Doing Dutch Wax Cloth: Practice, Politics, and 'The New Africa'

by

Amah Melissa Edoh

MSc., Population and International Health
Harvard School of Public Health, 2008

S.B., Political Science
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003

Submitted to the Program in Science, Technology, and Society
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology and Society
at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

September 2016

© 2016 Amah Melissa Edoh. All Rights Reserved.

The author hereby grants to MIT permission to reproduce and distribute publicly paper
and electronic copies of this thesis document in whole or in part in any medium now
known or hereafter created.

Signature of Author: ____________

History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology and Society
18 August 2016

Certified by: ____________

Signature redacted

Christine Walley
Professor of Anthropology
Director of Graduate Studies, History, Anthropology, and STS
Thesis Supervisor
Signature redacted

Certified by: _ _

________________________
Heather Paxson
William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Anthropology
Margaret MacVicar Faculty Fellow
Thesis Committee Member

Signature redacted

Certified by: _ _

________________________
Stefan Helmreich
Elting E. Morison Professor of Anthropology
Anthropology Program Head
Thesis Committee Member

Signature redacted

Accepted by: _ _

________________________
Christine Walley
Professor of Anthropology
Director of Graduate Studies, History, Anthropology, and STS

Signature redacted

Accepted by: _ _

________________________
Jennifer S. Light
Professor of Science, Technology, and Society
Professor of Urban Studies and Planning
Department Head, Program in Science, Technology, & Society
DOING DUTCH WAX CLOTH: 
Practice, Politics, and “The New Africa”

By
Amah Melissa Edoh


ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how Africa’s place in the world is negotiated in different forms of material engagement with Dutch Wax cloth—designing, advertising, selling, buying, and tailoring—along the cloth’s trajectory between the Netherlands and Togo. Derived from a manual Javanese textile printing technique, Dutch Wax cloth has been machine-printed in the Netherlands since the late 19th century, and was introduced to West Africa in the early 20th century. Lomé, Togo was a hub for its distribution throughout West and Central Africa for much of the 20th century. The cloth’s visual and material attributes were historically developed through exchanges between West African consumers and European manufacturers and Dutch Wax has since been integrated into both dress practices and processes of social reproduction in Togo, as in much of West Africa. Further, in recent years, the cloth’s producer has been rebranding itself from a textile manufacturer for Africa into a global luxury design and fashion brand. As such, Dutch Wax cloth has and continues to not only mediate but also embody West African participation in the global. By examining how Dutch Wax is “done” in various sites of practice along its path—how it is given form, and what is produced alongside these forms—this multi-sited ethnography brings to light how Africa’s relationship to and place in the global is negotiated in the practices of designers, advertisers, sellers, buyers, and tailors across the Netherlands, Togo, and “the global.” I argue that the view of Africa-in-the-world (Ferguson 2006) that emerges in each of these sites of practice and across all five is one that is characterized by a tenuous play between absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion. Even as it offers a seductive alternative to past discourses about a “hopeless,” “crisis-ridden,” “old Africa,” the “New Africa” remains decidedly layered and multiple.

Thesis Supervisor: Christine Walley
Title: Professor of Anthropology, Director of Graduate Studies, History, Anthropology, and STS
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title page ........................................................................................................................................... 1
Abstract ................................................................................................................................................. 3
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................................ 4
Acknowledgments ................................................................................................................................. 6
Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 10
Chapter One. Researching ..................................................................................................................... 33
Interlude ................................................................................................................................................. 70
Chapter Two. Designing .......................................................................................................................... 73
Chapter Three. Advertising ..................................................................................................................... 112
Interlude ................................................................................................................................................ 147
Chapter Four. Selling (& Buying) .......................................................................................................... 151
Chapter Five. Loving .............................................................................................................................. 204
Postlude .................................................................................................................................................. 214
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 217
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As ethnographers, we depend on the generosity of so many—informants, teachers, colleagues, friends, family—for guidance, sustenance, and substance as we undertake our research. I have been humbled again and again by how good so many have been to me throughout this journey. I have benefited from so much that any form of recognition for all of those who carried me through can never do justice to their gifts; my acknowledgments can only be partial and inadequate. But I am delighted to offer them here all the same, with heartfelt gratitude and hope that I will someday return the generosity and “pay it forward.”

