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THE INTERSECTIONALITY
OF IDENTITY, FASHION, AND EXPLORATION:
WHERE FORM MEETS FIT AND FUNCTIONALITY
(a biographical story of identity from a fashion designer)

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THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF IDENTITY, FASHION, AND EXPLORATION: WHERE FORM MEETS FIT AND FUNCTIONALITY (a biographical story of identity from a fashion designer)

Kate Pierre

IDENTITY

Identity has always played a big part in my life, starting from a young age. This was due to not understanding my background as I did not have anyone outside of my immediate family who looked like me. I didn't know who I was because I didn't know Trinidadian culture. This makes up half of who I am, and it makes up 100% of what people see when they look at me.

Clothing first intrigued me when I noticed the different clothing my classmates wore at primary school. This information would tell me if the clothes were brand new, home-made or hand-me-downs. Without knowing consciously what I was doing, I was able to identify others by the clothes they wore. I still look at people and clothing this way, not to judge, but to deconstruct pieces to see how they were constructed, or to see if the clothing can provide a glimpse into the mind and personality of the wearer.

During my time in the Otago Polytechnic Diploma of Fashion and Design art class, our instructor, Rick, showed us that fashion was everywhere. One class was a field trip to see the film, *The Fifth Element* (1997), starring Milla Jovovich and Bruce Willis with costumes designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier. This opened my eyes to see that fashion is not only on the streets, or on a catwalk, but also used to tell stories, to form identities and to relay certain characteristics about a person. This had a huge impact on me, later in my career, designing KATE&FRANCES, a sustainable fashion brand, because I am able to design pieces that allow others to be able to tell their own story, to express their own personality and self-expression. I have also used storytelling when designing and building character wardrobes in local theatre productions. The way in which we can portray characteristics about a character, without using words, is a form of communication. Learning that we can 'read' a character by the garments they wear, was crucial in this work.

Traveling through the Caribbean was a way for me to connect with my ancestry, my history, and my family. Throughout these islands I met people that matched my brownness, and my facial features, even if they had trouble understanding my accent (the feeling was mutual!), but there was a sense of belonging, that they could see that I was one of them. The history that I saw in museums, galleries and on the streets helped me to form a connection, and to relax into my identity. The search for another aspect of my identity was taking place, and this journey is visible in the product within KATE&FRANCES. My identity was evolving, due to the knowledge that I was experiencing and gaining. Having built this foundation of identity, made it easier to be myself and to advocate for my point of view in a professional setting. I found that my voice was a lot stronger when voicing my thoughts within my professional career, and in general communication.

Being of mixed race, and light skinned I have experienced what inequity is in this part of the world. Growing up in NZ I experienced it, but I didn't know what it was called, and I thought it was 'normal'. At the time of writing this, I was living, working, and playing on the unceded territories of the x̱m̱əθḵəy̱əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətaɬ (Tseil-Waututh) Nations, on Turtle Island. Also known as Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

My proximity to the US, where race relations have a deep and horrid history, and to the lesser-known history of Canadian colonisation and slave trade, there are still systemic racial inequalities that show up in everyday life. These equalities that still run systemically through government, policy, and language, has opened my eyes to the true meaning of what obtaining equity for all truly means and entails. Empathy and compassion for Indigenous persons who have been colonised forms an unseen connection for me, and this has developed my identity, my worldview perspective, and changed what I advocate for, against and with whom.

Growing up as a mixed-race child on Muaūpoko, the Otago Peninsula, my siblings and I were often asked if we were Māori. I remember once when I was asked this, I was around six years old, and I said no. This question was then followed up with, "Then, what are you?" I didn't know the answer to that question, and after school when I got home, I asked Mum, "What are we?" This was my first realisation that I wasn't like everyone else. I didn't see myself as different, but from then on I felt different. This experience made me look closely and examine everyone around me in order to identify differences and similarities. By looking at skin colour, clothes, shoes, the way they treated other people, I was able to form judgements and categorise them, in a way that made sense to my six-year-old brain. This started my fascination with clothing.

