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DECONSTRUCTING THE IVORIAN VESTIMENTARY TRADITIONS: NEW FASHION, CONTEMPORARY BEAUTY AND NEW IDENTITY IN MARGUERITE ABOUET AND CLÉMENT OUBRERIE'S *AYA DE YOPOUGON*

Richard Oko Ajah & Letitia Egege
University of Uyo, Nigeria

Correspondence: Richard Oko Ajah, Department of Foreign Languages,
University of Uyo, Nigeria; Letitia Egege, Department of Foreign
Languages, University of Uyo, Nigeria

richardajah@uniuyo.edu.ng; letitiaegege@uniuyo.edu.ng

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Abstract:

This paper adopts an eclectic framework of semiotic, postmodern and postcolonial theories to interpret the representations of dressing as an aesthetic activity in *Aya de Yopougon 1-3* and to investigate how Yopougon dwellers use their fashion sense to establish both a group identity and a form of everyday resistance. Characters' bodies are remade, through dressing, to contain emotive qualities and to play symbolic functions with their everyday choice of dress. Their sartorial obsession is supported by psychic inferiority and pop culture; all characters engage in "disciplinary practices" for the

clothing culture of their bodies that are ornamented surfaces for display.

Introduction

It is evident that discourse on African dressing culture as part of African beauty or its shifting paradigms in African literature has not been given much attention by literary and cultural critics. It is apparently because such issues are glossed over in African literary works which are exclusively textual while dress styles belong to visual discourse. Writers describe different parts of the body but leave out the aesthetics of African woman's hairdos and dressing culture. Marguerite Abouet's and Clement Oubrerie's *Aya de Yopougon*, as a graphic novel, offers the possibilities of a discourse on hair styling and sartorial practice, because both elements are paradigmatic of African beauty.

In her *Home and Harem* (1996), Grewal analyzes Romantic and Victorian ideas of beauty which owe much to Burke and Ruskin, to show Western conceptualization of women and Eurocentric definitions of the beautiful; yet it should be known that the European hegemony of this universalism of beauty/aesthetics is located in Platonic and Cartesian formulations (Materike and Mapara, 2009, p. 203). Although the black woman can be said to fall under the model of "order" and "submission" with its paradigmatic relationship with society, she falls short of physiognomic evaluation since a "black woman cannot be beautiful because she can only arouse a feeling of terror and can therefore be in the category of the sublime" (Grewal, 1996, p. 30). With Burke's and Ruskin's taxonomy of the beautiful which can be classified under colonial discourse, the notion of beauty becomes a racial and cultural construction that polarizes global spatiality between white/black, civilized/"primitive," metropolis/colony, and centre/periphery. Eurocentric concept of beauty privileges the aristocratic women whose faces are assigned angelic roles, through physiognomic discourse that makes phenotype an indication of inner qualities.

With such aesthetics, blackness as a racial category becomes associated with opacity, fear and horror, and features that could be read as analogous to moral characteristics (Grewal, 1996, p. 27).

Contrastingly, in his “Migrant Songs for Mothers,” Ajah (2012, p.15) admits that the desire to rewrite black history, to challenge Eurocentric notions and to portray the aesthetics of Blacks preoccupied black poets and explains the autoethnographic trends of negritude poetry. In *Imperial Eyes*, the critic conceptualizes *literary* autoethnography as “instances in which the colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s terms” (Pratt, 2008, p.9). In essence, autoethnographic agenda remains an artistic ideology of most postcolonial African writers whose creative consciousness is turned towards the European Center. Marguerite Abouet admits that she intends to correct the erroneous representation of her people. Scholars (Pratt, 2008; Ajah, 2014; Wall, 2008; Besio, 2006) have shown the autoethnographic content of postcolonial and postmodern studies which we have chosen as parts of the theoretical framework for our analysis. With the convergence of textual and visual modes of representation, her graphic novel illustrates the aesthetic traditions of the African people in Yopougon or Yop City as it is called in the graphic novel. The narrative is spiced with scenes of ceremonies and events that showcase the sartorialism of Yop City dwellers and their reception to exotic cultures, often marketed in foreign newspapers and televisions. The characters’ gorgeous hairstyles, dressing and make-up become means of articulating subjective sensibilities, rhizomatic sensuality and fragmented personality that emanate from the search for new identity and beauty. Sampled images of dresses drawn from *Aya de Yopougon* will be “read” as nonlinguistic cultural signifiers in visual discourse.