My first thanks must go to my informants in the Netherlands and in Togo, who so generously shared of their lives, work, and worlds with me. Without their generosity, there would be no dissertation to speak of. Though, in accordance with ethnographic norms, I anonymize them in the text that follows, I learned so much from them and am immensely humbled by what each of them shared with me. I hope that they see their stories reflected here, if refracted through a different lens. I would especially like to express my gratitude to the designers at Vlisco, who made me feel at home in the studio and from whom I learned so much about creative practice (things like: “I start every day with a blank page”; “You find a line and you follow it”; “Sometimes you have to put it away for a while before coming back to it”) that enriched my own creative process as I wrote this dissertation. I would also like to extend my sincere gratitude to Roger Gerards and the staff at Vlisco in Helmond and Amstelveen, to Ruud Sanders of the Vlisco Museum for his generous assistance with the company archives, as well as to Louis Philippe Bartet and the staff of the Vlisco Africa Company (VAC)-Togo in Lomé, for opening their doors to this research project.

My debts at MIT are innumerable. I couldn’t have asked for a more supportive and engaged dissertation committee than Chris Walley, Heather Paxson, and Stefan Helmreich. A class I took as an undergraduate with Chris Walley some time around 2000 marked the first time that I felt like I fit in at MIT, and that the ways I wanted to interrogate the world were valid. That class set me on the course that led me to pursue graduate studies in anthropology. It has been an honor to have Chris Walley as my advisor during my doctoral studies in MIT’s Program in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology, and Society (HASTS). Her commitment to leveraging academic inquiry to shine a light on the experiences of marginalized populations continues to be an inspiration and I am grateful for her support and guidance throughout this project. My first forays into “the field” for this ethnography were made possible thanks to Heather Paxson’s thoughtfulness and foresight. Further, her insights and sharp eye have been invaluable in helping me disentangle many a knot in my analysis at all stages of this dissertation. For all this and much more I am tremendously thankful. With his close reading and inspired connections, Stefan Helmreich consistently pushed me to deepen my analyses and to think not just about, but with Dutch Wax cloth. His enthusiasm for the project was always a great source of reassurance. Thank you all for championing this project and for helping bring it to fruition.

So many other faculty members in HASTS have been supporters and advocates, offering advice, encouragement, feedback on work in progress, or funding over the years. My gratitude goes to Chris Boebel, Manduhai Buyandelger, Jean Jackson, Erica James, Graham Jones, Vincent Lépinay, Clapperton Mavhunga, Anne McCants, Amy Moran-Thomas, Harriet Ritvo, Susan Silbey, and Craig Wilder. I would especially like to acknowledge Jeff Ravel for his thoughtful and generous mentorship over the years. From that unlikely undergraduate research placement on 18th-century French theater in 2000 to my graduate school journey
many years later, Jeff has been a steady presence, always ready to listen and offer suggestions and I am deeply grateful for his commitment to students. The administrative staff in STS, History, and Anthropology made my time in the department seamless and always made me feel like they were rooting for me. My warm thanks go to Paree Pinkney, Alex Aho, Carolyn Carlson, Mabel Chin, Margo Collett, Chuck Munger, Irene Hartford, Barbara Keller, and Amberly Steward. A special note of gratitude goes to Karen Gardner, academic administrator extraordinaire, for her open door, patience, and kindness. And for keeping us all on track with her friendly and impeccably timed reminders. Karen makes being supremely organized look easy and HASTS graduate students are the better for her attentive presence.

For their companionship as we navigated the introduction to academia that was grad school, and for being models of excellence all along, my gratitude (and high-fives) to friends and colleagues in HASTS: my cohort—Emily Lin Xi, Canay Özden-Schilling, and Tom Özden-Schilling—as well as Marie Burks, Ashawari Chaudhuri, Amy Johnson, Shreeharsh Kelkar, Clare Kim, Lucas Mueller, Shira Shmuely, Michaela Thompson, and Rebecca Woods. Seeing and having a chat with Jim Eggleston at MIT’s Dewey Library was always a welcome reprieve from the workday, and for that (and the ginger bread!) I am grateful to Jim.

To round out my MIT thanks, I would like to acknowledge the incredible women (and scholars) who nurtured and guided me from my earliest days at the Institute, when I was still but a teenager: Isabelle de Courtivron, Odile Cazenave, Michèle Oshima, and Joy Amulya; the models they set and their unrelenting belief in me over the years helped me carve out a path of my own in often unlikely settings. They continue to inspire me to this day.

A multi-sited ethnographic project such as this would not have been possible without financial support. My heartfelt gratitude goes to the Ford Foundation for supporting my research, and more broadly for its commitment to promoting diversity and excellence in the academy by providing financial and career development resources for scholars from historically underrepresented groups. The research presented in this dissertation was also supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship under Grant No. 1122374, research funds from HASTS, and a summer research fellowship from MIT’s Center for International Studies.

