolese designers the same as they now feel proud to wear Coco Chanel or Yves Saint-Laurent. So, the aim of our show is to display (...) what talents we have and what is our professional creativity. We want to show that we have an industry, we have talents which can attract interest from people who can also buy. (Interview: 24 February 2018)

Some of the Congolese designers who showcased at the CFW sixth edition, in 2017, testified to a similar positioning. As reported by the *Parisian Agence France-Presse* international news agency and published on its YouTube channel, designer Richie Maya said: “In Kinshasa, there aren’t really enough events that highlight fashion (...) there’s only one, *Congo Fashion Week* (...) where we can easily express ourselves and show

our creativity”. Another designer, Zoé Mukendi, added: “My dream is to create a brand that will be used all over the world and that will be of Congolese origin” (Agence France-Presse, 2017).

Twenty-four-year-old Charlotte Kamale (2017b), a Congolese, London-based, model and fashion, beauty lifestyle blogger,¹⁷⁸ travelled to Kinshasa to work as the “face” and brand ambassador of the CFW 2017. In an interview with twenty-four-year-old Congolese film producer Hilary Jennifer, who then published the talk on her YouTube channel (2017), Charlotte also emphasised the relevance of putting the Congo and, more broadly, African culture, onto the “international fashion map”:

African people have such a rich heritage when it comes to fashion with what we wear and how we wear it. I think it is time we gave ourselves a platform to express it and to let everyone know that we are here, and we have a voice. Even fashion designers that you see on New York Fashion Week or Milan Fashion Week are now imitating fashion pieces and shapes that came from African cultures, so I think is very important to actually give ourselves the platform, to express ourselves and our up and coming designers. (Jennifer, 2017)

In interview with me, when asked to describe her experience in reference to the audience demographic at the CFW 2017, Marie-Claire emphasised the diversity in cultures and nationalities among attendees. In particular, she highlighted the presence of Europeans settled in the Congo: “we had so many White skinned people, many expats who work from most of the embassies in the Congo, for example from the Belgian embassy and the French embassy (...) but also because the venue was the Pullman Hotel, so most of the people who were staying at the Hotel came to assist to the show” (Interview: 24 February 2018). Subsequently, in interview Marie-Claire articulated the decision behind launching the CFW project in London, a city already recognised as the capital of fashion, together with Paris and New York, and described as the best way “to

¹⁷⁸ Through her everyday life blog, *Charlie Kamale* (2018), she reports her fashion and clothing style preferences, she gives suggestions on hair and skin beauty products as well as on how to have a healthy lifestyle, and finally documents her travel experiences.

put the show on the map and give it a global connotation” (Interview: 24 February 2018).

The same story-frame was also emphasised by Marie-Claire to the audience of the CFW pre-show. Subsequently to the first catwalks of the evening, she appeared in front of the guests performing a monologue speech also on behalf of her sister Marie-France. She began by expressing their decision to develop the pre-show in London for the very first time:

This is an event that we have dreamed of and was made possible because of your support. Choosing London for our first international event was not a coincidence. London is the city of *Congo Fashion Week*. It is in this difficult city that we want to promote Congolese fashion. We were inspired by all the amazing fashion and beauty events organised throughout this city. We wanted to create something to celebrate us, the culture, fashion, and beauty of where we come from. (Fieldnotes recorded: 21 September 2017)

Keeping in mind Kondo’s theoretical framework, the above data echo and demonstrate how various forms of Orientalist discourses are in fact reproduced through the *Congo Fashion Week*. The first moment of Orientalist discourses, “Western exoticism” through which the old Western, patronising attitude towards non-Western fashion systems, for a very long time understood as unchanging and “uncivilised”, unavoidably re-emerge. This affects the ways in which African fashion is perceived and received at a global level, providing the framework-story within which *Congo Fashion Week* organisers, designers and attendees find themselves, and where their accomplishment is constantly determined by the recognition and visibility they obtain in the West (Nagrath, 2003). Consequently, “self-Orientalising” (Kondo, 1997), re-defined here as “self-exoticism”, through which the Western point of view is directly and indirectly internalised and appropriated by “non-Westerns” is also recirculated. This was, for example, traced through Marie-France’s story in describing Congolese fashion as “backward” and “left behind”, by the story of a fashion guest who experienced the fashion show as a possibility to demonstrate to the world that the DRC was finally “making steps towards

modernity” as well as by fashion model Charlotte’s story of seeing the CFW as a way to “let everyone know” that the Congolese exist and “have a voice” on the fashion scene. In this sense, similarly to the work of Japanese and Indian designers, Congolese CFW organisers, designers and attendees conflictingly claim, accept and promote “universal” Western norms of fashion (Kondo, 1997, Nagraath, 2003). “Universality” understood as producing garments, or *things*, that aim to be sold worldwide, and mainly in the West, is in conflict while reproducing ambiguities that characterise the construction of postcolonial identities. The *conflicting* search for universal attention “reveal desires for parity with the West as nation-state, as a capitalist power and as a cultural producer”, increasing the forces of consumer capitalism (Kondo, 1997). At the same time, this direction towards universality can be identified as a symbolic means of escaping, or better, overcoming, “ghettoization”, as directly expressed above by Marie-France, reaching out for international acknowledgment beyond essentialist and racially marked identities (Kondo, 1997). Following Nagraath’s analysis on Indian fashion, *Congo Fashion Week* in the African context provides a promotional platform for Congolese and African designers, yet clearly focuses on the need for “professionalisation” in the fashion industry. The label Congolese “fashion industry” acquires full meaning only through its adoption of universal, Western, norms, and its acceptability and recognition from the West. Similar to the India Fashion Week, the aspiration that forms the basis of CFW is to allow the Congolese fashion industry to “enter mainstream fashion” where “mainstream” is evidently perceived to be Western fashion. The implicit, conflicting, perception of “subordinate” fashion idioms can, therefore, be understood in the context of the legacies of Orientalist frameworks (Nagraath, 2003). This explains the reasons why the presence of European attendees, in Marie-Claire’s experience reported above, acquire the same importance as the work of the designers themselves (Nagraath, 2003).

Another important aspect where “Western exoticism” takes shape through the organisation, promotion and selling of *Congo Fashion Week* is the role played by the consumption of visual images (McRobbie, 2003). In thinking about the target market of CFW and focusing their attention on attracting national and international fashion press, journalists, and magazine editors to feature the show, the CFW team is influenced by Western structures within which the global fashion industry operates. Congolese fashion show organisers adopt well-established publicity strategies of the West. For example, garment collections of CFW are especially created by Congolese and other African designers for an “imagined consumption” of the fashion world itself, for the “media-as-market” where the image is the thing and the widespread consumption of the image is often not directly connected to the actual sales (McRobbie, 2003). As published on the CFW website, for the past six years both African and international broadcasters have covered the event in a range of news, fashion or style magazines and websites. CFW short reportages and photographs are, for example, documented in *Les Congolais* (2015), *News Ghana* (2015), *Refashion Africa* (2016). The CFW has also been cited by the Western and international press, for instance, in *The Guardian* (2012) and reported in *China Central Television* (2012), *Voice of America Afrique* (2017), *Vogue Italia* (2014), and *Deutsche Welle* (2015).

Additionally, a Western approach to commercialising the CFW is applied through what can be defined as “celebrity-as-market”, which relies on the idea that the representation of celebrities, before, during and after the event, further intensifies the fashion show’s meaningful story and the designers’ work value (McRobbie, 2003). The presence of the press and of well-known Congolese national individuals¹⁷⁹ in the

¹⁷⁹ During CFW 2015 edition, for example, Marie-France was photographed with Congolese musician and Africa’s most celebrated singer Papa Wemba (Denselow, 2016), who was also patron of the event. Other prominent figures in the audience of CFW 2016 edition included the DRC Minister of Tourism, (Heath-Brown, 2017), accompanied by a delegation of government officials, notorious singer Fally Ipupa, Miss RDC 2016 Andrea Moloto, etc. (Kini, 2017).

audience operates as a Western-style sponsor circuit, as they function as a form of cultural, symbolic, and economic capital, regardless of whether they purchase some of the showcased outfits or not.

Journalist Tamsin Blanchard describes how, during Western modern couture shows, the front row, abbreviated as the “frow”, evidently involves class status issues. Spots on the “frow” are commonly guaranteed to top magazine and newspaper editors, head buyers, bloggers and web influencers, celebrities, famous friends of the designers, and high-profile family members (Blanchard, 2018). This seating hierarchy structure of the Western fashion industry was in a similar, symbolical, way reproduced during the CFW London pre-show. “Frow” seats, as close to the catwalk and performances as possible, were indeed reserved for recognised members of the Congolese and African community. “VIP” guests included, for instance, Miss Congo UK 2017, with other pageant contestants and organisers such as Mya Odja Ilunga,¹⁸⁰ the London Congolese film director, editor, and producer Mania Tambwe and his wife, the London Congolese filmmaker Ne Kunda Nlaba. The London Nigerian fashion designer Adebayo Jones was also sitting in the front row. As reported in *Molato Magazine 2017*, he was one of the London Black African designers who travelled to Kinshasa to showcase at the CFW 2016. Next to him sat some Congolese *sapeurs*, recognisable from their body expressions and dressing styles, with hats, dark shades, and wands. Other guests included junior fashion reporters, such as London Caribbean writer from *Gal-Dem*, an online and print magazine run by women of colour, and London Nigerian fashion blogger from the online magazine *BellaNaija*.

While employing these double circuited advertising strategies, where the fashion show and garments are both a real, consumed, product, and a multimedia-image product (McRobbie, 2003), CFW organisers and designers are in fact replicating well-known

¹⁸⁰ Presented in chapter five.

Western marketing strategies. They are, therefore, unconsciously and conflictingly reinscribing legacies of exoticism, the effect of which was to establish Western superiority (Said, 1978), such as involving the old exoticising allegory of the “uncivilised” where the Africans, similarly to the Japanese and the Indians, are seen as “inadequate imitators of Western fashion and a racial threat” (Kondo, 1997, Nagraath, 2003). For this reason, the analysis of transnational fashion practices and bodily adornments, and the stories transmitted by these, should always be related to political and economic issues, within the global and local nexus, and not only restricted to the understanding of individual and collective self-formation and cultural self-representation (Li, 1998). Fashion interventions are inseparable from geopolitical, racial and neo-colonial positionings. Since Black African organisers and designers, like the Japanese and the Indians, are inevitably racially marked, the rivalry with, and the conflicting desired approval of the West become an ingrained feature of their fashion performances (Kondo, 1997). The following section will discuss the various ways through which the second moment of exoticising discourses, the Orientalisation of the self (Nagraath, 2003), redefined here as “self-exoticism” often flow from the exoticisation by the West and come into play even more evidently through forms of cultural performances presented at the fashion evening held in London.

6.2.2 Performing “traditional” collectivities: “Self-exoticism”

When three-quarters of the expected audience of the *Congo Fashion Week London 2017* pre-show was seated, the hosts finally announced the beginning of a series of different catwalks, partly documented on the *Congo Fashion Week* Facebook Page (2017c) and on other Twitter accounts (2017). Each designer’s profile and catwalk were singularly introduced, alternating between Nancy and Audrey, who themselves were wearing a piece or accessory produced by the designer that was being presented. Two raised screens from both sides of the grand nave also projected the name of the designer, with

the CFWL logo, while his/her production was being displayed. Traditional Congolese music was played in the background, at times switched with popular R&B tunes from global music star Beyoncé.

Along with garment catwalks, the fashion evening also involved music and dance performances. The first appearance to be introduced by the hosts was twenty-four-year-old British Congolese hip-hop singer Achi Avelino, stage name *Avelino*, who became commercially established in 2013-4. As partially documented on the *Congo Fashion Week* Facebook Page (2017a), he performed a brief concert with several of his recently released singles, rapping live in English accompanied by his own British hip-hop rhythms played by the DJ. He walked back and forth, gesticulating within the grand nave corridor, while receiving enthusiastic approval from many members of the audience.

Avelino's show was then followed by a second performance which involved a Black African dance group called Z5, formed by three young Congolese women, a young Nigerian woman and a young Jamaican man. They performed a fifteen to twenty-minute live Congolese rumba dance choreography to various Lingala and Swahili songs played by the DJ. The four women danced and formed a circle in the grand nave, with the only man at its centre. They were all wearing black t-shirts and half-length skinny, comfortable leggings. Additionally, the young women had their hips wrapped in African wax-print fabrics of the same colours, red and yellow, and patterns. At the end of the performance, host Audrey asked Vanessa Assombalonga, dance leader and main choreographer, to select a member of the audience and teach her/him how to perform some "Congolese dance moves". She picked an older Congolese woman, playfully pulling her into the middle of the nave, and they performed a few movements together, with other attendees whistling and clicking their fingers reinforcing the melody in the background.

In interview afterwards, Vanessa presented herself as a twenty-three-year-old penultimate child in a family of four children. She and her eighteen-year-old sister were born in the UK, while her two older brothers were born in the Congo. In outlining her experience, she explained that her parents sacrificed what they had in the Congo and settled in the UK to provide a better education for their children. Her family travels back to the DRC every year and her parents are waiting for her little sister to complete her medical university degree, become a doctor, and are hoping to move back to the motherland permanently. However, Vanessa's plan is to remain living in London, a city that she "can't leave", but that she wants to try to visit the DRC annually, as her parents taught her, especially for the benefit of her two-year-old daughter so that "she doesn't forget where she is from, I just want to pass this onto her, to embrace her own culture and never forget" (Interview: 21 September 2017).

