

Local Learning Focus: The Will to Adorn Project

Engaging and Connecting Youth through Community Based Cultural Research and Presentation

by Diana Baird N'Diaye



Members of the Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia

Photo by Sharon Farmer, Courtesy of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution

Zora Neale Hurston, the renowned anthropologist and folklorist, observed in 1934 that “the will to adorn” is one of the primary characteristics of African American expression. Like orature, quilting, and musical forms such as the blues, African American dress and body adornment are creative expressions grounded in the history of African-descended populations in the United States. They have been shaped by the legacies of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and more recent African diasporas. They reveal continuities of ideas, values, skills, and knowledge rooted on the African continent and in the American experience. Most importantly, dress and body adornment are “cultural markers”—aspects of visual culture through which people communicate their self-definitions, the communities with which they identify, their creativity, and their style.

--The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage Website

The Will to Adorn is a project that began with the idea to work with scholars, educators, students, and cultural practitioners to document the arts of everyday dressing. Dress represents a multifaceted aesthetic tradition closely related to identity, but not often recognized as an art form. Yet, we asked ourselves: What art could be more intimately related to our social and cultural identities than what we wear, how we choose to style our hair, and modify our bodies? What art could be more accessible? In fact, the expressive culture (art form) that is perhaps most closely related to dress is foodways. Everybody needs to eat and everybody gets dressed. What folklorists and other cultural researchers often call the body arts are very personal modes of

expression but are also very much connected to a sense of belonging and to the values and beliefs that give meaning to our lives. We present ourselves to others first through the way we dress so the dress arts are both modes of nonverbal communication and performances of our identities. We are all dress artists.

In 2010, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) initiated a research and community engagement project by reaching out to community and academic-based researchers, educators, and cultural practitioners. Entitled *The Will to Adorn: African American Dress and the Aesthetics of Identity*, the initiative focuses on the diversity of African American identities as communicated through the cultural aesthetics and arts of the body, dress, and adornment. It also creates a framework to engage scholars, students, and educators in studying dress as a form of expressive culture shared by communities. The project is grounded in cultural autobiographies of dress. That is to say, the research starts with researchers looking at how they developed their own dress styles as well as the values, beliefs, and skills that determine the way they dress. By asking questions about our own “dressways,” museum, academic, and community scholars, cultural practitioners, and school-aged youth collaboratively delve into the community influences on the ways we think about how we present ourselves and our relationships to others through clothing, hair, and personal adornment.

Dress as Autobiography

Given that one of the premises of the Will to Adorn Project is the idea of cultural autobiography, I thought it was appropriate that I share the story of my relationship to dress. I grew up in a family in which dressing well was both an art form and a form of protection. In an age of segregation as a family of African descent in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, my parents deemed it important for us always to be dressed well. After all, we were always being judged by our appearance on the basis of our skin color and the texture of our hair, no matter what we wore. My mother took pride in dressing us as “little princesses” in the best she could afford and had tremendous skill in finding high-quality clothes at a fraction of their retail cost. My father recounts that as a student working his way through graduate school at Columbia University as a hospital orderly he always wore a suit to class. Our family was not alone as African Americans with this consciousness of the messages communicated through dress. It is significant that during the struggle for civil rights in the 1960s marchers and those engaged in civil disobedience were instructed to wear their Sunday best.



The author's mother in a photograph taken in the late 1940s.

My understanding of dress as an art form came as a result of conversations around the dinner table and because many people in my family were what we have come to call “artisans of style.” My mother was a wonderful dresser and taught us to shop for style and value. She was also trained as a hairstylist and apprenticed with an older cousin when she first came to this country as an immigrant from Guyana. As a child growing up on the island of Bermuda, my mom paid for sewing

lessons at Ms. Francis' school because she felt that every young girl should learn to sew. In later years when she opened a dry cleaning business my afternoon chores in the family business consisted of fixing zippers, taking up hems, and other such repairs. So my first grounding in dressways was as an apprentice in the arts of community style.