Premised on the lack of attention on the nonlinguistic resources in meaning-making of multimodal texts (Lui, 2013, p. 1259), we have chosen an eclectic theoretical framework that incorporates social semiotics with postmodern and postcolonial studies to analyze

Aboutet's and Oubrierie's non/verbal discourse of dressing culture that permits the construction of subjective identities and "constitute[s] a system of signification, a visual language as dynamic, complex, and arbitrary as any spoken communication" (Michalove, 2014). We acknowledge polemical epistemological debates on the postmodern readability of visual images (Maré, 2006, p. 67) which, however and undoubtedly, emerge from postmodern visual culture (Myons, 2003, p. 11). Yet, relationship between semiotics with postmodernism (Gottdiener, 1995 in Wijeyeratne, 1997; Deely, 2000) and postcolonialism (Bowman, 2010) has been studied, because all cultural systems are vehicles of meaning, and, inversely, meaning animates all cultural systems (Lagopoulos, 1993, p. 289). In addition, a semiotic multimodal analysis model has been developed and applied in visual texts that engage in the construction of masculinities (Cilliers, 2014). This paper intends to demonstrate how dressing culture as "reproducible images" of graphic writing could be read socio-semiotically, postcolonially and postmodernly as cultural and *translational* texts invested with nonlinguistic meanings that interpret the bodies as "object of the gaze and of social representation" (Calefato, 2010, p. 345) of new subjective identities. We equally admit that there have been different cultural representations that have contributed in shaping studies on African aesthetics and its discourse.

With its autoethnographic posture, as we earlier noted, negritude poetry, it should be stated, emphasizes the African woman's body and its functional aesthetics. For example, Senghor eulogizes the striking beauty of the naked body of *Femme noire*; Laye's *A ma mère* unveils the multifunctionality of his "Dâman"; and Beyala concentrates on the *parte obscène* of the *Femme nue, femme noire*. In the words of Julien (1987, p.338), Senghor's and Laye's poetry unveils the "dignity, beauty, purity, nurturance [which] are the attributes of the African woman/continent." However, African clothing culture constitutes, to a greater extent, African woman's paradigm of beauty, because they (hair/styles or dresses which will be our focus) possess the emotive qualities and communicational

abilities that negotiate socio-cultural spaces. Studies (Twigg, 2009; Calefato, 2010; Barthes, 2013; Kirby, 2014; Michalove, 2014) carried out on African dressing have been mainly outside the domain of literature and literary studies; however, they help in shaping the understanding of the dynamics and aesthetics of African garb in postcolonial societies as reflected in Marguerite Abouet's *Aya de Yopougon*.

Aya de Yopougon (or *Aya* for short) is a graphic novel written by the Ivorian-born French writer Marguerite Abouet and illustrated by the French graphic artist and illustrator Clément Oubrerie. It is an autobiographical account that captures the writer's adolescence in Yopougon, a suburb of Abidjan, which is her birthplace. The graphic novel appears in six volumes that narrate the communal life of Aya and other Yopougon dwellers in the 1970s during the reign of President Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Through the eyes of the female protagonist Aya, Yopougonian society is mirrored. The portrait of Yop City, as it is popularly nicknamed in the text, a crude allusion to New York City as displayed in American films, reveals the image of its social and socializing space with its indigenized French, postmodern lifestyles, and obsession for popular culture.

This paper is divided into four major sections. The first section attempts to establish a paradigmatic relationship between popular culture, exotic fashion and cultural neuroses, thereby explaining the ideology that drives sartorial consciousness in Abouet's *Yopougon*, analogous to the advent of the Congolese *Sapeurs*¹ in subjectivity but not in creativity. The second discusses how dressing culture is used to construct postmodern identities, while the third evaluates the author's semiotic discourse of sexed and clothed bodies, since clothes "speak" the language of the wearers. The concluding part takes a look at some "disciplinary practices" necessary for remarking the body and the enhancement of its beauty; it considers these practices holistically as fashion involving not only the sartorial, but also haircare activity because dressing and hair styles are complementary.

Popular Culture, Cultural Neuroses and Exotic Fashions in *Aya*

Aya de Yopougon 1 opens with a large panel of a TV set, portraying a bike rider that overtakes a bus. The image on screen is an advertisement of *Solibra*, a locally brewed beer, anchored by Dago, a modern comedian in Abidjan, whose feat of overtaking a bus with a bike is harnessed by the consumption of *Solibra*. Aboutet and Oubrierie's portrayal of a group of working-class people as characters watching this TV Advert in *Aya*'s sitting room demonstrates the invasion of popular culture into the Ivorian society of 1970s. In *Popular Culture*, O'Brien and Szeman (2004, p. 9) define popular culture as "the communicative practices of everyday life" where "communicative practices" comprises all those activities concerned with the production of meaning: talking, writing, and social rituals such as eating, shopping, dancing, music, visual culture, sports, fashion, etc. Bailey (1998, p. 10) conceives it as a "sprawling hybrid, a generally eclectic ensemble or repertoire of texts, sites and practices that constitute a widely shared social and symbolic resource." *Aya*'s "sitting room," "Miss Yopougon Go!" (*Aya 3*, pp. 40-50), Yopougon's numerous bars such as *Allocodro* (*Aya 1*, p. 43), *Secouez-vous* (*Aya 1*, pp. 23-25), *Chez Maxim's* (*Aya 2*, pp. 44-45), *l'Hôtel aux mille étoiles* (*Aya 2*, p. 54), among others, are social rituals that serve as "symbolic resources" necessary for the construction of identity, individuality and collectivity for *Aya* and her coterie of friends, and other Yopougon dwellers in the texts.