While studying at Middlesex University London, Vanessa developed a strong interest in modern dance performance in her everyday life. She has been dancing for six years and she is now a self-employed teacher, running Afrobeat dance classes and workshops, especially in South London, under the name of *#DanceWithNessa* (2015). The recently-formed dance group Z5 was born as a collaboration which mainly aims to "embrace and show an African roots unity". Vanessa explained that the biggest task, in her role as dance choreographer in preparing the show for the CFWL event, was to introduce to the Nigerian and Jamaican members of the group the Congolese rumba, its rhythm and body movements which they have never danced before. The performance aimed to project a specific Congolese cultural "attitude and proudness". In clarifying her expression, Vanessa underlined that what makes Africans great is their collective pride in what they do:

Attitude is the way we dance, to show the 'we can do' strength. We Africans are very confident and especially we Congolese dancers are very proud to show this quality because dance is a main thing in our country and that's how we get through a lot of other horrible realities that are happening in our homeland like

war and political problems. So, dance is probably the happiest place, a way to escape! (Interview: 21 September 2017)

The use of dance, for Vanessa personally, becomes an ordinary way to share optimistic feelings as well as to get feedback and approval from those observing. When asked to elaborate more about typical Congolese dance movements, Vanessa continued:

It is all about the waist, normally Congolese people are very ‘elastic’ in terms of our waist, being able to be very flexible and to just rotate our hips (...) we are known for our wide hips, and the hips dance is what we are really good at. So, that’s what we wanted to put mainly in our performance. We just literally tried to show off our characteristics. I am just proud of being Congolese, very proud, very, very, very, very, very, very, proud. (Interview: 21 September 2017)

In conversation with Alisha, one of the other two young Congolese female dancers within the Z5 group, she described the night performance as “energy and pure energetic feelings”. She narrated that many Congolese dance moves have specific cultural references, names and stories. She brought the example of the Lingala word *malewa*, which literally means food. She explained that, in the Congo, doing *malewa* means going out for dinner with the whole family in one of the Congolese outdoor kiosk restaurants, commonly found on the side of the street. Alisha explained that the lyrics of one of the traditional songs played during the Z5 dance performance described the story of a typical Congolese mother saying, “I need to eat, really need to eat, I need *malewa*”. The lyric continues illustrating the mother going out to eat and this is the reason why the five performers, during that song, were dancing what they called the “food dance move”. In mimicking the gesture of feeding themselves through moving their hands close to their mouths they were portraying the story of the song. As clarified by Alisha, the “food dance move” illustrated the mother eating and signified how the dance flexibility comes to the body only after gaining energy from food (Interview: 21 September 2017).

As expressed by both Vanessa and Alisha, another dance-cultural reference of their performance was the story behind the Lingala expression *sima ekoli*, commonly

used to describe the popular body expression of “showing off and shaking our hips and bum”, displaying close similarities with twerking dance moves. *Sima ekoli* is a short expression taken from a longer Congolese song lyric chorus which says: “Mwana na’ tikaki moke sima ekoli, sima ekoli, sima ekoli, sima ekoli (...)”, translated by Alisha as “what as a child I left small, my mom has grown”. She explained that the song narrates the story of a man and a woman who grew up together and, when they were younger, the boy was attracted to the girl and now he sees her growing up to be a voluptuous woman. So, the cultural meaning of the story refers to acknowledging and embracing that many Congolese women grow up into “a mother nature type of body!” (Interview: 21 September 2017).

Another inspiration for the night’s choreography, Alisha narrated, came from one of the oldest and most influential Congolese dances called *mutuashi*, coming from the Baluba (or Luba) ethnic group living in the Southwestern Kasai province of the DRC. She explained that many of their songs tell stories, even if she could not illustrate details on it:

They dance a lot with their hips in going down and down and down as much as they can (...) I don’t know those stories, I just remember one was talking about a man who had lost everything but then I have no idea about what happened to him (...) that’s probably one of the first types of tribal dance that came out, so it wouldn’t be something that we would know in my generation, maybe my parents who lived in the Congo they would probably be able to tell you every story of every song (...) now it is like ‘filtered down’ through generations and that’s why the whole point of this event is obviously to make awareness and celebrate things like this. (Interview: 21 September 2017)

The *mutuashi* dance in the DRC, also known as the dance of the “lower abdomen” (Ngoye, 1995), is typically performed in the church context and wake ceremonies as well as being transposed to the performance space of popular music concerts. It involves smooth, undulating and circular hip movements and sensual gesticulations of the body as the focal point. Modernised elements used by Congolese women to demonstrate their *mutuashi* prowess includes, for example, moving slowly down towards the floor while

elegantly balancing an empty bottle on the head. This body performance, reproduced during the fashion evening, gives Congolese women the potential to communicate their selfhood and become visible social actors (Braun, 2014).

The Z5 dance performance, and the various *stories* (Marcus, 1995) embedded in it, represented an interesting site through which the second moment of Orientalist/exoticising discourses took shape. This signifies, according to Kondo, one of the most unavoidable, poignant, and problematic effects of domination which arises when subaltern peoples replicate forms of their own oppression (Kondo, 1997). More precisely, Kondo refers to the ways in which cosmopolitan Japanese fashion designers appropriate a “Western gaze and for whom Japanese-ness becomes exoticized and located in particular places and in particular objects emblematic of Japanese tradition” (Kondo, 1997, p. 81). As explained by Nagrah, this moment of “exoticisation of the self” emerges from a direct adoption of the first moment of Orientalisation/exoticisation by the West, resulting in the exoticization of Indian fashion motifs by Indian designers for Indian consumers (Nagrah, 2003). The same theoretical notion can be applied to the rumba dance performance of the evening, where young cosmopolitan Congolese dancers aimed to represent the idea of an “original”, shared Black African identity. More precisely, they symbolised through their bodies a sense of “authentic” Congolese-ness taking inspiration from a series of characteristics considered to be illustrative of Congolese culture. These included the translation of collectively known cultural expressions and song stories, such as the “doing *malewa*” and the *sima ekoli*, visualised through the medium of the body, as well as the re-interpretation of specific dance movements such as the folkloric *mutuashi* dance practice. In so doing, young dance performers reproduced perception of their own Black African culture, physically enacting a form of “exoticisation of the self” and, therefore, *metaphorically* (Marcus, 1995) recirculating old Orientalist discourses.

During the evening, another significant site of investigation of an “authentic”, “autoexoticised”, symbolic representation of cultural “traditionalism” was the fashion catwalk organised by twenty-six-year-old, London Congolese designer Rachael Lasamba. Appearing as the only young fashion designer of the show whose family is originally from the DRC, she previously showcased a different collection at the CFW 2016 in Kinshasa and was also involved in the production of the CFW London night.

Rachael, who defines herself as a serial entrepreneur,¹⁸¹ was born and grew up in London. She used to watch her Congolese mother and grandmother buying silk serge fabric, sewing it in collaboration and fabricating women’s wedding gowns. At a young age her mother taught her how to sew different textiles. This is how her passion for fashion and striving to become a businesswoman originated. She started her first commercial venture as a hobby at the age of seventeen, during high school, stitching accessories at home, for example decorative cushions for Mother’s Day with “Happy Mother’s Day” embroidered on them, and selling them at school. In the meantime, Rachael’s mother also often travelled abroad, selling her products not only in the UK but also in India, Hong Kong, etc. Once again, her mother being a role model made Rachael develop a second passion for travelling and encouraged her to study Travel and Tourism at college to become an airfare desk assistant. Rachael now tries to combine both personal interests to develop her fashion business (Fieldnotes recorded: 23 March 2018).

¹⁸¹ Data about Rachael Lasamba’ biography and experience was collected during an evening event called “Phenomenal Woman. Rising above obstacles to achieve success as a Black woman in 2018”, held at the Runway East Moorgate, Finsbury Square, on the 23rd of March 2018. Rachael and another Black businesswoman were invited to share their personal and career stories. As described by its digital pamphlet, “Phenomenal Woman” was a series of events created in 2017 by British Black Africans to gather Black women “of all ages and backgrounds for a time of celebration, empowerment and sisterhood”. The evening was attended by around forty to fifty people, mainly composed by young Black African female students, some older PR women, a few male students, and young entrepreneurs. Before the event began, one of the organisers distributed goody-bags to all female attendees, containing beauty products particularly for Black hair and skin. In the room, two stalls run by Black African women were selling products from their businesses such as African wax-print fabrics for headwraps and handmade jewelleryes.

Ordinarily, Rachael specialises in the production of bespoke bridal and evening womenswear through her own company *Ràshel* (2018), launched in June 2013. The label employs “Westernised” fashion tastes both in terms of the design and use of materials, aiming to provide “elegance, class and sophistication to help make every occasion memorable” (Belvitt, 2017). In so doing, the *Ràshel* label falls within the category of style which the sociologist Diane Crane names “luxury fashion design” (Crane, 2000) or the model that Angela McRobbie calls “professional fashion” (McRobbie, 2003). The emphasis is on a broad range of elegance, class and sophistication rather than abstraction or originality (McRobbie, 2003), with its key target market focused on independent, professional women.

However, for the specific context of the CFW London evening, Rachael produced a collection and staged a performance aiming to enact and celebrate an “authentic”, collective, *story* (Marcus, 1995). Contrasting with other catwalks of the evening (analysed later in the chapter), Rachael collection focused on clearly defined “Afrocentric” fashion aesthetics (de Witte, 2017). The spectacle involved the appearance in the grand nave of all female and male models, walking barefoot, dressed in garments produced from a number of colourful African wax-print fabrics, commonly referred to in Congolese Lingala as *liputa* (Lisapo, 2014). All the female models’ outfits were characterised by varying bright and bold patterns in green, yellow, dark pink, blue, white etc. Some of them wore two-piece outfits composed of tops wrapped on their chests and knee or ankle length skirts, cut and stitched into strips or knotted on their hips. Others wore one-piece toga-style garments, tailored with a unique piece of *liputa* fabric, knotted either on their neck or shoulders or backs. In addition, some of the young female models were adorned with accessories, for instance rope necklaces or earrings, stone pendants, or performing the catwalk with other significant cultural references such as keeping wooden bowls on their heads. All the male models were shirtless, wearing

comfortable, pyjama-style trousers made from simpler African wax-prints fabrics in green, red, blue, and white fantasies or plain, grey cotton fabrics. Some of them wore red or black velvet hats, in the shape of short, round-cylindrical and semi-rigid skullcaps.

The catwalk ended with a concluding performance involving the reunion, one by one, of all the models in the catwalk space. Female models formed a row on one side and male models formed a separate row on the other side, all facing the audience. Fashion designer Rachael appeared on the stage for the first time and stood in the middle of the models, close to the presbytery, facing the photographers. She was wearing a white skirt with a long-sleeved crossed blouse, also made from green and yellow *liputa* fabric. Once everyone was correctly positioned, the DJ played a specific Congolese Lingala song while Rachael and all the models performed small dance moves, clapping their hands in the air, and singing the song lyrics. Hosts and members of the audience were also involved, encouraged to stand up and do the same.

Similarly to the rumba dance act, the collection-story and performance organised by Rachael for a Congolese Black African audience can also be conceptualised within the perspective of “self-exoticism”. A sense of Congolese-ness was “autoexoticised” and transmitted through the combined selection of ethnically specific iconic elements, such as the *liputa* fabrics and the Lingala song, with a more generic sense of African-ness. Easily identifiable cultural signifiers (de Witte, 2017), predominantly characteristic of non-urban areas of the African continent, were also selected from a less-specific African visual language such as the semi-nudity of the models’ bodies, the barefoot walk, the head-carrying practice, etc. The fusion of various traditional elements was employed by the young designer to metaphorically recreate an “exotic” aura of the Congolese, African village and, consequently, displayed a Westernised image (Nagrath, 2003) of an idealised rural Africa for members of the audience with Black African

origins. In so doing, the performance re-inscribed a symbolic sense of the Congo and a more general sense of Africa through particular objects, or things. It “imagined” particular places that are emblematic in the Congolese tradition, but can be easily reflected to other parts of the African continent as well as being also illustrative of “African-ness” in the West. Both the “traditional” dance and the catwalk performances, therefore, acted out as processes of self-exoticisation, resulting from the internalisation of the exoticise Western gaze (Nagrath, 2003). A leading feature that emerged from the works of Congolese choreographer Vanessa and fashion designer Rachael was the common decision to metaphorically portray and celebrate their own heritage as “unique”, through an emphasised injection of “authentic” elements and signs, with the goal of staging an “exotic” African aura. However, these same practices, together with involving a process of “autoexoticizing”, could additionally, and in conflict, be interpreted as a process that enables young Congolese to position themselves as familiar with modernity by asserting knowledge of their ethnic heritage and a globally informed understanding of the reasons behind the value and “fashionability” of that cultural heritage (Nagrath, 2003, Jones and Leshkovich, 2003).

Overall, organisers, designers and other performers involved with the *Congo Fashion Week*, both in DRC and in London, find themselves forced to navigate the intrinsically conflicting “double-bind”, which often characterises the contemporary fashion industry and its related spaces. Through the CFW and its London pre-show, the persistent idea of the exoticisation by the West and its gaze, a product of Western and non-Western power relations and structures, was simultaneously interrelated, at times in conflict, with self-exoticisation. Kondo underlines that the ways power works can never be completely detached from dynamics of domination and among one of the most critical, but unavoidable, effects of domination takes place when minority groups reproduce forms of their own oppression through the Orientalisation/exoticisation of the

self. However, this “autoexoticising” is never merely a re-inscription of the dominant. On the African side, as for the Japanese, the relation with the West is a complex combination of “mimicry” (Bhabha, 1994) appropriation and synthesis (Kondo, 1997). Additionally, the space of CFW displayed cultural difference and symbolic forms of “traditionalism”, based on the desire to reclaim and portray a collectively “authentic” African narrative, shared between the organisers, the performers, the hosts and members of the audience, the majority of which were of Black African backgrounds and, especially, originally from the DRC. In this sense, the South-North dichotomy within the realm of fashion was, at different levels, both reinscribed through mimesis as well as being destabilised through the CFW, seeking to oppose yet remaining inextricably and profoundly implicated in capitalist colonial and neo-colonial relations (Kondo, 1997).

The following sections analyse the final moment of exoticising discourses through a detailed investigation of some of the garments displayed during the show. The aim is to highlight how the social field produced during the process of the fashion evening transcended national and cultural borders, forming a generalised Black African sense of collectivity, but simultaneously contradicting the “imagined” recreation of a specific Congolese “authenticity”. The ways through which Black African designers resisted or tried to contest stereotypes on African fashion dictated by the West through processes of counter-exoticism is also demonstrated.