An early appreciation for dress as an art form also came from attendance and participation in what I like to call visual concerts. Churches, schools, and community organizations offer opportunities for people to show off their personal collections of clothing, sense of style, and movement through fashion shows that, like musical concerts, provide entertainment and often raise funds for a common cause. Some of these events are organized by local designers who then use models from the neighborhood or the congregation. These visual concerts are a long-standing tradition in African American communities crossing boundaries of ethnicity, faith, and class and generation. At 85 years old, my mother still modeled in fashion shows organized by Bishops Old Girls Association (her Guyanese high school alumni organization) in the United States. More recently, the Will to Adorn Project documented the annual millinery fashion show of the Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, that featured the work of 98-year-old milliner Mae Reeves along with hats from the personal collections of the parishioners.

Rosemarie Reed Miller (2002) has written a biography of Zelda Wynn Valdez and other African American designers in a book suitable for high school readers.



Zelda Wynn Valdez
Courtesy of Dance Theater of Harlem Archives

Fashion design was my first choice of occupation and I had the good fortune to have wonderful teachers both in my high school and in a community arts program in Harlem. My teacher in the Harlem Program, Zelda Wynn Valdez was an outstanding African American independent designer who created clothing in her salon, on 57th Street and Broadway in New York, for Dianne Carroll, Eartha Kitt, Mae West, Gladys Knight and other glamorous performers. She is also credited with designing the first Playboy Bunny outfit. Ms. Wynn instructed her students in the arts of draping, pattern making and sewing—and in the occupational culture of couture as well. As students we modeled our creations at community events and at the 1967 World's Fair. I was on the path to becoming an “artisan of style” that would become a lifelong journey.

Nevertheless, a series of chance encounters and my parents' strong desire for me to get an academic degree led me into anthropology rather than taking on a fashion design major in college—New York University's Washington Square College, where I was admitted, did not have fashion design as an option so I ended up taking anthropology to learn about the clothing of the world. Although immersed in liberal arts training, I longed to get back to design and when I had the opportunity to begin a master's program in industrial design at the Pratt Institute I jumped at the chance. I was delighted to discover an entirely new approach to

thinking and learning.

In design school, the primary aim was to develop a new set of critical-thinking skills. Scientists had the scientific method—creating a hypothesis, testing that hypothesis through research and sometimes fieldwork, analyzing the data, and either confirming the hypothesis or coming to new conclusions based on the disproved hypothesis. As an aspiring designer, I learned another set of thinking skills that allowed students to solve problems in the real world. These skills also included visual literacy. The problem-solving aspect of design has been called design thinking. Although the steps of the process have been defined with slight variations, they include defining a problem, researching its contours, brainstorming solutions, creating a prototype, choosing the best of the solutions, implementing or creating, and learning from the creation to define new problems (Rowe 1987).

Folklore and anthropology provide entry points to the study of dress as visual culture, a subject that has become an interdisciplinary field of its own (Mirzoeff 1998). In the Will to Adorn students find ways to think about the cultural expressions related to community dress and style that are meaningful to them and identify those passed on from one person to another person in informal ways. Learning to document the culture in dress working within and *with* communities allows students to become agents of their own knowledge. We are pleased that the *Journal of Folklore and Education* focused upon some of the methodologies and the framework for the Will to Adorn Project, and we looking forward to hearing more about how teachers, students, folklorists, community scholars, and artisans of style can create meaningful classroom moments together as they think about dress and culture.

A Collaborative Pedagogy

While still an undergraduate, I read the work of Paolo Friere, who wrote that:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer

Addressing Educational Standards

The Common Core State Standards stress that students “need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and extensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new” to be ready for college, work, and life in a “technological society” (2010:4).