Yopougon, as a suburb of Abidjan, is a community of middle class workers and peasants, who are open to all forms of exoticism, except in their preference of *Koutoukou* to local beer, *Solibra*. Events such as marriage celebration between Moussa and Adjoua (*Aya 1*), Miss Yopougon Go (*Aya 3*), etc. provide great opportunities for the revelation of exotic fashions. Sikidi, Yopougon's popular fashion designer, is besieged by young girls who intend to come out in their best attires during Adjoua's marriage party held in Yopougon. He regrets his inability to finish the sewing of their dresses because

Yopougon girls often choose complex styles from magazines, newspapers and films. One of his clients had asked Sikidi: “il faut raccourcir plus ma robe Catherine Deneuve” [It is needful to further shorten my Catherine Deneuve-styled dress and Sikidi replied by asking: “c’est une robe que tu veux ou une camisole?” [Is it a dress or camisole you want?]] (ibid., p. 88). To be *à la mode*, it is necessary to choose popular dress styles of foreign artists advertised in different media that serve as vendors of popular cultures. The choice of Catherine Deneuve is not misplaced as she is a known face in the French movie industry as an actress in the 1970s; born Catherine Dorléac in 1943 in 17^e arrondissement de Paris, France, she ended up acquiring a cultural personality in foreign lands where her films were viewed and her name inspired her fans, as seen in *Aya*. Foreign and local magazines, newspapers and TV shows are ideologically charged agents of cultural and social constructions (See also Cereda, 2013, p.138), because “all cultural systems are vehicles of meaning, and inversely, meaning animates all cultural systems” (Lagopoulos, 1993, p. 289). Aboutet shows “to her western audience that the subaltern natives can look and speak; the natives she represents are no longer ‘silent objects’ but, contrary to the model of western hegemony in which the colonizer is seen as an active ‘gaze’ subjugating the native as ‘passive’ objects, the colonizer also feels looked at by the native’s gaze” (Bernardi, 2010, p. 419). The characters’ disparate gaze or “visual exoticism” is not unidimensional but multidimensional on different western cultural models or materials, explaining the fragmented and hybridized identities of Yopougon young boys and girls.

The obsessive orientation towards exoticism and its *mediated* fashion of Aboutet and Oubrierie’s characters is premised firstly on the postmodern and postcolonial deconstruction of the body as “unfinished biological and social phenomenon” (Cereda, 2013, p. 138) and, secondly on the psychic inferiority of Ivorian postcolonial subjects. The postmodernity and postcoloniality of Yopougon challenge the Eurocentric and dominant existing traditions of the body as a perfect creation of God, in that *Aya* and her friends seek

ways of remaking their bodies and enhancing their beauty, since “all women, irrespective of race, compare themselves to the western beauty ideals” (Thompson, 2009, p. 845). In essence, Yopougon dwellers suffer from a double dose of psychic inferiority as postcolonially ideological subjects and peripherally spatialized subjects, since Yopougon is a periphery of Abidjan and therefore “the margin of a postcolonial city.” The dream of being “exotic” and so “distinct” constitutes Yopougon dwellers’ “neuroses of blackness.” A term credited to Frantz Fanon, it is defined as “an emotional disorder, manifest at the level of personality, which stems from the conflict between a powerful (often instinctual) impulse or wish and the need to repress this instinct” (Hook, 2004, p. 116). For this group of youngsters, the search for new beauty becomes a way of affirming and redeeming their battered existence and identity. The semiotic relationship between clothing and identity is explainable because fashion, as linguistic codes, enables people to send a message about themselves (Twigg, 2009), and there is some evidence of the capacity of clothing to remedy sometimes unconscious feelings of a lack of self-worth and transform a person to the ontological status of “somebody” (Pearce, 2014, p. 859). In essence, sartorial practices of Yop City dwellers demonstrate their obsessive desires to resemble somebody and to inspire someone, thereby culminating into and enabling the construction of fragmented identities.