6.2.3 “Afropolitan” sartorial aesthetics: “Counter-exoticism”

Together with Rachael, six other fashion designers showcased their fashion garments during the CFWL night. The group included four young London Nigerian women, a middle-aged male British Nigerian based in Louth and a young British woman from Cambridge. Four fashion designers displayed collections from their independent fashion brands named *Yemzi* (2018), *Becca Apparel* (2018), *Majekal Regalia* (2018) and *George Adesegun Couture* (2018), while the other two fashion designers, Abisola

Akanni (2018) and Sarah Carter,¹⁸² presented their collections produced as part of their fashion degrees. A clear majority of the fashion garments were womenswear ready-to-wear collections, which in some cases had been showcased at the *Africa Fashion Week London* or *London Fashion Week*.

Throughout the evening, each fashion designer presented a collection composed of ten to fifteen garments. Approximately seven to eight young Black female models and four to five young Black male models come out from the backstage area in the crypt, performing the catwalks singularly from one side of the nave corridor to the other and going back to the ground floor. They all reappeared several times with very different looks, in accordance with each designer's collection. Following the standard format of modern fashion shows, each runway was summarised through a quick parade of the models altogether, showing the entire collection at once and concluded by the designer's first appearance on the stage, often accompanied hand in hand by one or two models. The designer was then asked to stand for a few minutes with one of the hosts and briefly present her/his work.

Although CFWL embedded various moments of exoticism by the West and the exoticism of the self, it also represented a space through which to resist, put into conflict, and reformulate those same stages. The London catwalk also exposed exemplary representations of what Kondo identifies as the third moment of Orientalist discourses, redefined for an African context as the third moment of exoticising discourses, calling it "counter-exoticism". "Counter-Orientalism" or "counter-exoticism" refers to the ways in which "non-Western" fashion practices can symbolically mobilise alternative messages, creating sites for the production and performance of "contestatory wish-images" in the form of racial, gender, national, and

¹⁸² Sarah Carter does not have an official website or social media page. However, her work can be found online. She was, for example, awarded first runner up at the FAD (Fashion Awareness Direct) competition, in London in February 2017 (Fashion Awareness Direct, 2017).

transnational identities (Kondo, 1997). This conflicting position was clearly represented through the womenswear designs of fashion label *Majekal Regalia* presented at the CFWL. The statement of the brand stood out from the other collections since it consisted of “Western wear” (Nagrath, 2003), without any specific African references and not even produced through an Afro-Western fusion. Most significant was the *Majekal Regalia* key garment, worn by model Charlotte Kamale, the “face” and brand ambassador of the CFW 2017, as mentioned earlier. This was a two-piece evening dress, composed of a tube top made from golden, sequin (paillette) fabric and a wide, voluminous and puffy, half-length skirt of five layers, from shorter to progressively longer lengths, of semi-rigid tulle fabric of golden colour as well. Referred to as the “golden princess” dress on the fashion brand’s twitter account, it enables the wearer to “shine like gold” and “sparkle like glitter”. Any trace of “traditional” or “ethnic” tastes were intentionally removed in the garment production and presentation. In so doing, the young designer could be seen as wanting to refuse any element related to her own “native” culture. However, the *Majekal Regalia* key garment can also be interpreted as an expression of counter-exoticism that metaphorically subverted stereotypical boundaries associated with African fashion styles and rejected the limiting discourses of Western exoticisation.

Several other collections presented at the CFWL pre-show could also be categorised as counter-exoticising symbolic statements. These encompassed what has been defined by scholars as “Afropolitan” (Farber, 2010, Chielozona, 2014) aesthetics, in which both African and cosmopolitan aesthetics are self-consciously mixed, reworked and integrated to produce an “African fusion” sartorial style (Farber, 2010). Many designers of the evening incorporated Africa-inspired symbols and signifiers of cultural difference, involving visual and material references generally considered to be characteristic of traditional African dress, into more Westernised tastes. Eurocentric

tailoring and styles were deployed through the stylisation of certain garments closely fitted around the body and the combination of certain outfits with re-visited Westernised items (Farber, 2010), including tailored jackets, tight-fitting corset-inspired bodices, jumpsuits, etc., as well as accessories such as high heels, evening sandals or casual boots.

A significant example of “Afropolitan” aesthetics was the fashion design of Nigerian Abisola Akanni.¹⁸³ She was the only designer presenting a menswear collection, described below, and the only one who had all young Black men modelling her pieces. This was entitled “Back to School” and focused on integrating Western and African school uniforms. When she was asked to illustrate the story behind her designs by host Nancy, she explained:

I just used to wear second-hand menswear, so I thought I’d create something similar but not just for men, also for ladies. This collection has the ‘back to school’ theme but with an African twist and what got me inspired was the fact that while I was looking at the African uniforms for students, I realised that I did not really see any powerful, colourful fabrics so I said ‘Ok, let me do that but with vibrant colours!’ (Fieldnotes recorded: 21 September 2017)

On her De Montfort University profile, the collection is described by Abisola as inspired “from the popular preppy look¹⁸⁴ and the Nigerian attire called Agbada,¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Many other examples of African hybrid aesthetics were presented during the evening. In displaying a piece from Nigerian fashion brand *George Adesegun Couture*, a young Black female model with natural Afro-hair and few long braids entered the stage wearing a black velvet “re-interpreted” evening jacket combined with a wide, ankle-length skirt produced with a purple cotton fabric on which Nsibidi symbols and signs from the South-eastern Nigerian region were inscribed in light orange (Gregersen, 1977). A similar approach in fashion production was testified by other designers. As London Nigerian fashion designer from the brand *Becca Apparel* explained, when asked by host Nancy what made her become a fashion designer and what inspired her designs: “I got inspiration from my Nigerian grandmother, she was a designer. Since I was little, I used to design with her. I just looked at bringing my African culture from there over here, but I also do European culture designs as well, so I just do a mixture” (Fieldnotes recorded: 21 September 2017). The combination of West African heritage and British upbringing’s influence was also embodied in the ready-to-wear collection presented by London Nigerian fashion brand *Yemzi*. As described on the brand’s website, the collection, entitled “Down and Out in London and Lagos”, included diverse pieces fabricated out of a dark palette of silk satin and silk chiffon where the designer had printed illustrations inspired by the Yoruba people in Southwestern Nigeria and their tribal scarification and rock art symbolism.

¹⁸⁴ The preppy look and style originated in modern America between the 1950s and 1960s. “Preppy” refers to the USA pre-college preparatory, or prep schools, attended by upper and middle-class White children. The classic male preppy style involves a pairing of garments such

combining these to offer a different, fun and modern look.” In her experience: “When it comes to professional-wear, Africa emulates the Western way of dressing to demonstrate a sign of social and economic progression but in turn has lost the cultural background” (Akanni, 2017). Therefore, the aesthetic development in producing her final designs was informed by a re-visitation of Ankara traditional cotton fabrics, characterised by vivid prints and colours, combined with very bright and synthetic fur. Models additionally wore bright beach hats and shiny plastic boots. The collection aimed to achieve a modern interpretation of school uniforms with a traditional twist and to celebrate the combination of cultures.

Many other young designers of the CFWL fashion evening did not label their collections as specifically “ethnic”, demonstrating instead how Western-style clothes could be fabricated along with African motifs and injections without falling into an explicit exoticisation of the self. They showed with mixed symbols how the strict dichotomy between the traditional and the trendy could be overcome, avoiding the representation of the traditional as “exotic” (Nagrath, 2003). In criticising the ways that a Western magazine understood and received the work of a Japanese designer, Kondo highlights the implicit patronising attitude of the West towards the East, where the subtext refers to: “East is East, and West is West and attempts to blur the boundaries are ‘misguided’ and only when motifs are ‘ancient’ (...) are they successful” (Kondo, 1997, p. 69). On the contrary, within a compatible African context, several collections displayed during the CFWL pre-show refused to be narrowed within pre-defined specific terms but rather mobilised counter-exoticisms as alternative messages, creating sites for the production of “contestatory wish-images” (Kondo, 1997, Nagrath, 2003). Through their material production, Black African designers metaphorically rejected the

as khaki pants, cotton polo shirts with turned-up collars, the casual sweater slung over the shoulders with the sleeve ends cuffed over one another, etc. (Pendergast and Pendergast, 2003).

¹⁸⁵ The Nigerian Agbada is a popular long flowing man’s garment, which can be worn on both sides (Maiwada et al., 2012).

parody of “high” and “low” styles of dress, the clear distinction between Western and African, but rather drew inspiration from multiple cultural domains, practically demonstrating how images and ideas move beyond the restrictions of boundaries and categories. This highlights the fluidity embedded within the fashion markets and networks, where sartorial innovations become material and symbolical products of a crossing movement of cultural “contamination” (Appiah, 2006), from South to North, North to South, South to South, and so on (Rovine, 2016).

Overall, the CFWL collections demonstrated that the stylistic synthesis of cosmopolitan and African aesthetics (or solely cosmopolitan aesthetics) symbolically incorporated the fluid modes through which new, local identities are “tried on” and performed in response to and under the influence of the dynamics of globalisation (Farber, 2010). The African components re-proposed during the show were not necessarily rigidly “native” and should not be understood as resistant, oppositional, or in conflict, with global culture but, on the contrary, should be seen as themselves constitutive of global culture. In this regard, Kristyne Loughran’s (2009) article, “The Idea of Africa in European High Fashion: Global Dialogues”, clearly delineates the complex, dynamic and durable interrelationship between African and European fashion systems. Loughran highlights a sustained presence of African aesthetic expressions and styles in European fashion arenas especially throughout the late twentieth century,¹⁸⁶ between 1991 and 2000, with 1997 as the central year. She analyses the work of exemplary European and Black African European high fashion designers to illustrate how African forms and designs have constantly stimulated the production of fashion collections from both sides. In the case of Black African designers working both in

¹⁸⁶ The direct inspiration from the African continent and its aesthetics of European and American fashion designers, fine artists, and patrons, especially during the mid-twentieth century, has been extensively discussed by scholars, who often criticised the primitivist, exoticizing treatment of African fashion. For example, by Candace Keller in her book chapter “International Fashion and West African Portraiture” (Keller, 2013).

Africa and Europe, fashion production is also used to spur on their home economies and to put Africa onto the global fashion circuit. A reciprocal dialogue and creative convergence can open the way for global aesthetics, potentially resulting in the development of a universal fashion system, involving both European and African expressions (Loughran, 2009).

In this sense, postcolonial subjectivities and their fashion productions presented at the CFWL were shaped by how individuals perceived themselves, and wanted to be perceived, as global individuals while registering a sense of racial and ethnic belonging that was similarly compatible with other modes of being in the world (Farber, 2010). The various forms of counter-exoticisms embedded within the fashion show in London opened a physical and symbolic space for the majority of Black African designers to assert some form of power in representing their sense of self and their own life histories, subverting and putting into conflict the restrictive perspectives through which African fashion is often interpreted and pigeonholed (Nagrath, 2003).

It is also important to note that, although the London pre-show was meant to create a space of visibility for the Congolese fashion industry and to celebrate a “one” Congolese beauty-story, as expressed by Marie-Claire during the fashion evening: “one Congo, one love, one fashion!” (Fieldnotes recorded: 21 September 2017), the CFW team found itself in a contradictory position. They were able to present the work of only one young London Congolese designer, Rachael, while they mainly showcased the work of designers from other nationalities and cultural backgrounds, as exemplified by the presence in the show of British designer Sarah Carter. When asked by hosts why she decided to participate and what was her idea behind the collection, Sarah answered: “I love prints and I love anything to do with patterns so that is really why I am here and what brought around my inspiration. I also felt that vibrant, very bright colours might have been perfect here!” (Fieldnotes recorded: 21 September 2017). In answering a

similar question, British Nigerian designer Elizabeth-Yemi Akingbade stated: “I was trying to gain exposure to my brand, and it did achieve a bit, more so than if I didn’t participate” (Email correspondence: 15 March 2018).

Regarding this position presented during the fashion evening, in interview Marie-Claire highlighted her difficulties in reaching out to young Congolese designers living in London and in other UK cities.

The trouble we have here, I don’t know about other Congolese diasporas in other countries, but here it is to bring Congolese together. We are doing so many things but, how can I say, everyone is doing that in his/her corner. I know there are plenty of designers with Congolese descent in many cities, but we struggled to reach out and register them. So other designers are more available and have more exposure I think so it was easier to get at them rather than our “own” designers. So that’s about it. We Congolese do things individually and the difficulty that we always have is to find Congolese designers living here in the UK. It was not easy ‘cause for most of them we did not know where and how to find them. (Interview: 24 February 2018)

According to Marie-Claire, many Congolese and Black African people living in the UK and abroad were also not aware that a Fashion Week was taking place every year in the Congo:

After the pre-show, many Congolese designers living in America or everywhere were able to know about it and they contacted us saying ‘Oh, we are here and how come that we did not hear about the show?’ and saying they did not know that there was a Fashion Week in the Congo and they asked so many questions for information saying that they wanted to participate or asking to become partners (...) so I believe in that way we have achieved our target! (Interview: 24 February 2018)

In this sense, the London pre-show did raise a general awareness among Congolese people about the existence of the CFW main event in Kinshasa, acting as an initial promotional arena for potential participation and collaboration between the diaspora scattered in the UK and other Western countries and the DRC. A prime example is the transnational story of model Charlotte Kamale who, during the London pre-show, explained how being invited to become the 2017 brand representative meant travelling to the DRC for the very first time, emphasising how the CFW was “trying to build ‘our Congo’ and Kinshasa as the next fashion capital” (Fieldnotes recorded: 21 September

2017). However, the showcasing of collections by non-Congolese fashion designers, mainly from the Nigerian diaspora, articulated a much wider, multicultural narrative field. On the one hand, it formed a generalised Black African symbolic sense of collectivity, while on the other hand, it clearly contested the representation of an “imagined” Congolese “authentic” fashion performance that the organisers claimed to portray and that, probably, many attendees had thought they would experience.