I have presented portions of this work in a number of venues over the past few years. The conversations each time pushed my thinking and for that I would in particular like to thank: Annemarie Mol and the Eating Bodies group at the University of Amsterdam; Deborah Posel and participants of the Conspicuous Consumption workshop at the Institute for Humanities Research in Africa (HUMA) at the University of Cape Town; Bruno Perreau and participants in the MIT-Sciences Po Borders Project; Perig Pitou and the Laboratoire d’anthropologie sociale at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris; Anais Gérard and Hiav Lam of the Atelier de doctorants at the EHESS; and Emma Teng and the Global Studies and Languages program at MIT. I would especially like to thank Annemarie Mol for her guidance and generosity in the beginnings of my field research in the Netherlands. Conversations with Suzanne Legêne, Rachel Spronk, Rhoda Woets, Javier Gimeno-Jimenes, Joana Ozorio de Almeida, and Nina Sylvanus at various stages of this research greatly enriched its final outcome.
How can I adequately recognize the friends whose labors of love over the last 7 years have buoyed me? At home and in “the field,” they have fed me, helped me move out of 4th-floor walkup apartments in August, run with me, cheered me on, talked through work with me, juggled my multiple phone numbers, endured my bad moods and reclusive work periods, celebrated (with) me... You are everything—thank you, guys.

On the road: Boundless gratitude to: Tjitske Holtrop for always knowing exactly what to say. And for those salads. With Julien McHardy, for embodying the epitome of smart, creative, easygoing coolness. Liliane Umubyeyi, for the laughter, for sisterhood, for modeling the virtues of discipline at the BNF, and for joining me in making an art out of being boring. With Adrien Lorenceau, for the impromptu living room dance parties, and for making their home an obligatory layover every time I was in Paris. We’ll always have Château Rouge. Matthieu Savary, for all those races; SITL! Carmen Ervin, Yell, and Lyse Ishimwe, for the magic of transnational black queer community. Arthur Musah, for sharing his family with me during a much-needed respite during my fieldwork in Lomé. Suzanne van der Aa, for impersonating Baby Jesus on Whatsapp on that grey Paris Sunday afternoon. And for visiting me at various points during my fieldwork and reminding me that I had friendships dating back more than a couple months: Jason Claude, Paula Winicki, The Andrew Green, Joshua Gambrell, and Audubon Dougherty.

At home: Marie Burks, aka Marmar, who, after many, many hours of talking through my dissertation and article drafts over the past several months now knows far more about Dutch Wax cloth than she could have possibly ever wanted to (sorry!). Ashawari Chaudhuri, for believing in this project so fervently, like it was her own, even when I didn’t. Nicole Wedick, for bringing me delicious and nutritious homemade goodies no matter where or when we met and storing my belongings for many, many months. Jennifer Manne, for welcoming me into her home more times than I can count, no matter how busy she was, and each time, assuring me of my awesomeness. Regina Joice, for showing me how it’s done, with grace and kindness and humility. Joshua Gambrell, for his incredible thoughtfulness and generosity (and for being proud of me like he birthed me!). Canay Özden-Schilling for making snail mail appear in my mailbox while I was away (and always with the wittiest messages!), and with Tom, for packing up and moving my desk (more than once). Xi, for steadfastly battling it out with me in the trenches in the last year. Nse-Abasi Umoh, Vernelle Noel, and Paula Winicki, for bringing joy back into a difficult period with bad poetry, red velvet cake, and boxed wine. Claire Pierre, for the irreplaceable magic and unique delights of twindom. Diane Kelley, for being there through the crankiness and always ready with a helping hand. Jovonne Bickerstaff for her wise, tried, and tested advice over the years, and for stepping in at exactly the right time in that last push! And Meredith Coleman-Tobias (Scholar!), for the double helix of sisterhood, for making daily accountability check-ins the best part of the day, and that incredible countdown acrostic!

For being conduits for the housing gods (a critical part of ethnographic research) and so much more on the road and at home, my thanks go to: Barbara Amouzou, Asli Arpak, Elena Golikova, Tjitske Holtrop, Patrick Lokadi, Cécile Obertop, Max Osseyi, Canay Özden-Schilling, Suhayl Ramirez, and Liliane Umubyeyi. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge some of the non-human actors that helped to bring this dissertation into being: audiodharma.org, Whatsapp, Netflix, Youtube, A Different World, Green & Black’s chocolate, DJ Ja Big’s “Deep and Dope” Youtube channel, and Ivens’s boxing class at the Cambridge YMCA.
I grew up in a family where working hard and doing good work were paramount. My parents, Emilienne Folly and Koffi Edoh, modeled these qualities for my siblings and me, but also imbued in us the importance of humility and kindness. I am deeply saddened by the fact that my father, Koffi Edoh, passed away before he could see this dissertation come to fruition; he had looked forward to its completion and to calling me “Dr. Edoh.” Both his and my mother’s influence pervades the pages and the spirit of this dissertation and I hope that what I have produced makes them both proud. Throughout this project’s lifespan, my family has shown faith in me, even when they weren’t entirely clear what exactly I was doing, or where I was in the world, or how much longer I was going to be. I am thrilled to finally be able to show them what it is I have been doing all this time and to thank them publicly for always cheering me on. To my siblings, Henri Edoh, Nadia Edoh, and Ayaboe Edoh, and the next generation, Milan Edoh, Mawuli Kanamori, and Kunale Kanamori, may this text play some part, however small, in making (or keeping) us curious about our home country.
INTRODUCTION