Dressing Culture and Construction of Postmodern Identities through New Clothing Styles

Aya de Yopougon appears to be a showcase of fashion, as all characters are so concerned with how they look. In reality, getting dressed is a practice of attending to the body (Pearce, 2014, p.857), and clothing is linked to the body. It forms the vestimentary envelope that contains the body and presents it to the social world. It is the social world that interprets clothing, assigns its values and evaluates the body that wears it. However, it is the body that gives clothes life (Twigg, 2009). Dressing culture prevalent in Yopougon

shows an aesthetically vestimentary divide between the old and new generations, and between the rich and the poor. Old-generation women maintain their traditional attires as found in figure 1:



Figure 1: Yopougon women dressed in their traditional attire of boubou and Ankara-styled simple garments in *Aya de Yopougon 3* (p.102)

Women as seen figure 1 represent the older generation of Yopougon middle-class womenfolk whose daughters constitute the new generation such as Aya, Bintou, Adjoua, among others. Their attires are distinct as they reflect the old order of clothing styles in African postcolonial societies and a symbolic adherence to traditional identities. However, aristocratic women such as Mme Sissoko, Moussa's mother, use Damask fabric, instead of the brightly printed Ankara, because it is a textile that features a weft pattern on one side and a warp on the other which has historically been a cloth worn and enjoyed by the wealthy. It has been popular in West Africa during 1980s and remains a favorite cloth for family and social events (Kirby, 2014). Mme Simone Sissoko's changeable outfits are representational of her world and its aristocratic principles of *haute couture*, unlike her neighboring lower class and middle-class women of Yopougon. Her styles, like youngsters of Yop City, are inspired by exotic newspapers and magazines. In her visit with Monsieur Sissoko to the village for burial rites of a relative, she appears gorgeous in a black gown and hat that makes her look younger than her age.

The dressing culture of Yopougon's younger generation displays the postmodern sensibilities of these youths whose styles are also, like Simone's, inspired by popular culture. Udousoro and Ajah (2015, p. 69) have already described Marguerite Abouet and Clement Oubriere's characters and space as postmodern. Their outfits are not imported, but they are made from imported materials, now exotically styled after popular foreign artists who are perceived as cultural icons and ingredients for the construction of postcolonial identities. Though the use of known fabrics such as Ankara is still prevalent, the clothing materials are now styled and patterned to the whims and caprices of the wearers as shown in figure 2:

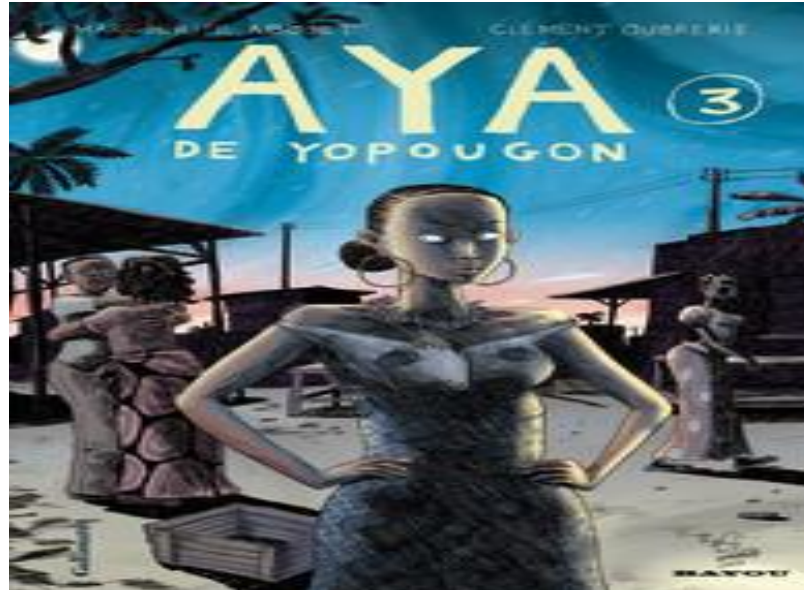


Figure 2: Aya's portrait as cover page of *Aya de Yopougon 3*

Aya and her friends have a dressing culture that is worthy of being studied and which is pregnant with meanings. It is a hybrid type of dressing that combines the exotic and the tropical, the foreign and the local, and the modern and the indigenous. For example, Ankara is now shaped in different exotic subjective styles and it is what is in vogue in Aya's Yopougon. Traditional boundaries are challenged and dismantled by these exotic styles that give the African female body an appealing figure, unveiling aesthetic contours that were Eurocentrically and historically vilified. Aya's body is presented and shaped with her slim-fit spaghetti-sleeve blouse and a hairstyle to match. In essence, the choice of dress is motivated by the nature of the ceremony to attend and the status of its audience. Bintou's skirt-and-blouse styled Ankara (*Aya 2*, p.58) shows the contours of her body as she makes her way to *Hôtel Ivoire* where Grégoire waits for her. She is admired by Yop City street boys who affirm her beauty by saying: "Hum! Les filles de Yop city sont belles, dèh! Elles vont nous tuer, gars" (*Aya 2*, p.58) [Hmm! Yop City girls are