Accordingly, the concept of transnationalism and the continuous formation of transnational identities should be referred to as a multi-layered and multi-sided phenomenon. The social field, or story, produced during the process of the fashion evening transcended national and cultural borders from various angles. It embedded the transnational life histories of individuals who belonged to the same socio-cultural group. Through the fashion arena, young Congolese people confirmed that they could maintain and further develop a connection with their origins not only on an “imaginary” level, but also on a physical dimension. The biographies and experiences of Marie-Claire and fashion designer Rachael can be taken as instances of this, whose highly transnational identities were based on experiences of multiple migrations. A transnational process was evident also in the stories and experiences of other young Congolese attendees, such as model Charlotte Kamale and other Congolese members of the audience (e.g. film producer Hilary Jennifer mentioned earlier) who were given the possibility to travel to the DRC since being involved in the organisation of the *Congo Fashion Week*. Expressing a more “imagined” transnationalism were the stories and experiences of British Congolese dancers Vanessa and Alisha, whose performance was directly inspired by their cultural references and cultural memories, and by their interest in transmitting a Congolese tale and a symbolic Black African pride.

At the same time, the space of the fashion show demonstrated how transnational identities are influenced and formed through everyday experiences and interconnections

not only between individuals with a similar heritage but also, and especially, between individuals who do not belong to the same cultural group and do not specifically share the same traditions. The emphasis of the evening to celebrate a “unique” Congolese identity was evidently put into question during the show’s performances which portrayed instead a continuous transformation of identity fluidity and multiplicity, inevitably affected by globalising and localising interlaced processes. The planned event, through symbolic systems and signifying processes, produced a multiple transnational space of practices. It represented a transcultural social field especially in terms of the material design collections largely produced by non-Congolese designers in front of predominantly Congolese consumers. The CFWL showcase brought to light how African and British fashion cultures increasingly emerge as a complex hybrid of “traditional” and “modern” styles, of global and local influences able to trace stories. “Afropolitan” aesthetics proved the existence of a permeability of cultural boundaries, where any fixed binaries of “West” and “South” were challenged. The essentialist view that sees cultural “authenticity” as the intrinsic feature of a particular group was contested, represented as conflictual, since the meaning of performances and material goods on display was contingent on how these were appropriated within that specific context (Jackson et al., 2007). In this sense, the fashion show created and offered communal meanings. It guided individuals who organised it and participated in it, to metaphorically identify and perform through actions a Black African community awareness, making sense of who they are (Merkel, 2015). They transmitted their own life histories, not specifically in reference to a single ethnic belonging but rather through a continuous interlace of transnational dialogues.

Therefore, in investigating the space of a commodity culture such as fashion, the concept of transnationalism can be extended beyond the narrow confines associated with membership of specific ethnically defined transnational migrant and “minoritized”

diasporic groups, encompassing instead all who inhabit it (Crang et al., 2003). The multi-layered cultural “imaginaries” that circulated through the context of the fashion evening illustrated that the constitution and performance of transnational identities represent an active, intercultural process, rather than a static one. It also showed that the transnational space of fashion is not only symbolic but becomes materialised and should, therefore, be looked at as a practical accomplishment of those same identity-stories (Crang et al., 2003).

Along with further demonstrating how the *people* and *biographies*, the *thing*, the *story* and the *metaphor* (Marcus, 1995) are embedded and expressed through the CFW and its London pre-show, the second part of this chapter has further traced the clear *conflict* (Marcus, 1995) revealed by the Congolese transnational fashion practice. The analysis of this type of body practice has also outlined how, following Goffman and Butler, performative acts are only seemingly theatrical (Goffman, 1959a, Butler, 2011a) since individual actors are not consciously acting out, but rather performing previously learned cultural “beliefs”, norms and meanings which are actualised and reproduced collectively as reality once again (Butler, 1988, Butler, 2011a). Individuals are, in this sense, not voluntarily “choosing” which race, ethnicity and gender to act out, to perform, although they are employing personal ways of accentuating it (Lloyd, 1999). Accordingly, any essentialist understanding of race, ethnicity and gender would be inaccurate since these categories have been proven, for example through the CFW and CFWL, to be performed by people during social interaction and manufactured out of the fabric of culture and social structure (Pyke and Johnson, 2003). Body performances have, moreover, the power to point out the ways in which subjectivity and identity are also spatialised processes (Duffy, 2005), as the case study has shown so far.

In the next sections, the second main issue of the chapter will be presented, concerning the simultaneous entanglement between the cultural/aesthetic, the

commercial and the political aspects which characterise the space of *Congo Fashion Week*. This interconnection is firstly illustrated through the investigation of the CFW collaboration with the *Congo Fashion Institute* project in the DRC, based on the idea of developing local “fashion entrepreneurship”. Secondly, this is illustrated through the strong political message behind the organisation of the pre-show in London, and its fundraising goal endorsing the British-Congolese charity *Tamar Foundation*.

6.3 The cultural, the economic and the political combined

6.3.1 Investing in local fashion entrepreneurship: The *Congo Fashion Institute*

The interrelation between cultural and aesthetic aspects with economics which distinguish the *Congo Fashion Week* enterprise lies in the ways fashion practices are practically and symbolically applied by its team. These are used as a medium to seek socio-cultural and financial advancement in the DRC, potentially acting to reinforce the wider African fashion industry. An instance of this connection is the establishment, in 2013, of the *Congo Fashion Institute*, a partnership between the CFW team and representatives of one of the oldest fashion schools in Kinshasa, the Higher Institute of Arts and Crafts. The *Congo Fashion Institute* is described on the CFW website and in *Molato Magazine 2017* as a collaborative network between professionals within the fashion sector and craft industry in the DRC and its diasporas. It was created to give a more organised structure to the fashion economy in the DRC and to support its expansion both in terms of quality and sustainability.

In a 2016 interview with *Vox Africa UK* (2016), Marie-France explained that the idea to create the project was influenced by her everyday experience in recognising a lack of job opportunities in the field of fashion, due to a “non-existent or dormant” fashion industry in the DRC. As she puts it: “we saw that there were so many talented people that finished school and then would go to work in supermarkets, in petrol

stations, etc.” (Vox Africa UK, 2016). Therefore, the institute aimed to represent a bridge between education, employment, and entrepreneurship, bringing the business side of fashion into the Institute through training workshops and conferences, ahead of the Fashion Week.

In 2015, as reported on the CFW website, *Congo Fashion Institute* also introduced the “best outfit” competition among final year students, sponsored by the Congolese brewery *Bracongo*,¹⁸⁷ where the winner at the CFW gained the opportunity to set up his/her own business. In Marie-France’s point of view expressed on *Vox Africa UK* (2016):

We just don’t want to raise employees, we want to raise business entrepreneurs (...) one of the contestants last year did not win but he got motivated to set up his own workshop because this is what people need sometimes, they don’t need us to bring everything on the plate for them. They want that motivation like ‘You can do it. You have to achieve it. You can start something. You don’t have to wait for government to start giving you jobs’ (...) So, the CFW and the *Congo Fashion Institute* work together to promote designers on one hand to raise entrepreneurs on the other.

Since the establishment of CFW and the development of the *Congo Fashion Institute*, both Idikayi’ sisters claim that the local fashion industry has progressed in terms of young Congolese designers’ production, promotion and visibility. As explained by Marie-France in an interview with *Vox Africa UK* (2016), and by Marie-Claire in interview with me, for the first CFW editions many Congolese designers were not used to creating entire new collections, but rather the same garments were re-presented several times. Over the years, CFW has trained them to produce more collections each year, based on fresh elements. The project has also been successful in instructing designers to advertise their works, such as how to organise events around Kinshasa and to produce marketing photoshoots to gain wider attention. In interview Marie-Claire mentioned that some designers have been invited to participate in other Fashion Weeks after being noticed through the CFW platform, and in terms of remuneration, “which is

¹⁸⁷ Offering, for example, outfit fabrics for the student competition.

still part of what we do, some of them have been able to sell to the audience just straight away from the catwalk shows. We have also been able to attract more international buyers from big shops overseas” (Interview: 24 February 2018).

Marie-France and Marie-Claire’s cultural and commercial input can be interpreted as what has been defined as “social entrepreneurialism” in the 1990s. This is based on the connection between cultural and social welfare values in the business world. Setting up businesses or, as mentioned above by Marie-France, even just encouraging individuals to establish personal businesses, becomes a way of creating employment for individuals who might otherwise be unemployed or, in the case of Congolese fashion designers, be forced to work in unrelated fields (McRobbie, 2003). Although Kinshasa is still far from potentially becoming a global African fashion centre, in comparison, for example, to Johannesburg established as Africa’s “fashion capital” (Rogerson, 2006), CFW’s fashion practices provide educational support and potential employment opportunities, especially by means of influencing the vision of “fashion entrepreneurship”. The field of fashion is employed to stimulate the growth of local businesses as a valuable resource for the country and, therefore, to create a cultural and economic impact in the DRC by way of guiding an improvement in the lives of younger generations of Congolese.

In illustrating the story behind the CFW and its main purposes during the pre-show in London, Marie-Claire highlighted:

We are working to give the younger generation of fashion designers the necessary tools and equipment to meet the expectation of a rapidly expanding world and gain the lead to turn beauty as a way to overcome the boundaries of cultures. Through workshops and competitions, we equip young creators and give them the motivation for entrepreneurship in this field which generate significant capital throughout the world. (Fieldnotes recorded: 21 September 2017)

Thus, the CFW partnership with *Congo Fashion Institute* demonstrates how performances of the body can be adopted both as a symbolic vehicle of cultural expression as well as a feature of economic development (Lemire, 2010). The deep

entanglement between cultural creativity and business strategy in the field of fashion is inevitably brought to light. In this regard, Stuart Hall reminds us that culture is material:

Culture has ceased (...) to be a decorative addendum to the 'hard world' of production and things, the icing on the cake of the material world. The word is now as 'material' as the world. Through design, technology and styling, 'aesthetics' has already penetrated the world of modern production. Through marketing, layout and style, the 'image' provides the mode of representation and fictional narrativization of the body on which so much of modern consumption depends. Modern culture is relentlessly material in its practices and modes of production. And the material world of commodities and technologies is profoundly cultural. (Chen and Morley, 2006, p. 232)

Accordingly, all cultural and symbolic phenomena, including the realm of fashion, exist and develop in conformity with commercial dynamics which no longer stand in some uncontaminated state (McRobbie, 2003). Following this point of view, creative fashion practices should be understood as a place of livelihood for young Congolese cultural producers in the DRC. Similarly, London Black African designers who presented their material productions, embedded with symbols, from their labels at the CFWL become part of the micro-economy of British fashion, a cultural phenomenon which differentiates itself from the haute couture tradition¹⁸⁸ and is instead immersed in popular elements such as multiculturalism and youth culture (McRobbie, 2003).

The CFW arena can, thus, be interpreted as a modern paradigm that brings together culture, identity-image and commerce (Soley-Beltran, 2015). Analysts remind us that, historically, the cultural dimension has been solely related to the production of

¹⁸⁸ According to the historical contribution of Pierre Bourdieu, fashion design was a profession that merged high cultural capital with low educational capital. Fashion designers historically belonged to the old bourgeoisie, living in the "old" fashioned core of Paris, and succeeding through their natural good manners and taste, rather than a specific fashion education (Bourdieu, 1984, Skov, 2002). However, Black African designers who showcased at the CFWL fell within Angela McRobbie's theorisation demonstrating that fashion designers are no longer a tiny, privileged elite, in a Bourdieusian sense. She illustrates how British designers, from different classes and trained in the art school system, are able to establish their "own labels" and to create a series of micro-economies based on their own self-employment strategies (McRobbie, 2003). Similarly, Black African designers do not belong to the haute couture classification (Bourdieu, 1993), although their collections still represent what Bourdieu would articulate as "clothes which satisfy the demand for distinction" (Bourdieu, 1984). Their market figures as less elitist and hierarchical, but rather wider and less expensive compared to haute couture houses (McRobbie, 2003).

meanings, creativity, imagination, aesthetics and never linked to economic profit, while the commercial dimension, has generally been associated with a materialistic world, driven by the logic of capital (Jackson, 2002). However, the common attitude of thinking of “business” and “culture” as incompatible concepts has gradually shifted, as argued above by Hall, and the embeddedness of economy within the social and the cultural must be acknowledged (Du Gay, 1997, Entwistle, 2015). In practice, analysts suggest, social actors cannot operate in relation to the market without possessing some forms of cultural knowledge. Cultural and economic categories and actions are logically and practically interdependent and mutually constitutive. One must not be reduced to or be separated from the other since cultural patterns are always combined within micro-economic relations (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002). In this context, the production of clothing and its related spaces serve as an important material and imaginative connection in transnational settings, especially in their capacity to materialise socio-cultural, economic as well as political networks (Mangieri, 2013). The space of fashion results from a series of intersecting practices which reflect the relation between what involves “business” and what concerns “culture” and its metaphors. It includes labour and marketing processes as well as design ideas, values and performances shaped by a more cultural attitude (Entwistle, 2015).

The *Congo Fashion Week* project and its London pre-show dissolved rigid polarities between cultural and commercial classifications. Congolese organisers and Black African designers represented intermediaries able to depict a new type of entrepreneur who produce a “cultural economy” (Du Gay and Pryke, 2002). Once again, this concept highlights the complex intersection between the production of cultural meanings and their circulation through the economy, where neither sphere regulates the other (Du Gay, 1997, Entwistle, 2015). Drawing on this perspective, none of the CFW activities could be considered as purely “economic” since it all involved cultural aspects

such as life histories and symbols. Concurrently, every CFW performance was not purely “cultural”, but rather manufactured as products of economic decision-making (Entwistle, 2015).

Furthermore, CFW production embedded the notion of what scholars define as “aesthetic economy”, indicating that aesthetics is central to the ways economic strategies operate in the realm of fashion. The concept highlights how the economic calculations of the fashion market are bound to socio-cultural values, concerns and networks, affiliated with forms of cultural knowledge, capital and acquired taste (Entwistle, 2002). As mentioned earlier, fashion practices among minority groups have been proven to represent forms of micro-markets and entrepreneurship which contemporarily embody strong coded cross-cultural meanings and racial politics. Through fashion diasporic economies, individuals “from the margin” take control over several economic, aesthetic, cultural and technological resources. In so doing, they intervene within, both practically and metaphorically, and shape processes of global capitalism (Bhachu, 2005). Accordingly, the role played by CFWL organisers and Black African designers as cultural and economic practitioners assumed a relevant place in mediating dynamics of production and consumption at a local level. They displayed garments and performances to be “consumed” with particular cultural values, biographies, stories and symbols and addressed these to attendees (Du Gay, 1997, Entwistle, 2015). CFWL languages of the body were put into practice and made meaningful through the actions of each agent (Entwistle, 2015).