The opening frames of the official video for *Azonto*, a hit song released in 2013 by British-Ghanaian rapper Fuse ODG, cut back and forth to shots of the artist taking position with two backup dancers in what looks like a shipyard. fuse is wearing a black cap emblazoned with the word “TINA,” hipster sunglasses, fat West African clay beads around his neck, a short-sleeved print button-down shirt in a mustard color that echoes the color of the beads, and cut-off denim Bermuda shorts. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled halfway up his biceps, in a style typically associated with hipster fashion. One of the dancers, a black woman, is wearing acid wash denim shorts and a loose shirt in a printed kente design. The other dancer, a white man, is clad in a faded denim shirt buttoned to the very top, his shirt’s sleeves rolled up in the same manner as Fuse’s, and faded denim cut-off shorts. A classic wax cloth print has been added across the back and symmetrically along the button panel on the front of his shirt. Positioned as they are there, the wax cloth panels almost look like lungs.

"See, I just came back from Ghana," Fuse starts in London-accented English, as the music picks up and the scene setup builds. "And I wanna share this dance that everyone was doing over there." He continues:

Kill Beatz had to show me how to do it.

He sat me down in his place, and he said to me/Fuse!

---

1 The video can be viewed at: https://youtu.be/wPGuUlG1Slk
2 Kente cloth is handwoven West African textile of great value. Kente-style designs are also reproduced as prints on machine-manufactured textiles (see Picton 1995).
3 I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 1 what a 'classic wax cloth design' is
4 Ghanaian producer and oft-collaborator of Fuse ODG
The next frame finds the rapper standing in a post-industrial chic room, alone this time, wearing the same cap, a new pair of sunglasses and beads, and a long sleeveless tunic cut from the popular print design known throughout West Africa as *Angelina or Miriam Makeba*, and popularized throughout the United States as the “dashiki” design. He starts to rap:

 Nobody want to see you rising\And when they do they don’t even like it
They just want to see you deep in crisis\Drive yourself you don’t need their license
Holla her she can’t even ride it\Move your feet just like this
Let me show you the latest\Walk over dem haters

Now watch me do my azonto

And the refrain picks up: “Azonto, azonto, azonto\Watch me do my azonto azonto
azonto\Let me show you azonto azonto azonto\Walk over dem haters.” A Ghanaian accent peeks through as Fuse says “Let me show you the latest” and “Walk over dem haters.”

The rest of the video is a montage of various configurations of people performing or learning the azonto dance: a glamorous dark-skinned black woman in a purple dress, red pumps, and high bun; a black man in a suit jacket and bowtie; two blond white girls in black tights and white tops; Fuse wearing wax print trousers with a white shirt, black blazer, and thick gold chain; a trio of black men with wax print cloth tied across their t-shirts in a manner reminiscent of how kente cloth is draped in traditional West African ceremonies; a solo white young woman with long blond curls....
Towards the end of the video, the crowd of dancers gathers in a single room, and individual dancers take center stage to freestyle their azonto moves. Most of the people in the group are black, though there is a sizable and active white minority. Indeed two of the dancers who take center stage in the azonto line are white, including one who is wearing a kente print cloth shirt with an embroidered collar in a style commonly worn by men in West African cities. The people in the group look like they are having a great deal of fun. Their bodies sway together, their movements echoing, if not exactly replicating, one another.
In the closing frame, we learn that the “TINA” on Fuse’s cap is not a word, but rather an acronym. It is spelled out in large white letters at the end of the video: This Is New Africa.5

***

This is (the) New Africa

I no longer remember exactly where I was when I first heard Fuse’s Azonto. But I remember the surprise I felt—and the instant delight—at hearing this familiar West African dance rhythm in what was a very mainstream, non-African venue and crowd. That this song could be played in this place felt like confirmation of a phenomenon I had been becoming gradually aware of: a new kind of African cool increasingly visible in mainstream Western settings and media. The aesthetic was characterized by high production value and typically originated from Lagos, Accra, Johannesburg, London, or Paris. It blended familiar signifiers of African cultures—beads, wax prints, kente and other textile patterns, rumba guitar chords—with mainstream Western forms. My interest was all the more piqued that Africans from the continent and the more recent diaspora—people like me—seemed in many cases to be the originators of this visual discourse.