A folklore-based program like the Will to Adorn can help students achieve college and career readiness by exposing them to alternate worldviews in their own communities. By offering youth the opportunity to prepare for and conduct interviews with artisans in their communities, the project necessarily requires youth to strengthen their ability to analyze written and oral histories, to discern themes within and across interviews, to learn about different vernaculars used to describe the body arts, to write routinely over the duration of the project, and to present informative summaries of complex themes and vocabulary to an audience in a professional setting. All these skills align with the goals of the standards for middle and high school students (2010:39-47).

According to the handbook *Folk Arts in Education*, “students practice a number of vital technical and academic skills during a community video project,” skills that involve “decoding and word meaning...technical media details, team work or interpersonal relations, performance/public speaking, attention to detail, analysis of oral and written literature... research/planning, critical and analytical thinking... creative /artistic development, [and] language arts” (2008:8).

merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (1970:67)

Friere's ideas about collaborative learning and teaching, how people in disenfranchised communities could learn literary skills, as they created reading materials based on their own experiences, were very important to the development of the methodology for the Will to Adorn and for other projects that I've developed. What remains powerful to me in the Will to Adorn project, inspired by Friere's work, is the validating impact of community and student agency in creating knowledge by documenting and interpreting the shared culture of everyday dress.

We recognize that much directed learning takes place in community settings and venues that offer the flexibility to design curricula that are complementary and supportive of curriculum standards. We also explicitly seek to reach young people for whom the formal classroom is not the learning space one reason or another. These include youth from alternative high schools, heritage schools, faith-based groups, and programs for adjudicated individuals.

In 2013, CFCH used a combination of online venues, new media, and hands-on workshops at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival to take to wider scale this successful program. The project continues to take advantage of new documentation tools such as mobile technology and social media to build 21st century cultural, social, and technical competencies grounded in core skills of literacy, problem solving, critical analysis, and research consistent with education standards. The involvement of partners representing different regions, cultural communities, and age groups is critical to the project's commitment to identifying, documenting, and representing a range of perspectives and approaches related to dress and adornment.

As educators, studying dress in the classroom or in the community offers wonderful ways to engage students in learning the arts of cultural documentation and analysis of visual culture. Over the five years of the project, we have found that examining dress captures both the imagination of young people and members of the community whom they interview. In interviews completed for the Will to Adorn Project, we hear over and over again from experienced artisans of style about their concerns regarding passing on their skills to new generations and about how meaningful it was to have those skills (including design and entrepreneurial skills) recognized by young people. The pedagogical roots of the Will to Adorn Project are many. They begin with lessons learned from elders at home and in community settings.

The Importance of Teacher Training

Lisa Falk, Arizona State Museum Director of Community Engagement and Partnerships and contributor to the Smithsonian's *Bermuda Connections* guide, emphasizes the correlation between teachers' investment in folklore projects and the success of the project in the classroom: "[T]he surprise is how something that to me is so obvious – looking at and working with community – is such a new concept to teachers and how excited they become once they do their own mini-fieldwork projects and class presentations. This work creates the difference between liking an idea and adopting and using it back in the classroom" (2004:13).

Falk speaks directly to how important teacher training is for getting research-based folklore programs implemented in classrooms. If teachers are given the opportunity to examine their own relationships to their communities, they will be more likely to continue using these techniques in their classrooms, and will ultimately become better equipped to help their students engage with their own identities and communities.

Alignment with Critical 21st Century Learning Skills

The Will to Adorn Project addresses virtually all 21st century learning skills (see Jenkins 2006), with particular emphasis upon:

Distributed Cognition: Learners learn to use common tools, such as smartphones, apps, social media, visual search technology, and webinars “that expand mental capacities.”

Collective Intelligence: The Will to Adorn website is built around learning to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal.

Transmedia Navigation: Learners use different media resources while processing and presenting their research in public, real-time venues.

Networking: Learners gain the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information in the course of preparing for fieldwork interviews by reading and writing blog entries based on their interviews.