A cultural and aesthetic economy of fashion was embedded both within the *Congo Fashion Week* in the DRC and its preliminary evening fashion show in London. The cultural meaning of “Africa” and “African-ness” portrayed through fashion, similarly to “Asia” and “Asian-ness” for Asian American designers (Tu, 2011), was experienced by organisers and designers as a medium to trace diasporic *stories* (Marcus,

1995), to articulate racial and ethnic identities and to symbolically invoke a cultural affiliation. At the same time, the embodiment of “African-ness” also involved economic interests, becoming an opportunity to increase the presence of African designers within the global fashion market. The creative and *metaphorical* (Marcus, 1995) dimension expressed through the production of Black African aesthetics was strategically tied to a more rational dimension which aimed to achieve commercial development and profit.

Along with socio-cultural and economic implications, a political agency of intermediation was also reproduced in setting up the CFWL, especially to offer a sense of continuity with the work developed in Kinshasa through the *Congo Fashion Institute*. The event not only served as cultural performance and commercial strategy, but also as a fundraising activity by partially investing its proceeds into a charitable cause, advocated by a British-Congolese organisation, *Foundation Tamar*, which operates both in the UK and in the DRC. This intrinsic political message behind the cultural and commercial fashion evening is investigated in the following section.

6.3.2 Walking fashioned bodies, walking identity politics: The *Foundation Tamar*

While representing a night of cultural entertainment, where fashion catwalks and live performances hold the audience’s attention, and a commercial tool of retailing designers’ merchandise and promoting the CFW project in Kinshasa, the CFW London pre-show additionally acted as a political space. Marie-Claire in interview explained that the fashion event was conceptualised also as a fundraising activity,¹⁸⁹ contributing to the call to end violence against women. As reported by the CFWL flyer (2017d), the

¹⁸⁹ The common interconnection between fashion environments with political statements and charitable causes is not a new concept. An historical perspective on this is presented by Caroline Adams (2001), who summarises how, from the twentieth century, fashion shows in Britain, France, and the USA were often staged in couture houses, department stores and operas as charity fund-raising events (Evans, 2001). An example is the *Bal des Petits Lits Blancs* (Ball of the Little White Beds), a French annual charity fashion gala, at the Paris Opera and Cannes, whose profits were held for tubercular children (Evans, 2001, Munich, 2011, Apollinaire et al., 2015).

show aimed to donate the ten percent of the profit to a British-Congolese charity, *Foundation Tamar*, initiated by designer Rachael Lasamba in 2016. Its mission, as described on its Twitter Page (2019), is to raise awareness and provide support to women who are survivors of rape and other kinds of sexual violence, both in the UK and the DRC. It aims to help restore “the dignity and confidence of sexual abuse survivors through art and story-telling, allowing them to smile again, to stand strong and to stand tall”.

Foundation Tamar finds its roots in Rachael’s personal experience and memories since, at the age of eighteen/nineteen, she was herself a victim of sexual assault in London. She kept the episode hidden for many years, thinking that she would never have the courage to come forward and openly discuss it. Then, she travelled to Bangkok to participate at the “One Young World”¹⁹⁰ summit in 2015, where she met other women from all over the world who had experienced sexual abuse. Some of them were able to courageously share their stories on stage. This is where the strength and determination of establishing the *Foundation Tamar* came from (Fieldnotes recorded: 23 March 2018).

The collaboration between CFW, *Congo Fashion Institute* and the *Foundation Tamar* was established in 2017. As reported on their Twitter pages, these three groups organised a one-day seminar and exhibition in the DRC, in March 2017. This presented the theme: “Fashion entrepreneurship, where to start?”, and was dedicated to empowering young girls in the city of Goma, Eastern Congo. Similarly, Rachael ran other workshops for young female fashion students at the Higher Institute of Arts and Crafts in Kinshasa, as visually documented in *Molato Magazine 2017*.

Not surprisingly, many young Congolese attendees participated in the CFW London pre-show not only for their general interest in African fashion, but also to

¹⁹⁰ A UK-based charity focused on empowering young individuals to create positive change.

express a symbolic and practical political engagement with the current women's condition in the homeland.¹⁹¹ Friends and family members of CFWL organisers and models agreed on the effectiveness of using fashion practices to influence a wider interest among the London Congolese diaspora to morally and economically sustain socio-cultural advancement in the DRC. During the evening performance, a Congolese female fashion blogger, when asked by the host to express the reason behind her attendance, declared that she was there “to remember her Congolese sisters and that she has always supported the cause” (Fieldnotes recorded: 21 September 2017). In conversation with myself, Jacob, a twenty-six-year-old student born in London to Congolese parents, stated: “I am here just to support the mission, supporting my culture, supporting my country, supporting an improvement in my home country. The clothes were beautiful but what strikes me the most is the thought of helping women who have much less advantages than men” (Interview: 21 September 2017).

Twenty-two-year-old London Congolese student Abel and sixteen-year-old London Congolese student Baptiste, younger siblings of the “face” model of the CFW 2017 edition, participated to encourage their older sister's efforts. According to Abel, the Congolese “love for fashion” has the potential to connect the diaspora in London to financially sustain a “good cause”: “the event is dedicated to a very important issue in the Congo and the funds are going to be invested in the charity and this will contribute to a change at home. It gives hope to see Congolese people coming together and paying to support a good cause!” (Interview: 21 September 2017). Baptiste's point of view was: “I had a nice experience tonight. It felt good to see so many Congolese people in one place happy and smiling, knowing that they could do something about Congo. My sister's plan is to go back and give back to our people there and just trying to work on

¹⁹¹ In the DRC, branded as the rape capital of the world, women are learning boxing skills as self-defence (Fox, 2019).

convincing people in England to care more about what is happening every day in the DRC” (Interview: 21 September 2017).

Other young London Congolese attendees emphasised their appreciation of Marie-Claire and Marie-France’s work. Film producer Hilary Jennifer, who was born in Belgium and moved to London at the age of two, described the *Congo Fashion Week* as an “amazing initiative” which must be acknowledged. She highlighted how her friendship with both sisters developed years ago. She travelled back to Kinshasa to attend the CFW fourth edition in 2015 while planning to attend the sixth event in October 2017 (as mentioned previously). Regarding the London pre-show, she stated: “I am very happy that this year we are having a pre-taste of what will happen in Congo next month. Tonight we have seen some amazing collections from African designers and also the event in London is a great opportunity for Congolese people to come and socialise but also to discuss and know more about the DRC’s problems” (Interview: 21 September 2017).

Liam,¹⁹² one of the photographers and video makers in charge of visually documenting the evening, stated:

There are not many Congolese events that are done in such a prestigious, wonderful venue so to speak. So, the fact that they held it in such a lovely location makes it very unique, ‘cause we don’t have many of our own shows to this degree (...) It was a bit of “a first” for us. So, I am very proud of Marie-Claire, of the CFW team, and I hope to do the same next year and the year after, who knows, maybe in L.A. or Hollywood. What I especially liked about it is the pure fact that it happened, that it was put together and not only for entertainment but for a deeper motivation, you know, I am proud of that because it is not easy. (Interview: 21 September 2017)

Many other attendees mentioned their personal connection with Congolese designer and activist Rachael. They wanted to demonstrate symbolic, moral and economic alliance to

¹⁹² Liam is the creative director of a Congolese, London-based, photography company *MCMedia London*, cited earlier in this chapter. His voice and experience have also been previously introduced in chapter three. He was also in charge of photographic shootings taken beforehand to the CFWL and used to commercialise the event on-line. These, for instance, were taken with Congolese “key” model Charlotte Kamale posing in Ridley Road Market, Dalston, and with other Black African models in indoor locations (e.g. the CFWL flyer photograph).

Rachael's engagement in advocating an open dialogue and healing process for female victims of any kind of violence and in working on advancing African women's rights. For example, two twenty-three-year-old British Congolese female Master's students explained their presence in solidarity with the work of their mutual friend Rachael. In Louise's words: "I am here specially to support what [Rachael] is doing to improve the situation of Congolese women (...) the event was very colourful, very vibrant and a very good experience!" (Interview: 21 September 2017). In Zoey's words: "I have never been to a fashion show before. I think using glamorous style from different African designers and models to bring up such important issues in our community was a smart move" (Interview: 21 September 2017).

A similar position was also shared by British African young women from different African diasporas in the audience and the other people included here as part of the case study. Sarah, a twenty-four-year old business graduate from central London, with very mixed African origins (Egyptian-Sudanese on her mother's side and Mauritian on her father's side), answered: "I am here to encourage my friend Rachael, who is one of the designers and co-organisers and I have always been supporting her. The event was good and her collection particularly, but also the other designers have done such a good job!" (Interview: 21 September 2017). Similarly, Isabelle, a twenty-six-year-old receptionist from West London (originally Rwandan on her mother's side and Burundian on her father's side), expressed: "I wanted to show appreciation to my friend Rachael, considering what she has been through, and I think the showcase of her collection at the end was the best moment of the night" (Interview: 21 September 2017).

According to Congolese dancer Vanessa, some people in the audience participated in the event to find out more about the Congo while others wanted to continue their support. In her experience:

I think where you are and what is happening in your home country can have a connection. What happens there is more impactful for Congolese people who live

there, of course, but these kinds of events are essential for us and for them, so they don't feel forgotten. I know the reason behind this fashion show in London is to help rape victims, which can happen here but is more a common thing in the Congo (...) and the purpose of doing this here, where there is a Congolese community, is to make us aware of that. (Interview: 21 September 2017)

A sense of "awareness" was equally shared by other young Black Africans. Giulia, a twenty-four-year-old British Nigerian female student, attended the evening to show solidarity with her Congolese sisters, friends and ex-boyfriend, whom she grew up with and met "more than ten or even twelve years ago". She described the Congolese diaspora as "very 'fabulous-oriented', (...) very welcoming, exciting to be around and lively". Concerning the London pre-show, she stated:

What I loved was the first dance performance, the cultural dance of Congo and also seeing people from the crowd dancing, singing and interacting with each other after the last catwalk. The best thing about having this event in London is that is not restricted, any culture is welcome, any colour, anybody is welcome. I feel like London is the best place for events like this simply because is not 'one-sided' (...) it brings a lot more awareness really. (Interview: 21 September 2017)

Giulia continued underlining that, in her opinion, the main message of the show was a "togetherness within the difference" in portraying African culture. She emphasised how, during the night's performance, "everybody joined hands, brought their ideas to the table, learned from each other" while, most importantly, investing some money for a clear purpose, a problem which affects all African women, not only Congolese women (Interview: 21 September 2017).

While examining the implications of fashion for political relationships, Joshua I. Miller (2005) raises the question: "what has fashion to do with politics?", highlighting the political significance of fashion practices in society. He particularly focuses on the practice of dress as an inherent element of everyday social life, reminding us how individuals make a visual presentation of themselves as well as witnessing the self-presentation of others through clothing on a daily basis. The act of clothing the body shapes individuals' attitudes towards themselves and each other. If we acknowledge the idea that clothing is a form of expression, it flows logically that social actors often

proclaim their cultural and political (or sexual, religious, professional, economic etc.) allegiances and beliefs, conveying explicit or subliminal messages, by the way they dress. Occasionally, fashion statements can be used to exhibit respect towards others and commitment to a group, thus, influencing political bonds among citizens. Furthermore, when the language of fashion manifests membership and respect for members of a group or a community, the relationships it fosters, Miller argues, can be interpreted as “democratic”.¹⁹³ Therefore, clothes sometimes facilitate the “democratic ideal” of widely distributed power (Miller, 2005). The process of self-presentation through clothing the body becomes particularly politicised when it is transformed as a mode to identify with and to show devotion to a cause advocated by a particular group and to voice a feeling of connectedness and solidarity¹⁹⁴ with other members of that same group. This feeling can encourage and generate communal ties and actions which might become crucial to build an equal and democratic community. In this sense, the world of clothing can be said to emanate political meanings and create political relationships, even if the message might be limited and reach out only to a restricted audience (Miller, 2005). Miller’s argument can be extended onto the fashion catwalk, which can similarly have the power to provoke a dialogue about social and political matters, as part of a democratic culture. The exemplary case of CFWL illustrated that fashion practices can become relevant to establish some forms of democratic processes (Miller, 2005). The London performance contributed to symbolically communicate communal feelings of solidarity regarding the cause advocated by the *Foundation Tamar*.

¹⁹³ Here Miller refers to an ideal involving citizens whose political power, status, and wealth are similar (Miller, 2005).

¹⁹⁴ As defined by the online Oxford English Dictionary, the term “solidarity” is here understood as “unity or agreement of feeling or action, especially among individuals with a common interest; mutual support within a group”.

Research studies show that collaboration with charities as part of a cause-related marketing campaign is a quite popular strategy among fashion brands. Interestingly, it has been found that this approach can be effective in modifying fashion consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards the brand and increasing their interest towards it. When fashion brands cooperate with a particular charity, various information about it, such as its political messages and aims, would usually be integrated into consumers' perception of the brand and their approach towards the brand would be consequently more favourable (Childs and Kim, 2017). In accordance with informants' experiences reported above, the organisation of CFWL in association with the *Foundation Tamar*, and the declared intention of CFW to contribute funding to the charity, influenced in fact a wider interest among members of the audience in consuming the event. The CFW team sought to underline the ethical role of the brand, portraying the story behind the event and marketing it as a "charitable night" in London. The political association raised favourable attitudes and responses towards the spectacle. Knowing that a percentage of the event profits were invested to support the work of *Foundation Tamar* encouraged many Congolese and Black Africans to participate in the performance. Numerous attendees, as attested in interviews, seemed to be more interested in supporting the political movement working on eradicating violence against women rather than on analysing the designers' collection and purchasing fashion garments displayed during the evening. The act of contributing to a political cause therefore allowed the CFWL organisers to attract the attention and engagement of a higher number of participants. It evoked a collective sense of socio-political responsibility towards women victims of violence in the Black African diasporas and in Africa.