indeed beautiful. They are going to kill us, guys]. She equally adorns herself with a sleeveless belly-revealing top and miniskirt (*Aya 1*, p.23) to attend a party in *Secouez-Vous*. To accompany her dad to his office, located in Yamoussoukro, Aya has to put on a feminine English suit with camisole underneath (*Aya 2*, p.69). Although the writer and illustrator use the Miss Yopougon event to showcase the fashion world of Yopougon, other instances in the texts demonstrate the sartorial awareness of Yopougon people.

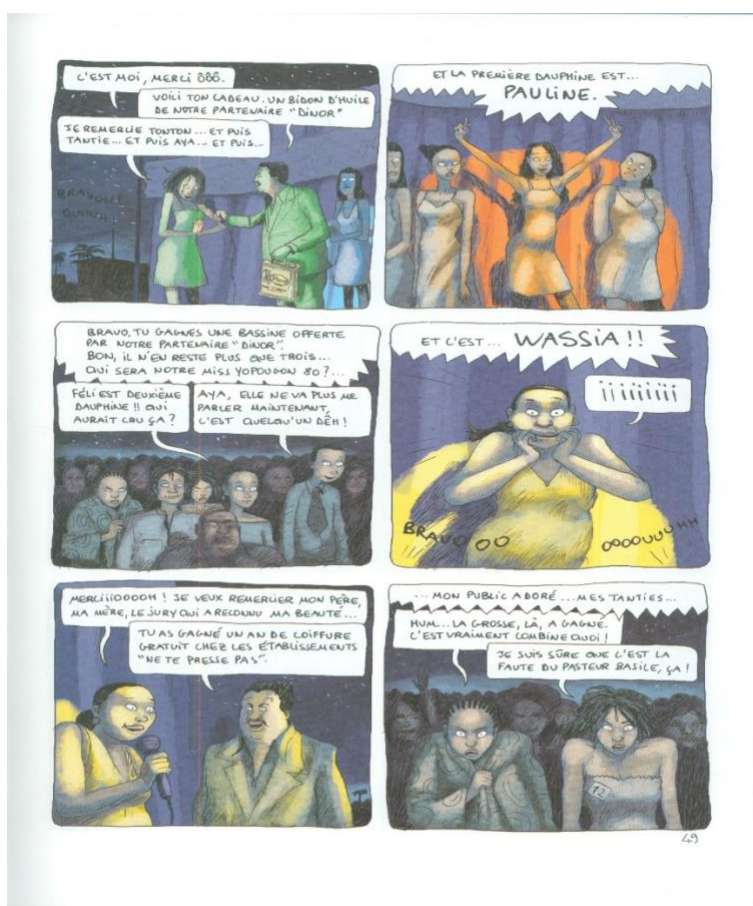


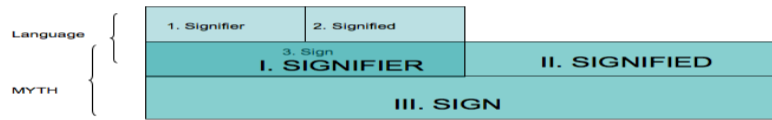
Figure 3: Miss Yopougon contestants in *Aya 3* (p.49)

Irene, Féli, Pauline and other Yopougon girls are, as shown in figure 3, the contestants whose sleeveless tight-fitting outfits reflect the “postmodernity” of the wearers as opposed to the traditional boubou of their mothers (Figure 1). Others wear what is now called “spaghetti sleeves” (Adjoua, pp. 6-8 in *Aya I*) and some wear topless gowns like Bintou (p. 23 in *Aya I*), exposing part of their breasts, thereby supporting our proposition that female bodies are ornamented surface for display. This ornamentation commodifies the body of these women, increasing their value and enhancing their marketability. Discourses on the commodification of the body have been studied to show that “commodities clearly are not static objects. Rather, they emerge as emblematic of transformative processes” (Sharp, 2000, p. 291), and the “body conceived as a project opens possibilities for its reformation and modification” (Hancock, 2000, p. 3). Adjoua’s “spaghetti sleeves,” Bintou’s “topless gowns,” and Irene’s “tight-fitting attire” become “catalyst” of commodification that “insists upon objectification in some form, transforming persons and their bodies from a human category into objects of economic desire” (Sharp, 2000, p.293). For, like commodification, objectification theory postulates that “many women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by others” (Szymanski, 2011, pp. 7-8). Yopougon young women such as Bintou, Adjoua, Aya, Irene, Inno end up internalizing sexual objectification through self-objectification “by treating themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance” (ibid., p. 8). The premise of the young women’s self-ornamentation is what Szymanski et al. (2011, p. 8) call “appearance anxiety” which provides a “fetishized form of femininity,” where female bodies become “erotic tokens designed for visual consumption” (Roberts, 1998, p. 829). The sexual harassment that Aya suffers is because the bystander conceptualizes her body and desires its consumption.