Negotiation: Learners interact across diverse generational, ethnic, gender, faith, regional, and occupational communities to document, present, and share their research.

Conclusion

The Smithsonian’s Will to Adorn initiative seeks to understand the relationship between community, identity and the aesthetics of dress. As the research of over four years is affirming, the arts of dress and adornment in African American culture signify more than just a statement of personal taste or a sense of style; they can be understood as examples of artistic expression and mastery. The sheer variety of community dress and body art traditions demonstrates the rich heterogeneity and complexity of the African American population. The Will to Adorn celebrates individual expression and creativity, but it also focuses on the details and conventions of social dressing that define what it means to be well-dressed or appropriately attired in different communities.

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Will to Adorn website for more information:
http://www.festival.si.edu/2013/Will_to_Adorn

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Classroom Application: Writing a Sartorial Autobiography

The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage developed a set of questions to inspire people to write sartorial autobiographies. Have students choose questions below to help write a life story about themselves or someone they interview about dress and culture. They may illustrate with photos and sketches.

Definition: *Sartorial Autobiography looks at the clothes we wear to help shape the story of who we were when we wore them. Looking at photos and physical examples of our own clothing through different times provides insight in to our own story—our wardrobe reflects social history, culture, family traditions, and personal beliefs.*

Guiding Questions for a Sartorial Autobiography

How did family and friends talk about dress?

Were there any family sayings or words of wisdom passed on to you about dressing well?

How did you learn--through direct instruction, by implication, or example--what not to wear? Why?

Were there any special words that you used to describe the different styles of dress or particular items of dress?

When did you become aware of dress as a personal statement?

How has the way you dress (or style your hair) changed through the years? Why?

How many communities of style do you identify with? Describe them and the associated dress.

What are the “codes of dress” of your cultural communities, including your age group, family, or occupation?

What are your thoughts on the way that you dress in relation to the aesthetics (ideas and values of beauty) relating to dress of the communities with which you identify or those of the people that you respect and admire?

Have you ever been treated differently, embraced, or rejected in a way that you would attribute to the way you dress or dressed? Describe the context and the experience?

Are there articles of dress or personal adornment that hold special meaning for you and for those in your family and/or communities?

The Will to Adorn Youth Access Program

by Sally A. Van de Water

The Will to Adorn initiative has seen many iterations: fieldwork, satellite research projects and dissertations, youth presentations and projects, and, most spectacularly, the 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival program. Of these, however, the one that might show the most long-term difference is the Will to Adorn Youth Access Program, which has partnered with community organizations all over the country to engage young people in direct fieldwork in their communities.



In 2010, inspired by a long working relationship and collegial goodwill, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH) formalized its partnership with Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center in the Bronx, New York, and specifically with its Beverly J.

Participants in the Dr. Beverly J. Robinson Community Folk Culture Internship Program at Mind-Builders Creative Arts Center in the Bronx, New York, interview master barber Dennis "Denny Moe" Mitchell about his two decades of experience.

Photo by Jade D. Banks

Robinson Community Folk Culture Program. The Folk Culture Program, directed at the time by teaching artist and community scholar/lay folklorist Jade D. Banks, hired teen and young-adult interns for a period of months, usually during the summer, and trained them to do fieldwork: photo and video documentation, fieldnotes, interviewing, and more. In 2010 the Folk Culture Program started doing this work with a Will to Adorn focus. Teens produced thousands of gigabytes of data, hosted fashion shows, mini-exhibits, and presentation nights at local community venues, and, most importantly, began to see themselves as cultural practitioners with something to say.

Inspired by the success at Mind-Builders, the CFCH staff wished to expand the model. We received a 2013 grant from the Smithsonian's Youth Access Program, followed by a second grant in 2014, to partner with more organizations doing similar arts-and-culture work in communities. We were also able to build on a relationship with Debra Robinson, a teacher at an Atlanta-area high school who had worked on some of the early Will to Adorn fieldwork at Spelman College. These two anchor programs provided models for us when approaching prospective partners. Our target audiences remained middle- and high-school aged students and their educators. Since directed learning also takes place in community settings and venues that offer flexibility beyond the classroom, we primarily recruited in out-of-school settings.