My father, who is Trinidadian immigrated to London, England when he was eleven years old, and then to New Zealand in the mid 1970's. My siblings and I were raised in Dunedin, close to my mother's family, whose grandparents immigrated from Northern England. We grew up surrounded by white family members. It wasn't until I was in my late teens, that I started to explore the Trinidadian culture and I visited in my mid 30's in order to immerse myself in the culture and to meet with relatives.

During my early schooling in Dunedin in the 1980's and 90's, I remember Māori culture was incorporated into the curriculum, especially waiata and the creation stories such as the adventures of Maui. Due to our physical proximity to Ōtākau, a Māori village of Ngāi Tahu or Kāi Tahu (an important landmark and within the history of the Te Wāi Pounamu, the South Island), there were marae overnight visits and general awareness of Māori culture. The tikanga, the behavioural guidelines and protocols that were shown to us during these visits, alongside the whakapapa structure and networks and manaakitanga, hospitality that was shown to each individual, and to the individuals as a community, showed inclusion and acceptance. As a young child, I remember feeling the connection, but also a feeling of disconnect because I knew this was not my culture. These visits started the process of whakawhanaungatanga, to establish links and connections between the iwi and the school. This initiated my curiosity with my Self and my culture. It is because of this knowing, early in my education, that I knew it was not appropriate for me to use Māori motifs or design elements in any of my work.

The location I grew up within New Zealand, didn't allow me to see others that looked like me. This has a profound impact on how I view, behave, and move through the world. At a young age I became very observant to those around me, as I felt as though no one could 'see' me because no one mentioned that I was Black. When people say that they don't see colour, there is a huge disservice done, because it is interpreted to mean "I don't see a crucial aspect of your identity."

Watching *Ready to Roll*, a television music show that played music videos from America, and seeing Run DMC, who were wearing Adidas three-stripe black tracksuits gave a sense of belonging to my eight-year-old self as I had a pair of burgundy Adidas three-stripe trackpants too.

In 2013 I visited Trinidad and Tobago for the first time as an adult, as a way to create connection and to explore my identity. I arrived during Carnival and played 'Pretty Mas' as a way to experience a part of my culture

that includes history, food, music, and celebrates all that is Trini. Alongside 'Pretty Mas', there is 'Old Mas' or 'Traditional Mas'. During slavery Carnival was celebrated by the plantation owners (French and English) by way of masquerade balls, outdoor parties, and street festivities. Slaves and mixed-race individuals were not permitted to participate in these celebrations and created their own celebrations where they dressed to mock the upper class through exaggerated imitation (Cometotheislands.com n.d.). Characters such as Moko Jumbies, the Baby Doll, Jab Jabs and the Midnight Robber were created from West African traditions. Disapproval and criticism from the ruling class led to legislation banning many practices associated with Carnival and met with violent resistance. Carnival morphed into 'Pretty Mas.'

The Indigenous People of Trinidad and Tobago include the Arawak (Taino), and Carib (Kalinago), originally from South America, settled there approximately 7,000 years ago. (Minority Rights Group, 2023). Both Indigenous peoples have creation stories, and there is also the folklore from the West African slaves, and the French-speaking planters mixed race peoples from Grenada, St Lucia, Dominica, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. (Besson, 2011). Based on this knowledge, and my limited knowledge of both the folklore and the creation stories, I know I don't have adequate knowledge to be able to incorporate this cultural design and thinking into my design. This does play a part in my practice because I am aware of my lack of knowledge, and I am aware that this complex history has many perspectives and stories attached to it, and this deserves a separate study.

As mentioned earlier, when I wrote this, I was living on Turtle Island and used Canadian agencies for a lot of my research. The Canada Council for the Arts, (n.d.) considers that "cultural appropriation" applies when cultural borrowings or adaptations from a minoritised culture reflect, reinforce, or amplify inequalities, stereotypes and historically exploitative relationships that have direct negative consequences on equity-seeking communities in Canada.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, according to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights (2024), is a "...human rights instrument that sets out the rights of Indigenous peoples around the world. They are intended to define and uphold human rights in international law...they are not legally binding but provide authoritative ideas and approaches that can influence state laws and practises."

The Declaration serves as a reminder that as artists, who find creative influences everywhere we look, and hear, touch, smell and feel, we also need to generate an awareness of appropriation of the influence, and of our own understanding. Respect for other cultures comes into play as, like a lot of creatives, I am curious about other cultures and art forms, and when studying and learning about the Indigenous People of Turtle Island, I search for the truth from the root source instead of relying on government information, which is often written from colonial settlers' viewpoints.