I found this development incredibly alluring, yet it also made me somewhat uneasy. Even before seeing Fuse ODG’s video, I had begun calling it “The New Africa” phenomenon, because it seemed to be very self-consciously part of a project to present an alternative, revamped image of the continent. (Imagine my excitement, then, when I came upon the closing frame of Fuse’s video!) This “New Africa” aesthetic seemed to be about showing a very current Africa, fluent in the forms of Euro-American cultural production, even as it proudly put forward its African-ness, through the use of African cultural signifiers like textiles, beads, music, dance, and dress styles. Fuse’s video offers a rich illustration of this

---

5 This Is New Africa is the title of Fuse’s 2013 album.
phenomenon—beyond the title of his album. For instance, the images in the video depict an inversion of the ties between Europe and Africa typically put forth in mainstream media, as the white people featured are not only in the minority, but they are learning from their African counterparts. In fact, the lyrics themselves gesture towards this alternate model of knowledge transfer, from Africa to Europe: “I just came back from Ghana\And I wanna share this dance that everyone was doing over there.” Further, the lyrics appear to gesture to historical discourses about the continent, and the shift the video positions itself as a signifier of: “Nobody want to see you rising\And when they do they don’t even like it” seem to harken back to The Economist’s 2011 cover “Africa Rising,” the follow-up to its earlier, infamous, cover: “Africa: The hopeless continent” (2000).

This appears to be a moment of shifting discourse about Africa in the world. Economists are clamoring about the exceptional potential for economic growth on the African continent, and touting the promises of an emerging African middle (and consumer) class (Hrubry 2015; Dupoux et al 2013; Olopade 2014).6 In the art world, African artists have gained recognition on the global stage since 2010 to a degree that had largely previously eluded them. Exhibits in major European museums such as the Global Africa Project and Africa Remix have featured the works of African artists, the 2015 Venice Biennale, curated by an African curator for the first time, the Nigerian Okwui Enwezor, showcased an all-time high of 21 African artists, and in 2014, Cape Town was crowned World Design capital. Writers such as Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Nigerian-Ghanaian-British Taiye Selasi have enjoyed great notoriety in the US and Europe with bestselling novels staged in both

---

6 Even in the midst of recent qualifications of this excitement, such as the Ebola crisis in 2014-2015, and recent reports of the deleterious effects of a slowing Chinese economy on African economies (see Onishi 2016), the tenor of economists and business analysts’ commentary on Africa remains largely positive.
contemporary and historical settings, in Africa, and across Africa, the United States, and Europe. Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong’o has become a household name in the United States.

Social scientists too, are calling for new ways to think and study Africa beyond crisis. Indeed as argued by anthropologists Makhulu, Buggenhagen, and Jackson (2010), crisis as the dominant paradigm for interrogating the continent has made certain forms of knowledge on Africa—what they denote “instrumentalizable knowledge”—valuable and others literally inconceivable (vii). As prominent literary and postcolonial studies scholar Simon Gikandi puts it, Afro-pessimism as a “theoretical problem” has constrained the capacity to interrogate Africa outside the frame of crisis. In response, Makhulu, Buggenhagen, and Jackson’s edited volume, consisting of contributions based on ethnographic research throughout the continent, aims to “construct worlds within and beyond the language of predicament, (...) to conceive of alternative spaces in which the imaginative and social practices of African agents could bring out ‘other orders of reality’” (2010, vii).

The contributions to Makhulu, Buggenhagen, and Jackson’s volume might be seen to belong to a burgeoning body of scholarship in Africanist anthropology that includes texts such as Charles Piot’s Nostalgia for the Future (2010), Brad Weiss’s Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops (2009), the essays contained in Weiss’s edited volume, Producing African Futures: Ritual and Reproduction in a Neoliberal Age (2004), Comaroff and Comaroff’s “Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is Evolving Towards Africa” (2012), Sasha Newell’s The Modernity Bluff (2012), and Nina Sylvanus’s Patterns in Circulation (2016). Driven by the call to look beyond Afro-pessimism in thinking Africa, a key tenet in this body of work is the creativity of African actors, the means by which these individuals respond to the complexities and difficulties of their social, political, and economic environments. For it
is not so much that this new Africanist scholarship leaves behind ‘crisis’ as a frame—*the* frame?—within which to interrogate Africa, as that it instead tries to approach crisis as generative. Generative—of day-to-day innovations and strategies for survival on the part of African actors, and, for those studying them, of theoretical insights that might be relevant beyond Africa.