Semiotics of Sexed and Clothed Bodies of Yopougon Dwellers

This work demonstrates *Aya*'s clothing culture or styles as signifiers of cultural identification and urban nationalism (Essah, 2008), through the semiotic deconstruction of these visualized hybrid dresses. It is possible to classify some of them as examples of Umberto Eco's "lying" with signs (Berger, 1984, p. 51). Clothing can be compared to text which is "an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) constructed (and interpreted) with reference to the conventions associated with a genre and a particular medium of communication (Pertiwi, 2010).

Modern semiotics as a field, greatly influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, deals with the study of sign systems and the social context of signification (Carlson, 2008, p. 131). Saussure's relationship between the *signifiant* (signifier) and *signifié* (signified) and Roland Barthes' extrapolation of Saussurean theory in his *Mythologies* are enough to provide a semiotic framework for the reading of dressing culture as texts, because they (different patterns and forms of dressing) are seen as "the set of lexical or visual signs that act as "cues" to guide the reader's inherent predilection for mental decoding operations" (Trifonas, 2002, p. 181). Visualized dresses can be read as myth which leads to a mystification "qui transforme la culture petite-bourgeoise en nature universelle"(Barthes, 1957, p. 7). Barthes' "myth and meaning" that gives room to first-order and second-order significations is important in this discourse, as Allen (2003, p. 44) puts it: "myth is a metalanguage: a second-order language which acts on the first-order language, a language which generates meaning out of already existing meaning." "First-order language" is compared to Saussure's interpretation of sign.



Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957, trans. Annette Lavers, Vintage: London, 1993), 115.

Figure 4: Barthes’ illustration of SIGN

In *The Language of Fashion* (2013), originally published as *Système de la mode* from 1993 to 1995, Barthes used this model to enumerate different “languages” fashion or dress as visual discourse can speak. The critic makes a distinction between dress (*langue*), dressing (*parole*) and clothing, which, however, refers to Saussure’s *langage* (Barthes, 2013, p. 8). While dressing has morphological, psychological or circumstantial meaning, dress is the proper object of sociological research and their relation is dialectical as related to *langue* and *parole* as a veritable praxis (p. 9). It is without a doubt that hairstyling is an invariable and signifying component of dressing, which also enjoys the free flow of myth-making as illustrated below.

Signifier (dresses)	Definition	Signified (meaning)
<i>Traditional Boubou</i>	Clothes worn by old-generation women with simple style made of Ankara and other textile materials.	Old school, Africanness, Afrocentric, Ethnocentric, etc. as seen in Alphonsine and other women in <i>Aya</i> (See Figure 1)
<i>Bob Marley dress and dreadlocks</i>	Dreadlocks twisted hair after the Reggae Musician, Bob	Rastafarianism, Reggae music, etc. (See Figure 2)

	Marley, created by washing but not combing the hair and maintained with a wax or bee wax and Reggae-branded polo with national symbol.	
<i>Sleeveless/body-hugging gowns</i>	Dress made of textile/fabrics materials, tailored to fit into the wearer's structure and figure, thereby unveiling the body curves and contours.	Eurocentricity, femininity, sexuality, Eroticism/Sex appeal in <i>Aya</i> (see Figure 2 & 3)
<i>French Suit, gown & feminine cap</i>	Foreign suit made of good fabric materials, normally imported from France or Italy (p. 34 in <i>Aya I</i>)	Eurocentric, westernization, etc. (See <i>Sissoko and his wife</i>)

As seen from the table, each dress style becomes a body of signifiers whose meanings could be a network of meanings of second-order significations and lots more. The semiotic analysis of clothing style permits connotative expansion of its denotations in that *boubou* is not just a traditional dress, but it stands for the old order against the post/modern order, a reflection of African pride, Africanity and ethnocentricity of the poor older generation of Yopougon women. The writer uses the day of the Miss Yopougon contest to showcase different types of hairdos and dressing styles, in general the fashion world of Yopougon or Abidjan. The invited musicians wear twisted Bob Marley dreads and branded Polo shirt, identifying them as the custodians of local Rastafarian traditions. Evidently, it is not their guitar that marks them but their dreadlocks and their Marleyan-styled clothes; some wear their hair open and twisted while others are covered with Rastafarian headgear, painted the tricolor of Ivorian national flag. The “colored hat or polo” symbology could be perceived as the “third-order” signification in Rastafarian discourse.