CFWL body practices were not only experienced as a cultural and economic force but also to exhibit a political allegiance to the Black African group and to show approval for a specific act of political activism. The dress showcase sought to

practically and symbolically reinforce ties between members of the audience, whose participation in the fashion evening demonstrated both an emotional attachment to the Congolese, Black African culture as well as a financial investment for a charitable cause. The London catwalk represented more than an isolated entertaining activity and its fashion language became more than a trivial matter. On the contrary, the fashion practice, and the *story* (Marcus, 1995) embedded in it, had a public nature and collective political weight, aiming to raise some effective social and political dialogues within the Black African community. Thus, although being often associated with elitism, individualism, and spectacle, the medium of fashion and its system can at times be very well embedded in the social world.

In this regard, Nathalie Khan, in “Catwalk Politics”, examines the fashion catwalks of three well-established haute couture fashion designers who have adopted a radical socio-political approach to the catwalk. In her analysis she explores whether the catwalk performance can ever do anything more than simply constitute a well-tested method of presenting and selling products and establishing trends. She questions: “Does fashion make us think and can fashion be powerful?”. Through radical catwalk shows, those three designers are attempting to transform fashion’s supposed superficiality into a form of protest, of declaration, of contemplation. Yet, despite stating that “fashion has influenced culture, in the same way that it has reflected cultural change” (Khan, 2013, p. 115), Khan concludes by affirming that “as a means of social or political expression, the catwalk show is only ever going to be marginal, destined by design to be ephemeral. The fashion show is an important event, during which nothing is said – at least nothing of substance” (Khan, 2013, p. 126). I partially agree with such a conclusion regarding the fact that most of the time the socio-political message embedded into the catwalk might remain marginal and circumscribed within a partial section of society and, in the particular case of CFW, that would be the Congolese and Black African diasporas in

London. However, keeping in mind that fashion expressions can have an impact on cultural values and reflect cultural transformation, I find myself in disagreement concerning Khan's final reflections. Having looked at the CFW as an exemplary case, I would instead maintain that fashion spaces can have the power to convey life histories, socio-political meanings, symbols and stories, along with having a practical, even though restricted, effect.

It has in fact been established elsewhere that fashion designers often use their collections to convey philosophical, social and political suggestions¹⁹⁵ while customers are interested in wearing those products as a means through which identify with those messages (Vrencoska, 2009). The same can be extended to the story traced within the CFWL and transmitted by the organisers, who produced the fashion performance to convey a specific socio-political "call for action" as well as by attendees who consumed the show to practically and *metaphorically* (Marcus, 1995) identify with the same idea. Thus, clothes and bodily display stood as an important symbol of collective identity during the evening, having political functions in fostering feelings of unity, pride and "imagined" community (Vrencoska, 2009).

As the CFW case study has elucidated, and as theorised by Miller, the practice of fashion has the potential to encourage symbolic attachments and mutual respect among citizens, occasionally facilitating processes of equality and solidarity (Miller, 2005). In this sense, fashion production and consumption develop in accordance with the community within which it is situated. Its force can cover various components of socio-cultural, economic, and political issues. Within the case of *Congo Fashion Week*, fashion practices of self and collective representation were intersecting with politics,

¹⁹⁵ Within the British context, an instance of "protest fashion" is the work of fashion designer Katharine Hamnett, known for her production of simple black or white t-shirts with explicit politicised slogans.

while also seeking to stimulate economic development and potential profit (Lemire, 2010).

Together with further tracing the *people* and *life histories*, the *thing*, the *story* (Marcus, 1995) enclosed within the CFW and CFWL, the final part of this chapter has therefore demonstrated the embedded *conflict* and *symbolic* (Marcus, 1995) dimension characterising the Congolese transnational body performance, resulting not only in a cultural practice but also in an economic and political fashion space. The case study has also confirmed the influence of a sense of place on cultural identity, and the role played by cultural performances in coping with the disruption of place, or with displacement (Fine and Speer, 1992). According to the paradigm of this thesis, in our postmodern world of dislocations and discontinuities, cultural identity is not a given, stable, “originary” principle but rather must be continuously performed, re-membered, and improvised. Identity is more like a site of exchange, a dialogical performance always in process, mixed, relational, and inventive (Clifford, 1988, Conquergood, 1992). The performance of identity becomes even more significant in situations of displacement where individuals often live between worlds, between past and present (Conquergood, 1992). Wrenched from their physical and cultural landscape, their original homelands, diasporic subjects experience performances as a way to recover that physical space through the imaginative reconstruction of a cultural landscape. A combined narrative of body practices is part of this restoration (Fine and Speer, 1992).

As mentioned earlier, the series of performance rituals presented during the CFW London pre-show, most openly the rumba dance spectacle and the last “traditional” catwalk, aimed to recreate a sense of collective “authentic” cultural identity shared between the organisers, the performers, the hosts and member of the audience, the majority of which were originally from the DRC. However, the showcasing of collections from non-Congolese fashion designers, mainly from the

Nigerian diaspora, articulated a much wider, multinational narrative field. On the one hand, it formed a generalised Black African sense of collectivity, while on the other hand, it clearly contested and contradicted the “imagined” Congolese “authenticity” and the claimed representation of “one Congo, one love, one fashion” that the organisers sought to portray and that, probably, many attendees had thought they would experience.

This chapter has, therefore, demonstrated how narratives transmitted by means of fashion and beauty performances stimulated memories and provided a medium for young London Congolese and other Black Africans to manifest agency on their own personal history and to reflect on their experience of exile. They have re-collected and re-contextualised their diasporic identities, but also re-fashioned and experimented with new and adaptive global identities. Furthermore, the producing and selling of these body spaces, both old and new, lost and found, borrowed and discovered, are fabricated into assertions of identity, and are also, significantly, transformed into a resourceful, material means of economic profit and political debate (Conquergood, 1992).

Storytelling is not necessarily verbal or literary but can be powerfully inscribed upon the body and expressed through cultural practices created and proliferated across the African continent and its diasporas. Fashion design is one of those practices that have allowed Black African designers as well as fashion show organisers and audiences to try to move beyond racial and national limitations (Byrd, 2016). For this reason, the analysis of transnational fashion practices and bodily adornments should always be related to political and economic issues, within the global and local nexus, and not only restricted to the understanding of individual and collective self-formation and cultural self-representation (Li, 1998). Fashion interventions are inseparable from geopolitical, racial and neo-colonial positionings (Kondo, 1997). Since the Black African designers and fashion show organisers, similarly to Japanese designers, are inevitably racially

marked, the rivalry with, and desired approval, of the West was brought to light through the circulation of re-inscribed and contested Orientalist discourses (Kondo, 1997), as the chapter exemplified. In this regard, the “body surface” (Hendrickson, 1996) through which racial and ethnic consciousness was displayed during the evening, was transformed into a rich testimony of a cultural and political struggle (Li, 1998). The Fashion Week in the Congo and its preliminary fashion night in London can be read as a way to critique and discuss the necessity of acknowledging the position that African designers living in the continent, and African designers from diasporas, occupy in mainstream fashion. The aim is to increase their visibility and stimulate a more equal system of representation.

Additionally, the fashion arena can be seen as a modern paradigm that brings together culture, identity-image and commerce (Soley-Beltran, 2015). It highlighted how the strict dichotomy between the cultural dimension (traditionally related to the production of meanings, creativity, imagination, aesthetics, and not linked to economic profit), and the commercial dimension (generally associated with a materialistic world, driven by the logic of capital), can be surpassed (Jackson, 2002). In fact, the commodification of cultural difference and the rational calculus of the market, in both cultural practices of *Congo Fashion Week* in Kinshasa and its London pre-show, overlapped.

In this sense, Congolese organisers Marie-Claire and Marie-France, Congolese designer and co-organiser Rachael, and other Black African designers, could be classified as a new type of entrepreneur who produce a “cultural economy” (Du Gay, 1997), resulting from an increasing integration of culture and commerce (Skov, 2002). They represent cultural and commercial intermediaries able to dissolve rigid polarities between Western and African aesthetics, and between globalised perspectives and

localised traditionalisms, and able to transcend borders both imaginatively and physically.

Although it is relatively early in its development and the DRC is still far from potentially becoming a mainstream “fashion centre”, *Congo Fashion Week*’s practices in Kinshasa are actively used to provide educational support and promote employment opportunities, especially by means of influencing the vision of “fashion entrepreneurship”. The field of fashion is employed to stimulate the growth of local businesses as a valuable resource for the country and, therefore, to create a cultural and economic impact in the DRC by way of guiding an improvement in the lives of younger generations of Congolese. To offer a sense of continuity, a socio-cultural agency of intermediation was similarly reproduced through the setting up of the fashion pre-show in London, not only depicted as a cultural entertainment event, but also as a fundraising activity which exceeded the fashion landscape, with part of the proceeds invested into a Congolese charitable cause.

Overall, the CFW London preliminary show played a relevant role in the performance and display of Congolese as well as Black African socio-cultural identities. The tendency of the evening to emphasise and celebrate an “original” Congolese identity was evidently put into question during the show’s performances which portrayed instead a continuous transformation of identity fluidity and multiplicity, inevitably affected by globalising and localising interlaced processes. The performance ritual shaped and offered communal meanings, through symbolic systems and signifying processes, which guided participants to inscribe onto the body a Black African community awareness, make sense of who they are (Merkel, 2015) and to transmit their own histories.

6.4 Concluding remarks

With its focus on spectacle and entertainment, in the case of CFWL the fashion runway acted as an inspiration for postmodern cultural identity formation and re-consolidation. Following the concept of identity “performativity” (Butler, 2011b), bodily expressions and actions during the show resulted from the performative reiteration of collectively defined identity norms, continuously and subjectively cited and re-enacted by social individuals (Butler, 2011b, Soley-Beltran, 2015). Through this lens, fashion and dress practices encompass a performative quality since the “fashioned” or “fashionable” body not only involves the presentation of garments, but also the practice and situation of which they are part. Garments are clearly not worn passively. On the contrary, they require an individual’s active participation (Hansen and Madison, 2013). Therefore, the various ways through which fashion spaces take shape, where material products and cultural performances are consumed and multi-layered meanings are disseminated, confirm the idea that the “fashionable image” at times results from a complex process of self and of collective expressions. The fashion catwalk is transformed into a multidimensional discourse rather than simply displaying collections of garments (Bruzzi and Gibson, 2000).

To outline the transnational geographies and everyday life diasporic experiences of other young London Congolese, in line with the previous fieldwork case studies, every multi-sited ethnographic field (Marcus, 1995) concerning the fashion and beauty practice of *Congo Fashion Week* and its London pre-show were analysed throughout this concluding chapter. The main *people* and *biographies* (Marcus, 1995) were the three migrant young Congolese women, Marie-France, Marie-Claire and Rachael, whose individual life histories and points of view have been central to demarcate and document each multifaced meaning embedded in the DRC international fashion event and in its preliminary London show. Some of the Congolese designers, attendees and

models who took part in various editions of the CFW in the DRC were briefly cited along with the voices of the main organisers, to trace the transnational dimension of the body performance. The diasporic experiences of other participants in the CFW London pre-show were additionally documented. These included the voices of young London Congolese such as the two hosts, the “face” and brand ambassador model, the main photographer, some of the dance performers and some of the London Nigerian and British fashion designers. The ways in which many Congolese and other London Black African attendees perceived the fashion evening was also analysed.

The material productions, or the *thing* (Marcus, 1995), were the different tailored fashion collections displayed at the London CFW event. The performance of young London Congolese creative productions was also outlined, including the hip-hop concert of *Avelino* briefly cited and the more detailed analysis of the traditional Congolese dance choreography performed by the Z5 group.

The *story, plot* or *allegory* (Marcus, 1995) was mainly traced by the ways in which CFW organisers, fashion designers and attendees, both in the DRC and in London, continued to seek international attention and to struggle to find a place in the mainstream fashion industry, as a result of the historical treatment of African fashion systems as “secondary” to Western high fashion and the perpetual dynamics of “Western exoticism”. Narratives of everyday diasporic life experiences and socio-cultural memories were also embedded within some of the cultural performances held at the CFWL, such as the above-mentioned traditional dance choreography and the final catwalk-dance performance. A Congolese transnational story was also transmitted via the experiences of some of the CFWL participants who could travel back home as a result of their involvement with the fashion show.

The *metaphor* (Marcus, 1995) included the correlations of socio-cultural, economic, political values and symbols associated with the CFW and its London pre-

show. CFW practices clearly exceeded the aesthetic and cultural landscape to encapsulate economic and political meanings. The collaboration between CFW and *Congo Fashion Institute* demonstrated how the fashion arena is strategically deployed in the DRC to create an economic impact on the nation and to improve the condition and professional opportunities for younger generations of Congolese. Through a similar approach, the collaboration between CFWL and British-Congolese charity *Foundation Tamar* has transformed the fashion spectacle into a politicised space. Here, fashion and beauty performances were symbolically used to raise awareness on gender violence, and to practically advance the debate on gender equality and democratic processes among Black groups. Additionally, the fashion performance mainly proposed “Afropolitan” sartorial aesthetics as a form of “counter exoticism”. These were either fusing European and African aesthetics or employing only Western ones to challenge reductive stereotypes concerning African fashion reiterated by the West, and to demonstrate an ability to be constitutive of global culture rather than to be resistant or oppositional to it. A symbolic dimension also emerged during the conclusive moment of the CFWL, when the last fashion-catwalk performance, produced by the only London Congolese fashion designer of the show, aimed to establish a traditional collectivity under a framework of “self-exoticism”.

Finally, the *conflicts* (Marcus, 1995) were the quite ambiguous messages ingrained in the establishment and development of the Fashion Week in the DRC and the organisation of its pre-show in London. As a result of the historical baggage from the West towards African fashion as “subordinate”, a deep conflict emerged concerning the ways organisers, designers and attendees experienced the fashion production as “uniquely” Congolese while, in fact, clearly re-inscribing Western “exoticised” tropes out of a strong desire to be recognised and necessity to be included within the global, mainly Western, fashion industry. In parallel, while the CFW London pre-show aimed

to draw attention to Congolese fashion and to emphasise and “originary” cultural identity, what resulted during the night was the presentation of collections mainly produced by British Nigerian designers. The contradictory position in which CFWL organisers, performers and members of the audience found themselves revealed how the multi-diverse fabric of the city of London always has an impact on the ways in which racial and ethnic minority groups, voluntarily or involuntarily, shape their cultural productions and sense of cultural identity.