An important characteristic of what might be called the new Africanist anthropology is its interest in "Africa" as not only geographical entity, but, taking its cue from James Ferguson’s work, in "Africa" as "place-in-the-world." In the introduction to his 2006 collection of essays on Africa in the neoliberal age, *Global Shadows*, anthropologist James Ferguson argues that anthropologists have for years reacted to totalizing, uniformly negative narratives about "Africa" with a refusal to engage with "Africa" (2006). Instead they have highlighted the heterogeneity that makes up the continent, through locally bounded studies and a reluctance to speak to "Africa" as a signifying category—a category that holds structuring power. Yet, Ferguson insists, building on the work of scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2001; 2002) and Valentin Mudimbe (1988; 1992), "Africa" means something in the world. As a historically constructed category, it has been foundational to the West’s self-conception, as “a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world” (Mbembe 2001:2 cited in Ferguson 2006: 2) or, as Mudibme puts it, “the paradigm of difference” (1992, xii). With "Africa" as their object of inquiry, Ferguson’s essays in *Global Shadows* amount to a call for critical interrogation of “Africa” as a place-in-the-world, a category that not only structures the world, but also within which social actors in Africa situate themselves.
Methodologically, studying Africa as place-in-the-world in this new Africanist anthropology has demanded a reconfiguration of space and scale in ethnographic inquiry. This approach is exemplified by Ferguson’s analysis in *Global Shadows*, which draws both on his own in-depth ethnographic research spanning decades in southern Africa, and a review of literature on the continent more broadly (2006), or by Piot’s “jumping scales from village, to village cluster, to capital, to Togo as a whole, to neighboring Ghana, to the Ghana-Togo-Benin-Nigeria coastal corridor” (2010, 17) in his discussion of post-Cold War Togo.

Theoretically, the new Africanist anthropology looks beyond postcolonial theory as the dominant toolkit for conceptualizing social realities in Africa, drawing significantly from theories of globality (see Piot 2010, Comaroff & Comaroff 2002), neoliberalism (see Ferguson 2006; Weiss 2004; Makhulu et al 2010; Newell 2012; Sylvanus 2016; Chalfin 2010), and political theology (see Meyer 2004; van Wyk 2014).

For anthropologists, then, as for economists, museum curators, and music producers, engaging with Africa today—studying, measuring, imagining, representing it—seems to hinge on not only including Africa in “the global,” but on highlighting Africa as agential, and thus *unexceptional*, in this global order. Africa-in-the-world as a “structuring category” seems to be undergoing some changes. That is where this dissertation intervenes—by interrogating how “Africa” as a structuring category, Africa-in-the-world, is articulated in this moment.

**The dissertation**

As an object that has linked West Africa to Europe, Southeast, and East Asia in commodity exchange networks since the late 19th century; an imported commodity appropriated by West African consumers into pre-existing regimes of value and that has come to signify
African identity and heritage worldwide; a designed object, the crafting of which calls on technical proficiency, creative practice, and market research; and an object that shapes African bodies through dress, and African tastes through the status it confers, Dutch Wax cloth offers a rich entry point for the questions this dissertation poses about the articulation and negotiation of Africa-in-the-world today. By adopting Dutch Wax cloth as its point of entry, an object that has long served as a marker of (West) African identity, both in Africa and beyond, this dissertation asks how this object that has signified African-ness for so long can tell us today, also, about how African-ness is being articulated in this historical moment.

I pursue this aim by focusing on different forms of material engagement with Dutch Wax cloth along its commodity chain—designing, advertising, selling, buying, and tailoring—between the Netherlands and Togo, a historical hub of the cloth’s trade in West and Central Africa. By “tracing cultural formations across and within multiple sites of activity” (Marcus 1995, 96), multi-sited ethnography is uniquely situated to reveal how Dutch Wax cloth is made to mean across and between a range of sites. Moreover, tracking commodities in their circulation between production and consumption, commodity network approaches highlight the different regimes of value and standards that shape commodities along their trajectory, and the means by which they are made to work together: through a succession of “tournaments of value” occurring over their biography (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986) or through successive trials of qualification whereby the product’s qualities are momentarily stabilized by actors along its path (Callon, Méadel, et al. 2002).

In each site of practice, this dissertation traces the contradictions, tensions, continuities, and emergent forms as actors engage with Dutch Wax cloth, at once grappling with and producing "Africa" as a category. It argues that “Africa” as structuring category has not so
much changed as it is in flux, existing somewhere and moving back and forth between Africa as the “paradigm of difference” (Mudimbe 1992) and Africa as active participant in the
global order. Africa-in-the-world today is an unstable category, riddled with contradictions between old tropes (and enduring difficult realities on the continent) and tentative new narratives about and visions of the continent. What comes to light by examining the
practices of actors along Dutch Wax cloth’s trajectory then is the work that these actors perform to momentarily stabilize the category in this historical moment. Taking the
practices entailed in the design, advertising, sale, and use of Dutch Wax cloth as its point of entry, this dissertation speaks to how “Africa” is made, remade, and stabilized. In the vein of
the new Africanist anthropology discussed above, this dissertation reconfigures space and scale in its study of Africa as structuring category, with its analysis unfolding in and across
multiple sites in three cities in two countries. By adopting an aesthetic object like Dutch Wax cloth as the focal point of its inquiry and focusing on creative practice, however, this study attempts to move past crisis as the dominant frame for engaging Africa in academic inquiry.