By spring 2013, seven additional partners had been selected. They came to us by several methods: following recommendations of existing research partners, asking folklorists in specific communities for recommendations, and serendipity. These partners represent a broad range of programming and target audiences, including Title I and alternative schools, faith-based groups, arts and community organizations, urban youth-focused initiatives, and organizations working with adjudicated youth. The work in 2014 has focused upon developing and nurturing design thinking

while continuing to address competencies that have been identified as part of the core education standards, particularly literacy, analytic skills, writing, primary research skills, communication, and team work, as well as basic technical skills.

Now, what to do? We had chosen deliberately diverse organizations, each working with a slightly different target audience. After selecting these partners, CFCH invited all nine to Washington, DC, for intensive training in the midst of the 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Longtime Will to Adorn educators Jade D. Banks and Debra Robinson were joined by Bonnie Sunstein, author of *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, plus Lisa Rathje and Paddy Bowman of Local Learning. They each led workshop sessions covering an aspect of the project within their expertise. We worked with Jade to adapt Mind-Builders' lesson plans into a draft Will to Adorn curriculum, which we shared with the new partners. Following the workshop, eight organizations were able to extend their participation through the second week of the festival; youth participants from three organizations collaborated to document various aspects of the festival relating to dress and adornment. Spontaneous discussions throughout the festival days added to the group's understanding of the larger Will to Adorn initiative, and as they worked with each other they grew excited to begin their own projects upon returning to their home cities. For me, one of the most exciting aspects of the Youth Access Project was working with six former youth interns from New York and Atlanta, now aged 17 to 29, at the festival to help train and support the younger students.



The 2013 Will to Adorn Festival program showcased the distinctive ways in which diverse African American identities are expressed through attire and adornment. It explored the traditions, artistry, and social histories that have shaped these expressions. The program featured demonstrations and workshops by artisans such as milliners, hairdressers, jewelers, tailors, and ceremonial regalia makers. It presented performances by exemplars of styles such as musicians, dancers, activists, poets, athletes, and others.

Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian

Teachers and students can participate in the Will to Adorn Project by downloading the Will to Adorn App available for iPhone and iPad to contribute their own dress stories.

I'm thrilled that this inaugural edition of the *Journal of Folklore and Education* highlights several Youth Access partners' programs in the following pages. These organizations are doing profound work and making a difference in the lives of the young people they serve.

Sally A. Van de Water has been at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage since early 2013, when she was hired to manage the Will to Adorn Youth Access Program. She was coordinator for the 2013 Smithsonian Folklife Festival The Will to Adorn: African American Diversity, Style, and Identity program and is project manager for CFCH's symposium Intangible Cultural Heritage: An International Dialogue. Ms. Van de Water has facilitated national meetings of cultural heritage professionals on behalf of the American Folklore Society, National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, and National Endowment for the Arts, and has a long history of managing public programs, cultural events, and public folklorists' convenings. She has an AB in Folklore and Folklife from Bryn Mawr College and an MA in Folk Studies from Western Kentucky University.

Art of Style @ Jazz Fest

by Jenna Bonistalli and Elise Gallinot Goldman

Afterschool 5th- and 6th-grade students in KID smART classes at Akili Academy in New Orleans were part of the Smithsonian's Will to Adorn Youth Access Program during the 2013-14 school year. Over the course of the year, students studied adornment, style, and culture through the lens of the visual arts. In the fall semester, students created their own patterns, collages, and poetry. In the spring, they focused on learning about local artists by interviewing them about their craft and process. On May 2 the class took a fieldtrip to the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival to interview and document the artists and craftspeople who show and sell their work in the Congo Square Marketplace. We produced a video of the students in action at the festival to share with family and community members.