Dreadlocks can be compared to Afrocentric nappy hair, as both require careful and patient processes. But unlike dreadlocks, it is curly and frizzy. Afro natural hair has been a marker of “woke” or “I woke up like this” trend in the US and in France in the last few years among Blacks or people of color (Cerda, 2016).

During this fashion parade, Yop City girls and contestants appear in their sleeveless dresses. So, sleeveless tops which are ubiquitously used distinguish the sexuality and femininity of Aya and her friends. These body-hugging and tight-fitting dresses create sexual allurements for Yopougon young men and boys. As seen in our text, Aya is being followed by a loafer (*Aya I*, pp. 20-21). This shabbily dressed young man contemplates Aya’s body, eyes fastened on her braided hairstyle and fitted clothing almost grabbing her head before asking her out. It can be said that meaning is beyond these fixed cultural attributes, it connotatively explains the “neuroses” of Yopougon girls such as Aya, Adjoua, and Bintou. By neuroses we mean that “fantasy sets targets for desire; it coordinates patterns of affect” (Hook, 2012, p. 130); it is an inescapable condition of the girls’ existence because for psychoanalytic thought, “the subject, caught up in its identification with an illusory, unattainable imago of wholeness and in its ultimately unfulfillable desire, could never attain a sufficient wholesomeness that is always posited as “normalcy” (Isin, 2004, p. 223). And the “wholesomeness” is “whiteness,” as we shall further explain below. However, it is a postmodern identity shared also by males such as Inno, the homosexual partner of Albert. His curly twisted hairstyle and classic dress align to the feminine role he plays in his relationship with Albert; it equally permits him to acquire a “Michael-Jacksonized” personality. Like Aya, Adjoua, and Bintou, Inno has the “appearance anxiety” which translates to what Hook (2012, p. 105) calls “anxieties of likeness,” that is, “the dream of turning White,” because “whiteness has functions as a moral category, as the basis, the template, of all that is positive” (pp.106, 110). It is the unconscious reception of the Eurocentric notions of inferiority in this postcolonial city that propels the desire for exotic hairstyles and

dress patterns; therefore, this attitude defines how people dress and the hairstyles they wear. Eurocentricity, it appears to them, becomes a yardstick for measuring beauty. Until the postcolonial subject submits to these paradigms, he or she cannot be said to be “beautiful” and “attractive.” It is this discourse of dominant culture that the Western media propagates and perpetuates even after the end of European colonization, thereby creating the mentality of aesthetic difference between colonial centre and postcolonial periphery, between the West and the rest, between dominant White and dominated Black, and between us and them.

The changeability of apparel semiotically connotes the fragmentation of identities of Yopougon dwellers, which become neither white nor black, neither typically European nor African, neither here nor there. It is because this fragmented consciousness is a product of post/modernist montage of different cultural orientations and practices, expressivity, choice and agency (Twigg, 2009) that reinforce cultural imperialism and strengthen social binaries. This phenomenon elucidates, in the words of Mercer, “a neo-African approach to the pleasures of beauty at the level of everyday life” (1987, p. 45). And such approaches tend to focus on youth culture, street styles and transgressive counter-cultural modes (Twigg, 2009). Their overture to European culture, hybridized with African traditions, produces a translational culture that is defined by a space of liminality where these characters dwell. Their desire for exotic culture explains the extent they go to remake their body through the enhancement of their appearance now conceptualized as “a privileged realm for the construction and the expression of individual identity” (Cereda, 2013, p. 137). It can be said that their “body has become the site of a strange experiment where it aims for an illusory perfection by various forms of intervention” (Isin, 2004, p. 228).

Remaking the body through “disciplinary practices”

Although we have emphasized sartorial practices, hairstyling is an integral part of dressing as both go together and entail some “disciplinary practices.” Postmodern thought questions the biological and theological construction of the body as perfect and finished product as we have already remarked. Consequently, as an unfinished product, the body of Aya and other Yop City dwellers becomes a “project” which requires some “risks to attain beauty” (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 93). The patterns and practices of aesthetic stylizations demand these “disciplinary practices.” In Abouet’s and Oubrerie’s graphic novel, *Aya 1-3*, the characters’ dress choices and hairstyles go together; so, hair equally receives much attention. Aesthetically, hair is remade to contain or connote emotive qualities like sexy, graceful, exotic, beautiful, and unique that play symbolic functions in social space. Nourished by the media or pop culture, both male and female characters engage in these “disciplinary practices” with regards to *haircare*. The hairdos of Aya, Mme Sissoko, Adjoua, the Rastafarian musicians, Bintou and many others undergo aesthetic stylization through the use of braids, weave-on, threads, and other synthetic materials from abroad, while Inno’s hair is relaxed or straightened with the use of “toxic chemicals or heat intensive tools such as a straightening comb or flat iron which may be heated to over 400 degrees” (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014, p. 93). Incidentally, Inno is a stylist who not only manages his own *haircare* but also gives such care to other Yop City dwellers in his beauty clinic.