**Dutch Wax cloth**

Dutch Wax cloth is the Dutch-manufactured variety of the richly colored and printed textile generically known as wax cloth or ‘African print,’ or again *pagne* or *tissu wax* in
Francophone Africa. The cloth’s multi-layered design and color combinations are the product of the means by which it is printed, a series of steps through which sections of the fabric are successively isolated (with wax or a resin) and dyed (Nielsen 1979). This technique, employed by the cloth’s Dutch manufacturers in the mid-19th century, was a mechanical adaptation of the Javanese batik hand printing technique (Hout 2001).
The European-produced imitation batiks were originally intended for East Indian (present-day Indonesian) markets. However, when Indonesian consumers rejected the textiles in the late 19th c. due to printing defects produced by the machine-based technique, wax print cloths were redirected towards West African markets. The Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) had been a key trading port for all manner of goods (including slaves during the transatlantic slave trade) for Dutch traders (Riello & Prathasarthi 2011). Cloth was one of the key items of trade during these stopovers, and production for West African markets began in earnest in 1891 as the Dutch realized that their West African trade partners valued the European-produced wax print styles (Kroese 1976; van Koert 2007). What Indonesian consumers had rejected as imperfections proved to be appreciated by West African consumers, who valued the fact that each yard of cloth was unique (Sylvanus 2016). West Africans had already been active participants in textile trade networks linking Europe and the Indian Ocean for centuries (Kriger 2006; Riello 2013; Riello & Parthasarathi 2011; Prestholdt 2008). They took up the new wax cloths also, which were subsequently adjusted through a collaborative process with the cloth’s European manufacturers to suit West African consumers’ tastes and preferences (Steiner 1985; Sylvanus 2016).

Wax print textiles traded in West Africa in the late 19th-early 20th c. were printed throughout Europe—not only in the Netherlands, but also in France, England, and Switzerland—and in Japan (Steiner 1985; Sylvanus 2016; Picton 1995). The designs, which were created by teams of designers in the European factories, were initially based on Indonesian batik designs, and later came to also incorporate African objects from photographs, museum exhibits, and travels by company executives, as well as European fashion trends of the moment (van Koert 2007; Sylvanus 2016). The designers were never African, and it was only in 1986, almost a century after trade with West Africa had begun,
that the first team of designers from the Dutch manufacturer visited an African country. However, sales and design managers from the company regularly and frequently traveled to their various African markets, and bi-annual meetings gathered representatives of the European trading houses that distributed their textiles at the company’s headquarters in the Netherlands.

Wax cloth has signified African-ness since its introduction to the continent in the late 19th century. Cloth in West Africa has historically served as currency and thus a form of wealth—specifically, female wealth, deriving value from both exchange and keeping as a form of feminine patrimony (Bickford 1994). Once introduced to West African markets, wax cloth was rapidly integrated into longstanding uses of cloth in processes of social reproduction. For example, the cloth became an important part of the inheritance a woman bestows upon her daughters as well as a means to signal affective ties through gift exchange and wearing practices: in this logic, sharing and wearing the same print symbolizes wearers’ bond (Bickford 1994).

Because of its role in processes of social reproduction, wax cloth also serves as a memory object (Bickford 1994; Sylvanus 2007). West African women have historically kept cloth not only as a backup emergency fund that can be sold for money if need arises, but also as a cherished repository of memories; print images become symbolic of particular relationships and people, creating a non-indexical, wearable photo album of sorts. Dutch Wax specifically holds this value because it is considered the most “authentic” of varieties available on the market. Similar to jewelry in certain traditions, wax cloth holds both sentimental and monetary value, a form of wealth you can wear (Johnson 1980). Though the tariffs imposed by colonial powers in the early 20th c. to support the import of European-produced wax
cloth had a detrimental effect on local textile producing industries, local cloth varieties did not disappear with the introduction of wax cloth (Picton 1995; Steiner 1985). Rather, wax cloth today co-exists with textiles such as kente, adire, and indigo block-print and tie-dye techniques that predated its introduction to West Africa (Picton 1995).