General Conclusion

Processes of embodied aesthetic practices deployed by young London Congolese have represented a powerful lens to scrutinise their cultural identity formations as well as trace their material and symbolic geographies as lived social fields (Dwyer, 2004b). Cultural theorists remind us that storytelling is not necessarily verbal or literary but can be powerfully inscribed upon bodily cultural practices. Stuart Hall points out that the body has for a long time been a fundamental form of cultural capital for Black African subjects, functioning as a canvas for self-representation during colonial times as well as during decolonial and neo-colonial processes (Hall, 1993). Accordingly, this thesis has demonstrated that a large section of young British Congolese has used the medium of creative fashion style, and aesthetic and beauty display to express their cultural identities. Whether directly or indirectly involved in the production and consumption of fashion and beauty practices, all participants have shown an appreciation of how instrumental outer appearances are in fashioning the inner self, a characteristic well-rooted in their cultural legacy, reflecting the Central African region's historical preoccupation with body display. Specific practices of the body and markers of appearance presented in the thesis served in various ways to reinforce and display the construction and embodiment of new, and at times subversive, individual and collective racial, ethnic and gender identities. These appeared to be fluid, always "in process" (Hall, 1990), with their histories in a constant process of becoming (Mani, 2006).

As analysts highlight, the various ways through which fashion spaces take shape should be seen as part of a complex process and multi-layered discourse (Bruzzi and Gibson, 2000). Bodily adornments encompass a performative quality since the "fashioned" or "fashionable" body not only involves the presentation of garments, but also the practice and situation of which they are a part. Garments are clearly not worn passively, rather requiring individuals' active participation (Hansen and Madison,

2013). Thus, the analysis of aesthetic practices should always be related to economic and political issues, within the global and local nexus, and not only restricted to the understanding of individual and collective self-formation and socio-cultural self-representation (Li, 1998). Bearing this in mind, productions presented in this doctoral project were considered as multi-dimensional (Dwyer, 2004b), since representing culturally, politically and economically driven social practices enables us to reveal some levels of agency for young urban Congolese. Each case study has, indeed, demonstrated that fashion and beauty rituals of the body stand meaningfully as cultural, economic and political arenas, often seeking to mark out a distinction in terms of racial and ethnic belonging as well as class and gender configurations. Through fashion diaspora spaces, many participants have manifested the formation and transformation of cultural values, political points of view and local, economic interests. While the well-established fashion and lifestyle subculture of *la sape* appeared to be progressively losing relevance, the traditional garment practice of the headwrap was reformulated by fashion brand *Kiyana Wraps* and new forms of bodily displays, such as the *Miss Congo UK* beauty pageant and the *Congo Fashion Week*, were introduced.

Importantly, in organising, promoting and attending performance rituals that had many “original” elements of their cultural heritage, young London Congolese strove to record and celebrate a sense of cultural “authenticity” through the reproduction of traditional aesthetics, gender configurations, and representations of racial pride. These productions embodied diasporic memories, manifesting a strong transnational and “imaginary” attachment to the original homeland in the context of postcolonial displacement. It is undeniable that the evoked idea of an “authentic” culture embedded in each form of performance of identity was perceived as “real” by younger generations of London Congolese as a symbolic sense of belonging to a minority group. Many expressed a communal pride in delineating some core aspects of their cultural heritage.

This “imagined” approach paved the way for young subjects to formulate a counter-narrative for themselves from the remains of their essentialised precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial culture.

However, at the same time, the direction of learning workshops and entertaining spectacles to emphasise and celebrate a unique Congolese identity was evidently contradicted during those same performances, which instead, portrayed a continuous transformation of identity fluidity and multiplicity, inevitably affected by globalising and localising interlaced processes. Through performances of the body, young Congolese were also implementing a process of generational renewal regarding socio-cultural “original” values, beliefs and costumes. They often transformed or questioned what was passed onto them by their parents’ generation, at times openly criticising the lifestyle decisions and central values promoted by elders. In this sense, fashion and beauty modes of performances represented a significant site of political intervention (Oza, 2001), used by the young London Congolese group to openly tackle controversial concerns affecting their own community, and more broadly, Black/African diasporas. Some served to display status and social distinction during everyday life in the metropolis as well as the entangled embodiment of Black “feminist” values and “feminine” styles. Others served as a local and a partially global platform through the web, for the younger generation to debate socio-cultural issues, such as gender violence and inequality as well as the under-discussed problem of the HIV virus and its attached widespread stigma. Additionally, new forms of bodily displays were deployed to encourage Afro-diasporic alternatives to Euro-Western beauty and body standards, disseminating African aesthetics, notions of Black beauty and the “natural” body, and potentially becoming a tool to overcome the Western systems of cultural representation. In so doing, Congolese youth were trying to contest conservative beliefs perpetuated by older generations of Congolese and other Black African elders and to promote internal

progress particularly regarding Black African women's rights, community health awareness and beauty ideals.

As well as being political, some participants could also be classified as a new type of entrepreneur who produce a "cultural economy" (Du Gay, 1997), their businesses resulting from an increasing integration of culture and commerce (Skov, 2002). Many of them aimed to acquire recognition through their professional efforts, claiming to be focused on cultural activities that are able firstly to shape a durable progression of their community in the city, and secondly invest in an improvement in the homeland. Young London Congolese represented cultural and commercial intermediaries able to dissolve rigid polarities between Western and African aesthetics, and globalised perspectives and localised traditionalisms, as well as to transcend borders both imaginatively and physically. Bodily performances were, in fact, multiply inhabited (Dwyer, 2004b): not necessarily exclusively connecting members of the same Congolese diasporic group, but occasionally extending beyond specific ethnic and racial boundaries, with a different range of consumers from various cultural origins being involved, especially members of other Black African communities.

Significantly, it is within the very complex nature of a "superdiverse" (Vertovec, 2007) context and everyday "convivial multiculturalism" (Gilroy, 2004), characteristic of the city of London, that each ritual production analysed in the thesis has developed. In one way or another, each case study has been strongly impacted by the London environment, resulting from a combination of "hybrid" points of view and injections of "non-traditional" elements emerging from the metropolis's global settings. Compared to other places of settlement for Congolese diasporas in Europe, from a political point of view, the London group has been recognised as the European focal group for political resistance and common concerns on the DRC's political and economic disorder. From a socio-cultural and economic point of view, London has figured among the young

community as quite an open and accessible place for personal and collective growth. London's multicultural and superdiverse environment has been perceived by many young Congolese as less racist and offering more professional opportunities. Accordingly, the globalized environment of London, involving a constant flow of people, discourses, and cultural forms, has certainly influenced diasporic actors' ways of living and of producing their diaspora spaces (Rogers, 2006). Young diasporic subjects have on various occasions demonstrated that they have been actively and creatively influenced by their multicultural surroundings, stimulating a transformation in their own culture. London has occupied a unique place for the ways in which well-established fashion trends, such as *la sape* and the traditional headwrap practice, have undergone a transformation, and on the ways in which new forms of fashion and beauty expressions, such as *Miss Congo UK* and *Congo Fashion Week*, have taken shape, used here as exemplary case studies. These fashion and beauty rituals have changed or emerged as cross-cultural and transformative power-spaces containing ongoing, circular appropriations of elements from the interaction of a wide range of cultural backgrounds.

Overall, the study of grounded examples has demonstrated that the idea of culture and cultural identities, as composed of fixed and passive configurations of practices and existing as a pure, essential and single origination, should be questioned (Rogers, 2006, Slimbach, 2005). In comparison, culture itself was shown to be constituted through processes of "transculturation", by acts of appropriation from and by multiple cultures, with young Congolese cultural identities and productions understood as a dialogic, relational phenomenon that is an ongoing, evolutionary process of absorption and transformation (Rogers, 2006, Cuccioletta, 2002). The social fields produced by young Congolese articulated a more encompassing idea of transnationalism. Their narrative fields embedded the transnational histories of individuals who belong to the same socio-cultural group while often transcending

national and cultural borders. Fashion diaspora spaces showed how cultural identities are influenced by and formed through the collaboration and interconnection, not only between individuals with a similar heritage but also, and especially, between individuals who do not belong to the same cultural group and do not specifically share the same traditions. Young Congolese on and off stage represented more than just actors performing a ritual of shared cultural identity. They aimed to configure an active and progressive transnational tale, although often one embedded in contradictions and not always impactful, yet one that characterised their minority group in London, particularly in relation to older generations' conservative mentality and to other Black African diasporas. In this sense, bodily performances developed some counter discourses as well as drawing out some paradoxes concerning how young Congolese reclaim and make sense of who they are and how they wish to transmit their own histories (Merkel, 2015).

Narratives told and enacted in staged or displayed performances provide an opportunity for individuals to appear before others in the light of their own interpretation of themselves, becoming a means for collective self-definition and self-construction (Labrador, 2002). The various fashion and beauty practices analysed in this thesis sought, therefore, to illustrate the central diasporic spaces through which young Congolese currently perform their individual and collective narratives in London, producing and distributing ideas and ideologies about their own community, culture and perception of cultural identity. These forms of cultural production revealed what it meant to belong to a minority group while addressing issues of power, voice and visibility. Young London Congolese were both performers and spectators, dramatizing and witnessing their own history-making, constructing their own definition of themselves and producing their understanding of the knowledge and truth of their past, present and future. As each case study has differently shown, what occurred in the performances was a type of "cultural mirroring" where the young community

collectively reflected its understanding of itself. They constructed and performed their own definitions of themselves, affirming their own definitions of diasporic identities, of “home” and “homeland” (Labrador, 2002). Importantly, along with announcing that being Congolese in London is something to be proud of, constructing resistance against marginalization and minoritization, their performances also expressed a kind of diasporic “cultural activism” (Ginsburg, 1997), advocating progress within the diaspora itself. The stage of the performance thus provided an avenue to mark a new “identity tale”, a new cultural imaginary of “Black-ness” and “Congolese-ness” of both the actors and the observers (Labrador, 2002).

Having outlined the major concluding remarks that this thesis has demonstrated, it is now important to point out that this work should be seen as a research process whose product could always be subjected to up-to-date revisions. Firstly, case studies framed by this research, for example the active production of fashion brand *Kiyana Wraps* and the organisation of *Mister Congo UK*, developed in conjunction with *Miss Congo UK* since 2018, could be further expanded upon. Secondly, since performances of the body currently emerged as the most prominent and multifaceted form of transnational cultural expression deployed by the young Congolese minority group, my work has organically laid the basis for supplementary investigations into the presence of many other fashion productions and bodily performances organised by young London Congolese. This work could, for instance, lead onto the detailed examination of the biennial fashion fundraising event *Passion for Motherland Fashion Gala*, organised by *PFM Foundation*. It could also lead onto the analysis of works from emergent young Congolese fashion designers, such as Tina Lobondi, including her Congolese social enterprise *Esimbi* and related annual fashion charitable events in London, as well as menswear fashion brand *Kitoko* and dressmaker *Kumbi Kouture*, to indicate a few. Thirdly, an additional line of investigation could also be developed on forms of bodily

performances among other under-researched Black African minority groups settled in London with no direct links to British colonial history. A comparative study could situate the cultural productions of young Congolese in a more comprehensive light. Finally, although some aspects of the music scene as well as dance and poetry performances were necessarily included as part of the debate on performance of identity, more desk and field research should be undertaken on a diverse range of cultural and artistic expressions among the community. Despite the availability of limited studies, especially on music, more scholarly attention from a cultural perspective is needed to develop a complete evaluation of the impact that the Congolese heritage and the multicultural context of London have on young Congolese individuals' senses of multiple identities. With the necessity of further academic research being acknowledged, this doctoral project has nonetheless shed some light on better understanding how diasporic subjects with a Black African background experience, embody and authenticate their own life histories, and importantly, has partially filled the gap on the rich cultural, economic and political contribution that young British Congolese make to the multicultural and superdiverse milieu of London.

Glossary of specific terms

“Afropolitan” aesthetics: an “African fusion” sartorial style in which both African and cosmopolitan aesthetics are self-consciously mixed, reworked and integrated.

Agbada: a popular Nigerian long flowing man’s garment, which can be worn on both sides.

Authenticité: a precise state ideology established by Mobutu and mostly designed to detach the Congolese state of mind and behaviour from decades of colonial and cultural paternalism, and to re-establish African roots and Congolese cultural identity.

Évolués: an African person, in the former African colonies of Belgium and France, educated according to European principles.

Griffe: The French word for expensive designer clothing used by *sapeurs*.

Kitendi: the Kikongo and Lingala word for clothes that in *la sape* refers to the religion or cult of clothes.

La sape: a word play used as an acronym standing for *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes* (Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People).

L’aventure: a compulsory rite of passage of the *mikiliste*’ personal and social advancement, consisting, firstly, on finding a way to travel and live in Europe to acquire a wardrobe of high-fashion designers’ clothing and accessories, and secondly, to triumphantly return to the homeland to ritually parading their material wardrobes.

Les Combattants: Congolese radical political activists among the diasporic opposition movements.

Liputa: the Lingala expression commonly referring to colourful African wax-print fabrics.

Malewa: the Lingala word for food. In the Congo, doing *malewa* means going out for dinner with the whole family in one of the Congolese outdoor kiosk restaurants, commonly found on the side of the streets.

Mikiliste/s: a “new” social figure spread in postcolonial Congos. The expression defines a Congolese *bon vivant* (one who enjoys life) who has established a new life in Europe, or travels regularly there, wears designer garments and associates with musicians.

Mobutisme: a personality cult, including all Mobutu’s ideologies and policies.

Mukotte: a local form of headwear used among the Congolese Pende ethnic tribe. In the 1930s, the *mukotte*, or Pende wig, became the popular symbol of resistance against the Belgians.

Mutuashi: a tribal dance performed among the Congolese Baluba (or Luba) ethnic tribe. Also known as the dance of the “lower abdomen”, the *mutuashi* dance in the DRC is typically performed in the church context and wake ceremonies as well as being transposed to the performance space of popular music concerts.