Living on Turtle Island was an opportunity for me to learn about Indigenous ways in the area in which I live, work and play. Nearby at the University of British Columbia (UBC), is the Museum of Anthropology (MOA), where I was a volunteer. This is one way in which I continued to explore and learn about the land and the people. This feeds the curiosity within my practice to know more about others, to understand other cultures, to create connection and deepen my respect. It also piques my curiosity to continue to learn more about my own culture.

Context is important. The look into my past guides me on how I can move into my future, ensuring my perspective and knowledge on my personal and professional cultural design is cared for, nourished, and how it can be of service, in terms *whakawhanaungatanga*: of establishing relationships and relating to others. By first looking into our own histories, journeys, and relationships, we explore what is important to us as individuals, in an intrapersonal relationship, as small communities, within interpersonal relationships, and then we can branch out and connect with others in global communities, to find mutual commonalities, and to celebrate our differences. This is an opportunity to support others, to learn compassion, *atawhaitanga*, to encourage those to have *maia*, courage to move through the world with an open heart, an open mind, and respect for the biculturalism of Aotearoa, the multiculturalism of Aotearoa, and the global community in which we are all a part of. Within this concept, also involves the principle of active protection, where we as creatives have the responsibility to be aware

of the use of cultural icons, motifs, inspiration. To seek collaboration, to gather feedback, to ask ourselves the question of, "Of what purpose does this serve (insert name of group) People if I use this within my work? Do I have the right or permission to use this?" To be able to create safe spaces to have these conversations; where we can expose gaps in our own knowledge, to be able to ask questions and to have honest, authentic conversations without judgement or repercussions, is pivotal for everyone in order to move forward collectively. My hope is that as I find or build these types of spaces that my practice, and that of others, can be inclusive, can speak to multiple communities of people, can open doors to opportunities that may have been blocked before, and can create connection in order to foster a feeling of belonging. When we have a sense of belonging within our Self, our identity can be explored, accepted, and acknowledged.

In 2017 I launched KATE&FRANCES DESIGN. Inspired by the streets of New York City and the functionality of sportswear. I design on my own terms and use Black and Brown models as a way to see myself reflected in the fashion industry. It is the representation I needed to see when I was growing up. You could say that I am my own influence now. This is my identity, and one way I encourage others to create their own identity. Alongside entrepreneurship, I have been teaching at post-secondary institutions which has shown me how influential my early learnings have been in my career, and I am astounded by the amount of learnings I have gained when sharing this knowledge. Students allow me to view concepts from other perspectives and to understand how to teach to multiple learning styles. Students inspire me. They show me that I have relevant information, not only on a professional level, but also as a human, that they can use in their career to move into a space that works for them, and they also show me that there is excitement, awe, and creativity for this industry. Being curious about my immediate surroundings creates a sense of belonging and if I can use this in my work to create more inclusive collections, in a more philosophical manner. It is how I can feel appropriate whilst still acknowledging the diverse cultures around me. I feel it is not appropriate for me to take physical aspects of these cultures and interweave them into the garments that I create, either for my own brand or for clients. However, by acknowledging and recognising the tikanga and whakapapa; the holistic way of life, of being on this planet, the environment, of taking care of others, by respecting the natural forces and traditions of Indigenous cultures, is how I can be culturally aware and embed this cultural aspect of my home into my work.

SUSTAINABLE FASHION

According to Eco.com (2021) "Sustainable fashion is fashion that's mindful of its social, environmental, and economic factors. Its fashion developed by companies that pay their workers a living wage, give them safe, healthy working conditions and monitors its environmental impact, taking care to use more sustainable materials and reduce resource use throughout their products' life cycle."