Watch the video to see how students learned from these artisans of style! (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPr1tVw9LFQ>)

Here is what the class wrote and said before showing the video at their afterschool showcase:

Le'Jean G.

Hi! We are representing the class "Art of Style." The Art of Style is about art you know and don't know. For example, all types of clothes are art. Look at your shoes, someone designed

and made those! Even your body is art. Look around you, everything in this world is art. And, this is what Art of Style is about.

Paris M.

On Friday, May 2, our afterschool class took a trip to Jazz Fest. We went to Jazz Fest to learn about other people and the art they make. We met artists to see what they do for a living and what inspires them. Before we went, we came up with questions we might ask and different jobs for each member of our group to do while we were there. We practiced with the iPad, iPod, iPhone and recorder to prepare.

Sheltion B.

When we were at Jazz Fest, we learned about different cultures and personalities. For example, we met a jeweler named Baba, who lives in Atlanta, Georgia. He told us that "Dreams are real and the real are dreams." This relates to art because he says he dreams about art and then draws them out to make jewelry designs out of silver. That quote by Baba inspired me by encouraging me to succeed and be the best I can be.

For more photographs and information visit:

<http://kidsmartnola.tumblr.com/tagged/will-to-adorn>

Classroom Application: KID smART Student Interview Worksheet

Possible Questions for Artists

Your story:

- When did you know you wanted to be an artist?
- Were you a creative kid?
- Do you come from a family or community of artists?
- How long have you been making art?
- How did you become an artist?
- What else are you good at?
- How does your creativity reflect your culture?

Your process and inspiration:

- How do you decide what you are going to make?
- What are your inspirations?
- What are you trying to communicate in your artwork?
- How does your culture influence your artwork?
- How does where you come from influence or inspire your artwork?
- What does the word “adornment” mean to you?
- What do you hope people feel when they buy/wear your artwork?

Relevance:

- What are some important life lessons that the arts can offer?
- Is creativity based on talent or hard work?
- What is the best part about being an artist?
- What is the worst thing about being an artist?
- Can anyone become an artist?

Classroom Application: KID smART Student Jobs Worksheet

Organizer _____

- Holds bag and map
- Keeps track of time
- Gets all people interviewed/photographed to sign release

Greeter / Introducer _____

- Greets the artist
- Tells the artist about our project and why we're at Jazz Fest
- Says thank you
- Helps group to be kind and respectful

Photo / Video Manager _____

- Manages camera/video/audio equipment
- Takes turns with others/makes sure everyone has a chance
- Makes sure images are focused/clear
- Makes sure to have:
 - o Wide image of artist with their work, smiling
 - o Detail images of their work
 - o Some audio/video of them speaking

Lead Interviewer _____

- Asks thoughtful questions / follow-up questions
- Listens carefully
- Guides conversation
- Uses "Questions for Artists" as a guide

A Closer Look at AS220 Youth

by Anne Kugler

AS220 Youth is a free arts education program in Providence, Rhode Island, serving young people ages 14 to 21. AS220 Youth has three teaching sites: our downtown Providence studio, UCAP Middle School, and the Rhode Island Training School, the state's juvenile detention facility.

While our program is open to any young person with an interest in the arts, our goal is to engage youth in the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems. Once youth begin attending the program regularly, they build an online portfolio. Youth portfolios can be viewed here: Youth.as220.org/portfolios.

After youth attain technical skills in an artistic medium, staff members link them with professional opportunities. These could include exhibiting art work in a gallery show, assisting on a commercial photo shoot, recording a mixtape in our studio, or performing with our hip hop dance troupe, 2legit.



In addition to after-school programming, AS220 Youth runs an Apprentice Program for young adults ages 17 to 21. Apprentices come to work each day and complete large-scale, collaborative projects that generate income for our studio.