Nkaka: the diviners’ headdresses among the Congolese Tabwa ethnic tribe.

Parisien: an expression used previously to the terms *sapeur* and *mikiliste* to identify earlier Congolese men who had travelled to Europe.

Sapeur/s: member/s of *la sape* known for fashioning their identities through the acquisition and reinterpretation of Western designer labels, using spectacular luxury clothing inspired by the classical elegance of the Western suit. A typical *sapeur* look consists of haute couture garments that are purposely assembled to assert extreme fashionability.

Sapeuse/s: female *sapeurs*.

Sapologie: the life philosophy promoted by the movement of *la sape*, including dressing up flamboyantly but also following a specific way of living based on values, jargon, and rituals. For example, behaving in a “high-class” manner, knowing how to make an entrance, to walk, to sit and to stand like a “gentleman”, being clean, cosmopolitanism and non-violent.

Sima ekoli: the Lingala expression commonly used to describe the popular body expression of “showing off and shaking our hips and bum”, finding close similarities with twerking dance moves.

The *conflict* (Marcus, 1995): referring to issues contested in everyday life social spheres.

The *life story* or *biography* (Marcus, 1995): individual life histories for delineating ethnographic-systematic relations.

The *metaphor* (Marcus, 1995): the social correlations of signs, symbols, and visual images.

The *people* (Marcus, 1995): the most classical ethnographic subject, which refers especially to migrants and diasporic individuals

The *plot, story* or *allegory* (Marcus, 1995): the narratives of everyday experiences and socio-cultural memories told in the frame of single-site fieldwork.

The *thing* (Marcus, 1995): the circulation through different contexts of material objects, such as commodities, gifts, money, works of art and intellectual property.

Zairianisation: Mobutu’s nationalisation of the entire economy of the DRC.

Appendix A – Chapter Three Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee non-anonymised profiles:

- Informal conversation 1: Laetitia Kamayi, photographer, twenty-nine-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Email exchanges on 4 August 2018.
- Interview 2: Monique Bolange, clinical research administrator, thirty-four-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at a coffee shop near Marble Arch, on 2 April 2018.
- Interview 3: Vava Tampa, university student, community political activist and founder of Save the Congo, thirty-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at Dalston CLR James Library Café, on 24 February 2016.
- Interview 4: Priska Kibala, entrepreneur involved with the “the Black Child Agenda” project, thirty-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at the Clocktower Café, West Croydon, on 10 April 2018.

Interviewee anonymised profiles:

- Interview 5: Creative director of *MCMedia* London and photographer at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-nine-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Liam]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 6: University student, twenty-nine-years-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo [alias Emma]. Interviewed at the coffee shop near Oxford Circus, on 7 May 2018.

- Interview 7: Shopping assistant, thirty-three-years old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo [alias Lina]. Interviewed at the British Library, Kings Cross, on 18 May 2018.
- Interview 8: University student, thirty-five-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo [alias Lucille]. Interview at a coffee shop in Westfield Centre, Shepherd's Bush, on 2 July 2018.

Other informants non-anonymised profiles (cited from secondary sources):

- Profile 1: Kinshasa *sapeur* (unspecified age), cited by Martin (1994).
- Profile 2: Papa Wemba, Congolese musician also known as “le Pape de la Sape”, cited by Thomas (2003) and Gondola (2010).
- Profile 3: Colonel Jagger, well-recognised Kinshasa *sapeur* and manager of Papa Wemba's band Viva La Musica, Interviewed by Michela Wrong (2009).
- Profile 4: Maguy “Mama Afrika” Ndumza, thirty-three-year-old Kinshasa *sapeuse* and self-described hustler, interviewed by *UK Vice Broadly* editor Zing Tsjeng (2017).
- Profile 5: Kimbondo “Mama Africa Mayise” Dumbo, thirty-six-year-old Kinshasa *sapeuse* and bar owner, interviewed by *UK Vice Broadly* editor Zing Tsjeng (2017).
- Profile 6: Kinshasa *sapeuse*' brother interviewed by *The Guardian* West Africa correspondent Ruth Maclean (2017).
- Profile 7: UK Journalist Sally Howard, interview published by *Lightfoot Travel* (2018).
- Profile 8: Congolese Photographer Junior D. Kannah, interview published by *UK Vice Broadly* editor Zing Tsjeng (2017).
- Profile 9: Barbara Kasende, thirty-five-year-old Kinshasa *sapeuse*, interviewed by UK Journalist Sally Howard, published by *Lightfoot Travel* (2018).

- Profile 10: Inda Gabie, fifty-one-year-old Kinshasa *sapeuse*, interviewed by UK Journalist Sally Howard and published by *Lightfoot Travel* (2018).
- Profile 11: Kinshasa *sapeuse* (unspecified age), interviewed by UK Journalist Sally Howard and published by *Lightfoot Travel* (2018).
- Profile 12: South African photographer Alice Mann, interviews published by *Metropolitan Magazine* (2017) and *It's Nice That* (2017).
- Profile 13: Theophile Munganga, older generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by South African photographer Alice Mann and published by *Metropolitan Magazine* (2017), *It's Nice That* (2017), *Huck Magazine* (2018).
- Profile 14: Diaquiesse Kiasungua, also called “Papa Yoyo”, older generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by South African photographer Alice Mann and published by *Metropolitan Magazine* (2017), *It's Nice That* (2017), *Huck Magazine* (2018).
- Profile 15: Yaya Beauga, younger generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by South African photographer Alice Mann and published by *Metropolitan Magazine* (2017), *It's Nice That* (2017), *Huck Magazine* (2018).
- Profile 16: “GMS Le Correcteur”, younger generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by South African photographer Alice Mann and published by *Metropolitan Magazine* (2017), *It's Nice That* (2017), *Huck Magazine* (2018).
- Profile 17: Prince Jamal, older generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by South African photographer Alice Mann and published by *Metropolitan Magazine* (2017), *It's Nice That*

(2017), *Huck Magazine* (2018) as well as interviewed by me at the Costa Coffee shop, Dalston, on 9 March 2018.

- Profile 18: Charlie Schengen, older generation retired London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by Eugenio Giorgianni, published by *Al-Jazeera* (2016).
- Profile 19: Gauthier Mudiata, older generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by Eugenio Giorgianni, published by *Al-Jazeera* (2016).
- Profile 20: Cedrick Golden, older generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by Eugenio Giorgianni, published by *Al-Jazeera* (2016).
- Profile 21: Aimé Champagne, younger generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by Eugenio Giorgianni, published by *Al-Jazeera* (2016).
- Profile 22: Louis-Marie Lupumba, older generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by Leo Benedictus, published by *The Guardian* (2005).
- Profile 23: Roger Ndosimau, older generation London *sapeur*, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by Leo Benedictus, published by *The Guardian* (2005).
- Profile 24: “Papa Mapasa”, real name Bale Nyoyi, older generation London *sapeur* and producer of Congolese music, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, interviewed by Leo Benedictus, published by *The Guardian* (2005).

Appendix B – Chapter Four Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee non-anonymised profiles:

- Interview 9: Madeleine Laini, creative director of *Kiyana Wraps* brand, thirty-two-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, on 17 December 2016.
- Interview 10: Christelle Laini, *Kiyana Wraps* brand collaborator, twenty-nine-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, on 17 December 2016.
- Interview 11: Josette Matomby, *Kiyana Wraps* brand collaborator and stylist at *Kitoko* brand, between thirty-five to forty-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, on 17 December 2016.

Interviewee anonymised profiles:

- Interview 12: Designer, between twenty-five to thirty-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. [alias Celia] Interviewed at St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, on 17 December 2016.
- Interview 13: Professional model, between twenty-five to thirty-year-old Black female, originally from Uganda. [alias Kizza] Interviewed at St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, on 17 December 2016.
- Interview 14: University student, between twenty-five to thirty-year-old Black female, originally from Burundi. [alias Yvette] Interviewed at St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, on 17 December 2016.
- Interview 15: Professional model, between twenty-five to thirty-year-old White female, originally from Russia. [alias Alina] Interviewed at St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, on 17 December 2016.

- Interview 16: University student, between twenty-five to thirty-year-old White female, originally from Belgium. [alias Julie] Interviewed at St. James Hotel and Club, Green Park, on 17 December 2016.

Appendix C – Chapter Five Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee non-anonymised profiles:

- Interview 17: Lucrèce Kibeti, university student and winner of *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2016*, twenty-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at the British Library, Kings Cross, on 25 May 2017.
- Interview 18: Horcelie Sinda Wa Mbongo, university student and winner of *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, twenty-two-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at the British Library, Kings Cross, on 19 June 2017.

Interviewee anonymised profiles:

- Interview 19: Founder and main organiser of *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, thirty-three-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Luke]. Interviewed at The Print House, Dalston, on 21 April 2017.
- Interview 20: University student and contestant at *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017* twenty-four-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Anna]. Interviewed at The Print House, Dalston, on 15 April 2017.
- Interview 21: University student and attendee at *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, twenty-seven-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Kyle]. Interviewed at Stratford Town Hall venue, Newham, on 1 April 2017.

- Interview 22: Business entrepreneur and attendee at *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, thirty-five-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Adam]. Interviewed at Stratford Town Hall venue, Newham, on 1 April 2017.
- Interview 23: Cultural event hostess, collaborator and attendee at *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, thirty-year-old years old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Sabine]. Interviewed at Stratford Town Hall venue, Newham, on 1 April 2017.
- Interview 24: University student and attendee at *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, twenty-five-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Alice]. Interviewed at Stratford Town Hall venue, Newham, on 1 April 2017.
- Interview 25: University student and attendee at *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, thirty-two-year-old Black male, originally from Nigeria, [alias Mark]. Interviewed at Stratford Town Hall venue, Newham, on 1 April 2017.

Other informants non-anonymised profiles (cited from the web):

- Profile 25: Vava Tampa, university student, community political activist and founder of *Save the Congo*, second main organiser of *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, training teacher and judge during the final gala night, thirty-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Profile 26: JJ Bola, poet, writer, educator, political activist, collaborator of *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK* and main performer during the final gala night, thirty-one-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Profile 27: Mya Odja Ilunga, stage name “*La’Sheek*”, CEOs and founder of *She’s King Empire*, collaborator of *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK*, training

teacher and hostess during the final gala night, twenty-five-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo.

- Profile 28: Victoria Bangu, university student and contestant n. 4 at *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, twenty-four-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Profile 29: Stacey Loseke, university student and contestant n. 6 at *Miss Congo Beauty Pageant UK 2017*, twenty-three-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo.

Appendix D – Chapter Six Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee non-anonymised profiles:

- Interview 26: Marie-Claire Idikayi, co-founder of *Congo Fashion Week* and main organiser of the CFW London pre-show, thirty-five-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed in the Oxford Circus area on 24 February 2018.
- Interview 27: Vanessa Assombalonga, dance leader of group Z5 and main choreographer of the CFW London pre-show performance, twenty-three-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 28: Hilary Jennifer, film producer, twenty-four-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.

Interviewee anonymised profiles:

- Interview 29: Dancers within the Z5 group, young Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Alisha]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.

- Interview 30: University student and attendee at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-six-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Jacob]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 31: University student and attendee at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-two-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Abel]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 32: Student and attendee at the CFW London pre-show, sixteen-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Baptiste]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 33: Creative director of *MCMedia London* and photographer at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-nine-year-old Black male, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Liam]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 34: University student and attendee at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-three-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Louise]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 35: University student and attendee at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-three-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo, [alias Zoey]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 36: University student and attendee at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-four-year-old Black female, with Egyptian-Sudanese and Mauritian

origins, [alias Sarah]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.

- Interview 37: Receptionist and attendee at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-six-year-old Black female, with Rwandan and Burundian origins, [alias Isabelle]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Interview 38: University student and attendee at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-four-year-old Black female, originally from Nigeria, [alias Giulia]. Interviewed at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.

Other informants non-anonymised profiles (cited from the field):

- Profile 30: Rachael Lasamba, fashion designer, founder of fashion company, *Ràshel*, and of *Foundation Tamar* NGO's, also involved in the production of the CFW London pre-show night, twenty-six-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Fieldnotes recorded during the "Phenomenal Woman" event, at the Runway East Moorgate, Finsbury Square, on 23 March 2018.
- Profile 31: Nancy Kondo, University student, blogger, and host at the at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-eight-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Fieldnotes recorded at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Profile 32: Audrey Madeleine Badibanga, marketing executive, blogger/vlogger, and host at the at the CFW London pre-show, twenty-five-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo. Fieldnotes recorded at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.

- Profile 33: Becca Apparel, fashion designer who showcased at the CFW London pre-show, young Black female, originally from Nigeria. Fieldnotes recorded at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Profile 34: Abisola Akanni, fashion designer who showcased at the CFW London pre-show, young Black female, originally from Nigeria. Fieldnotes recorded at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Profile 35: Elizabeth-Yemi Akingbade, fashion designer who showcased at the CFW London pre-show, young Black female, originally from Nigeria. Fieldnotes recorded at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.
- Profile 36: Charlotte Kamale, model and fashion, beauty lifestyle, blogger, selected as the “face of CFW” and brand ambassador for the CFW sixth edition, twenty-four-year-old Black female, originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Fieldnotes recorded at the Christ Church Spitalfields, Tower Hamlets, on 21 September 2017.

Other informants non-anonymised profiles (cited from the web):

- Profile 37: Marie-France Idikayi, CEO and main founder of *Congo Fashion Week*, thirty-three-year-old Black female, originally from Democratic Republic of Congo.
- Profile 38: Maria Samoylova, London-based young Russian model who worked at the CFW 2012.
- Profile 39: Lisette Mibo, London-based young Congolese model who worked at the CFW 2012.
- Profile 40: Grace Kelly, Kinshasa-based stylist who showcased at the CFW 2013.

- Profile 41: Given Tshilanga, fashion show attendee of the CFW 2013.
- Profile 42: Richie Maya, Kinshasa-based fashion designer who showcased at the CFW 2013.
- Profile 43: Zoé Mukendi, Kinshasa-based fashion designer who showcased at the CFW 2013.

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