The text prominently illustrates two spaces for the construction of beauty in Yopougou: Inno’s beauty salon and Sidiki’s tailoring shop. Different panels display Inno’s beauty salon and how male and female characters jostle for their turn to get their hair done. The stylist’s touch transforms their hair and gives them new looks that can be described as exotic and modern. Unlike Yopougou’s barbing salons, his salon offers modern hair services such as styling, weave-on, braids, among others, and his numerous hairstyles are copied

from known foreign cultural figures such as musicians, filmmakers, and actors. The trend for modern, exotic and complex hairstyles attracts the patronage of young men and women like Aya and her friends, who do not mind waiting endlessly for their turn. Just like Féli, who accepts sitting for hours because of Aya's promise to give her a hairstyle that "vais ressembler à la fille dans le film" (*Aya I*, p .66) [is going to look like the girl in the film]. Unlike Aya and her friends, Mme Sissoko is an aristocrat who does not live in Yopougon; she invites her stylist to her home for the upkeep of her hair and opens a magazine to choose her preferred style, saying: "Aminata, tu me fais la meme coiffure que dans ce magazine" (*Aya I*, p.6 9) [Aminata, make my hair look like the same one found in this magazine]. She sits before a mirror for many hours for the completion of her exotic but complex hairstyle. The time spent is worsened and conditioned by the choice of a complex hairdo or clothing design made by each character. Aside from the financial burden it imposes, it equally adds to the hairdresser's and tailor's fatigue. The tailor, Sidiki, complains of this phenomenon by saying: "vous choisissez des robes compliquées dans les magazines pour me fatiguer" (*Aya I*, p.88) [You choose complicated styles from magazines to wear me out]. It can be said, however, that the complexity of dress and hair styles elongates the waiting period spent on these disciplinary practices for beauty. While the choice of exotic and modern fashion, seen in magazines and films, unveils the raw materials needed for the construction of the characters' subjective identities, such styles constitute a paradigm shift from their locality, and what is considered outmoded fashion, to a transnational engagement.

Conclusion

In multimodal texts like Abouet's *Aya I-3*, the application of semiotics, postcolonial and postmodern theories have enabled us to understand the semantic dynamism of dress as cultural signifier. The media and all popular culture play important roles in the continual production and the constructed distribution of meanings in Yopougon postcolonial society as European magazines, newspapers

and television celebrate and propagate cultural superiority of Whites over Blacks and European materials over African counterparts. Yopougon as a postcolonial space becomes vulnerable to the Eurocentric construction of knowledge that generates social binaries between the West and the rest. The calamitous stage of its neuroses induces an insatiable craving for exotic cultures, intended to finish the unfinished production and expression of the postcolonial body with its “imperfections.” To commodify their bodies, these characters have to discover what Bhabha (1994, p. 41) calls the “pleasure of pain” through disciplinary practices. This phenomenon creates an endless flow of cultural signifiers where cultures become codification systems that play an important role in people’s lives (Berger, 1984). The signifiers such as types of clothing and hairstyles are susceptible to socially-negotiated, spatially-constructed connotative interpretations. Such understanding influences the ephemeral attitudes that inspire the types of hairstyle and dressing culture Yopougon dwellers run after. In this graphic novel, Abouet and Oubrerie demonstrate that African beauty is now constructed as individualistic, subjective and fluid, because the body is conceptualized as an ornamented surface for display during ceremonies. The ornamented body appears to be a repossessed clothed body that contends with Ivorian vestimentary traditions and negotiates with cultural boundaries within its cityspace. The emergence of a new sartorial consciousness from Yopougon as a periphery, does not seek dominance over or comparison with Abidjan’s cultural standards as a center; it, rather, shows the ubiquity of fashion and the possibilities of marginal spaces to shift paradigms and assert their cultural freedom.

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Endnote

¹ Sapeur is a term coined from SAPE (Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes) which, as a fashion movement, originated in Congo Brazzaville in the early 1960s. It was a popular sartorial practice that showcased modern, Eurocentric outfits put together by Congolese men, thereby demonstrating the masculinity, exhibitionism and exoticism of its adherents (See Gondola 2010).