AS220 Youth by the numbers

- 500 youth served each year at three teaching sites
- of these, 85 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch at their public schools
- one in three participants (33 percent) are, or were, in state care
- 28 youth hired as Studio Apprentices
- 54 hired in our summer jobs program

AS220 Youth as a Will To Adorn Youth Access Program

Will to Adorn's Program Coordinator, Sally Van de Water, and Curator, Diana Baird N'Diaye, invited AS220 Youth to Washington, DC, in July 2013 for an initial training on folklore and ethnographic research. AS220 representatives Charlene Wooten, Felicia Megginson, and Anne Kugler spent three days learning to use digital media to document "artisans of style" in our community. We integrated this folklore curriculum into existing photo and video production classes. Youth were asked to complete street photography projects, oral histories, and documentary videos. An example is this video on barbershops: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Cye13Fs0SM>.

Because AS220 Youth has a long history of teaching photo and video, it was relatively easy for us to engage teens in that creative process. However, we didn't have any experience teaching folklore or anthropology fieldwork. We were challenged to engage youth in the historical and ethnographic research that adds depth and meaning to cultural studies.

Youth Engagement

In one of our Will to Adorn workshops, I was trying to engage youth in a conversation about something "old-fashioned," like why the distinctive African fabric is called Dutch Wax. They weren't so interested in the history but loved the gorgeous colors and patterns. The conversation quickly turned to buying fabric and making clothes, then showing them off. It seemed like everyone in the room had a secret desire to be a runway model! The idea of hiring a DJ and hosting a huge party really transformed our work with the Will to Adorn. The project suddenly felt more accessible and fun, and everyone could see themselves playing a role.

Many more young people began showing up at our planning meetings, and it was easier to involve them in conversations about cultural history. They began researching African American style and created online mood boards on Tumblr to document what they learned and what they liked. The mood boards referenced different aspects of Black style, from Josephine Baker's feather plumes to Angel Haze's dark psychedelia. Maasai beadwork and Ghanaian *Adrinka* symbols popped up next to Solange in Ankara short-shorts.

Thanks to rap's current obsession with high fashion, many guys were willing to help out. They collaged pictures of their favorite emcees dressed to the nines: A\$AP Rocky in leather Givenchy shorts and Pharrell sporting Lanvin tuxedos and the latest Bathing Ape gear.

Planning for the Show

In January 2014, our planning process shifted into high gear. Charlene ran tryouts for models and rehearsals began for the models. Our hostess and emcee, Ronya Traynham, organized guest artists and designed the décor. Boston-based designer Judith Bashala graciously offered to show her clothing and began coming to Providence on a monthly basis for fittings.

AS220 VISTA volunteer Janay Pina worked with youth to develop an African-inspired makeup look, while Nila Lares was sewing skirts and sundresses out of colorful geometric print fabrics. Kyle Collins created a line of hoodies for the show, and Fernando Flaquer got busy screen printing RIOT in Japanese on all his clothes.

One of the most rewarding and enjoyable partnerships to develop was with a group of teens from Central Falls, Rhode Island, called the Fashionistas. Led by teaching artist Rachel Stern with model coaches Sammy Medina and Sadio Sokona, the group designs and models clothing in an afterschool workshop. They also learn makeup techniques and the basics of fashion photography. When the Fashionistas learned about the Will to Adorn fashion show, they began choreographing a scene for the show. Rachel also brought the Will to Adorn Project to an alternative education classroom called the Square Mile Program. The ten young men in the program were given digital cameras and asked to shoot photos of Central Falls swag. The team assembled their footage into a short video that premiered at the show.



The Day Finally Arrives!