Brands that do not state their sustainability values and processes, in my experience, don't have them and it is not a priority for them, which translates into the customer who also doesn't prioritise sustainability efforts. My personal beliefs and ideals surrounding sustainability for brands has changed as I have gathered more information as a natural part of being within this industry, working with multiple manufacturers and across many product categories that require careful consideration when selecting fabrics (natural vs synthetic), manufacturers and building processes. Reading brands sustainability statements and realising that they are not actually providing transparency to their processes or manufacturers, has caused me to question and distrust their words, and to deep dive into their practices myself. If information is not easily accessible, this signals that they have not yet done the work or have the understanding of what it means to create a sustainable product. I have also come to the realisation that it is not possible to be a 100% sustainable brand and to not leave an environmental footprint, due to the current processes within the industry. This may change in the future, however there is education to be had, new ways of doing to be explored, and the environment and the workers welfare to be top priority instead of only financial rewards. Within my current brand KATE&FRANCES DESIGN, I have incorporated multiple sustainable processes because they align with my personal values and the values of my customers. These include using zero-waste

pattern techniques to reduce the amount of waste, or to create waste that can be used in other styles; reducing the colour range each season by having core colours and seasonal colours; by designing styles that do not follow trends, but flatter different body shapes and sizes, and by offering a small selection of sizes as well as customised sizing based on customers individual body measurements. Elastic and labels are the only trims used, and the fabric quality is 95% organic cotton and 5% elastane which are sourced from two Canadian suppliers who buy fabric from mills in China and Turkey. The fabric mills are the only part of the process where I don't have full visibility, however both factories are Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) certified, and manufacturing happens locally in Vancouver. With all of these processes and systems combined, I feel confident in calling this a sustainable brand. When talking to customers, honest conversations are had, although I find that not everyone is aware of the ways in which brands can bring sustainability to the forefront, so there is the education side of the conversation as well. My hope is that customers will then go and talk to their friends and family about sustainability, not just regarding apparel, but within their lifestyle.

Now that I am based in Dunedin, Aotearoa, I am sourcing organic fabrics that are GOTS certified and will manufacture in small batches, using minimal trims. After packing up all of my business tools and components, this process made me look again and evaluate just how many components are needed in order to create one garment. This time around, I want to be able to reduce even further the impact I have on this planet.

I often use and hear the phrase, "use what you have," as the best way to reduce the amount of waste that is created, whether that be in the apparel, food, or technology industries. I am a firm believer that you can use what you have on hand to solve a problem with a little creative thinking, and if you have to buy, buy second hand. If you need the item for a one-time situation, then renting or borrowing is an option. Designing with an end-use and purpose in mind that solves a problem for the consumer and is crucial in order to sell product, and to do so in a sustainable way. Taking a user-centric approach, and incorporating feedback gathered throughout the development process in the form of wear/product testing, consumer reviews and competitor research, are ways in which I have created products for large and small organisations, both as an employee and as a consultant. This can look very different between companies, however gathering data from a variety of sources ensures that the product meets the needs, provides the functionality that the consumer requires and contributes to the longevity of the product lifecycle.

THE PROCESS

As individuals, our identity is made up of layers; the experiences that build who we are, our history, our ethnicity, our nationality. For me this includes knowing my own cultural identity of being Trinidadian, being born and educated in Aotearoa New Zealand, and living in the different countries of England and Turtle Island. We have the ability to continue to build on these layers with what we choose to do with our experiences, our history, our ethnicity. This includes my careers, my hobbies, and my travels. Combined, these guide how I show up in the world, and how I show up in my life and in the lives of those around me. Gaining a solid foundation of who I am; what my values, morals, ethics, and passions are, I then have the ability to do anything that I choose. This is what fashion means to me. This is what design means for me. It's an expression of my perspective based on all that I have experienced, and I have a responsibility to be able to share what I have learned with those around me, whether that be in an informal or formal setting. This has become my identity along with the knowledge that I can change or pivot when I want to.

For me there is a lot more to fashion than just a garment. There is thought and meaning and an interconnectedness that not everyone needs to understand, to see, or to experience. Fashion is an art form and one in which the viewer will always create their own opinion, based on their personal experiences. Where form meets fit and functionality, where experience and personal aesthetic intersect, is where you will find me. The stitches and the patterns of the quilting I incorporate into my work form intersections, multiple intersections, this is where you find me. Literally.

As a designer, an educator and a life-long learner, **Kate Pierre** has travelled extensively around the globe working within the apparel industry and exploring many cultures and countries and has now landed back in Dunedin, Aotearoa, to continue her studies and launch her brand KATE&FRANCES DESIGN to the New Zealand market.

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