After months of preparation, the day of the show finally arrived. The date fell during the week of public school vacation, so young people were on AS220's doorstep at 10 am, ready to get busy. Some youth focused on getting the stage set up, while others organized the media files we needed to project. Our social butterflies took to the Internet, letting friends, followers, and family know that something special was about to happen. The show was slated to begin at 6, but by 5 pm, we already had a crowd. DJ Kris Fame hit the decks and played the latest hits from West Africa, while Nigerian chef Iyabo Odewole fed everyone jerk chicken with rice and peas. When that ran out, our friends from New Orleans' Ashé Cultural Center showed up with enormous pots of spicy gumbo.

AS220 Youth's Photo Program set up a photo booth, with a backdrop painted by Liberian artist Uriah Zoegar. Audience members, models, and guest artists lined up to get their portraits taken.

Our hosts, Ronya Traynham and Mike Johnson, got the night off to a great start with their charisma and humor. They explained the Will to Adorn Project and AS220 Youth's involvement. Then our models and guest artists took to the stage:

- Spoken word artist Christopher Johnson offered a sartorial autobiography
- Will to Adorn videos from AS220 Youth and Central Falls were shown
- Playwrights Yunus and Habibah Qudus performed a one-act play about how brand-name clothes DON'T make the man
- Youth designers Kyle and Fernando talked about their nascent streetwear line, Broken Monuments
- AS220's rap group, ZuKrewe, and dance troupes 2legit and Project 401 performed

And then there were the clothes. Models from AS220 and Central Falls took turns doing scenes with Judith Bashala's outfits, as well as Personal Style sections. By the time the models hit the stage, the cheers were deafening. The crowd was incredibly supportive and showed all the performers love, regardless of their looks or the cost of their clothes. Emcee Ronya said, *"I feel like it went wonderfully. Even during the months of*



Square Mile Street Style Video
[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3YnKVofAm0%5D>]



Central Falls Fashionistas
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcL-Lti0gy8>

planning, I didn't imagine this many people would come. When you looked out from the stage, it was just a sea of faces."

ZuKrewe member Casimiro Pereira agreed. *"I walked out feeling so happy. I walked out ecstatic. There's so much negativity in our community, especially among young people from this neighborhood who's got problems with people from that neighborhood. This night just goes to show that we're all one community and can support one another."*

Lessons Learned

AS220 Youth is an art studio, and when youth come into our space, it's with the expectation that they're going to make something. Engaging youth in a more academic pursuit—like ethnographic research—was challenging. Success came when we made research a means to an end, with the end being a big party for the whole community. As soon as the lights went down at the end of the show, youth began asking when the next one was going to happen. If we do move forward with another fashion show, we plan to dedicate more time on the front end to folkloristic research. We'd love to bring Smithsonian curators and educators to AS220 to run workshops on sartorial traditions and "artisans of style."

Behind the Lens: Girls of Color in the Media at the Museum of the African Diaspora

by **Indiia Wilmott**

This community program puts African American adornment traditions at the heart of our media literacy program. Many of our lessons begin with an activity about a particular type of adornment and then we look critically at how that tradition is depicted in various media outlets. For example, we recently studied African American hair adornment and then took an in-depth look at the natural hair social media movement. Once the girls had a historical reference for their traditions, they were able to look at current trends with a more critical eye. I found that hair adornment is a great way to get girls to open up about how media can shape how we see ourselves.



Questions asked in our activities include: Who's in charge of the messaging? What exactly is the message being sent to young women of color? How does this messaging make them feel about their own identity? These important questions contribute to the success of our lessons, which we have learned must include these factors: celebrating women of color, analyzing the current media messaging surrounding women of color, and asking how such messages make the girls feel.

Our hope with Behind the Lens is that we inspire our girls not only to look at social media, reality television, magazines and other media with a critical eye, but also create or share content that they want to see and that they want others to see. They can start a Tumblr page, Pinterest board, or Facebook community with the purpose of sharing positive images and stories about women of color. In addition, we have given them the groundwork to help them speak up when they see something that looks or feels wrong because they understand the power behind dress, adornment, and media.