A number of textile manufacturers produced wax prints for West Africa in the late 19th-early 20th c.; these included notably the Haarlemsche Katoen Maatschappij (HKM, Haarlem Cotton Company), Ankersmit, and Vlisco. The Haarlem Cotton Company was the first manufacturer to manufacture these textiles for West Africa, in 1893 (Sylvanus 2016). Vlisco was established in 1846, as a textile manufacturer for domestic, European, and overseas market. Though the company was also at the time manufacturing Javas (a different variety of wax-printed textiles) for trade to Eastern and West Africa, it did not master the technology for wax prints until 1914, at which time it became involved in the cloth’s trade with West Africa (ibid). As its competitors floundered, Vlisco either acquired the rights to their designs and/or their copper rollers, consolidating its position as the sole manufacturer of “Dutch Wax cloth.”

Today, Vlisco sells over 51 million yards of Dutch Wax print cloth across West and Central Africa (Actis 2013). Popular print designs, today denoted “classics” by the company, are continually in print at the Vlisco factory, some almost 100 years old. As such, a Togolese woman today can purchase a Dutch Wax print that her mother or grandmother wore, or owned, giving the cloth value through its ability to maintain, embody, and memorialize those relationships. Although today wax cloth design and production has been taken up throughout China and in West African countries such as Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, and Ghana, Dutch Wax cloth retains a special status due to its historical legacy. The cloth’s biography—
Introduction

its cross-cultural nature, its strong signification of African-ness, both in African locales and outside of Africa, how it shapes West African bodies and is leveraged in cultural processes in this region—make it an exceptionally rich object with which to interrogate the place of Africa in the world today, from a material-semiotic perspective.

(Re)branding Vlisco

At the time of my research in 2013, Vlisco was in the midst of redefining its business identity, working to remake itself from a textile manufacturer for Africa to a global luxury fashion and design brand. The branding initiative came in response to the company's inability to compete with the influx of significantly cheaper Chinese produced wax print textiles and counterfeits of Vlisco prints onto West and Central African markets (see Sylvanus 2016). Unable to compete with these new commodities' price point, the company's management decided to differentiate itself by targeting the higher end of the African market and trying to broaden its consumer base beyond Africa. Vlisco's new orientation manifested most visibly in its prominent communications campaigns in the form of billboards throughout West African cities, its social media presence on the Internet, the organization of exhibits showcasing the company's products and history, and collaborations with European fashion designers and artists. But the new brand identity also reverberated all along the cloth’s chain, from the creation of designs to the distribution of the cloth on African markets.

As a result, where I had initially set out to study how Dutch Wax cloth is made West African, in the face of the changes underway at Vlisco, the more relevant driving question for my inquiry turned out to be: What does it mean for Dutch Wax cloth for its manufacturer to remake itself into a global luxury fashion and design brand? How does “African-ness” get
reconfigured in the branding process by actors all along the cloth’s chain, and what does that make visible about Africa-in-the-world in this historical moment?

Vlisco items for sale on luxury retailer Luisa Via Roma’s online store
(Source: luisaviaroma.com)
Introduction

Scholarship on wax cloth

Early scholarship on wax print cloth was primarily historical. Mary Ann Littrell (1977) and Ruth Nielsen (1979) discuss the cloth's origins, tracing its trajectory from South-East Asia to West Africa, by way of Western Europe in the late 19th c. In his groundbreaking article on European-produced textiles for West African markets, anthropologist Christopher Steiner (1985) extends this work by demonstrating that the success of the trade was dependent on European manufacturers understanding and honoring the preferences of their West African consumers. Wax prints were thus, Steiner argues, Euro-African commodities, whose cultural hybridity was embedded in the very materiality of the cloth. Folklorist Susan Domowitz (1992) and art historian Kathleen Bickford (1994) turn to the cloth’s West African users (Ghanaian and Ivorian respectively), examining how they “domesticated” the prints through naming practices.

Anthropologist Nina Sylvanus’ recent work (2007; 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2016) on the Dutch Wax cloth trade in Lomé constitutes the most significant body of work on wax cloth at the moment. Sylvanus’ scholarship traces the interwoven histories of Togolese and global capitalism as made visible through the Dutch Wax cloth trade. She analyzes the transformation of the Dutch Wax cloth trade in Lomé from the prints’ introduction to West Africa at the turn of the 20th century to the introduction of the Chinese-produced copies that threatened the Dutch Wax trade almost a century later. In her forthcoming ethnography of the Dutch Wax cloth trade in Lomé, Patterns in circulation: Cloth, gender, and materiality in West Africa (2016), Sylvanus offers an eye-opening account of the wax print trade between Europe and West Africa, drawing particular attention to the critical role of Togolese women in mediating the cloth’s trade from its earliest days. Sylvanus brings to light the layers of
political and economic action that have shaped the Dutch Wax cloth trade between the Netherlands and West Africa. Taking the prints’ “dense materiality”—"the visual, material, and semiotic density of the cloth” (2016, 5)—as her guide, she demonstrates how “the cloth’s different qualities and agencies—both human and nonhuman—mobilize people and things on the one hand, and consequently shape political, economic, and gender relations on the other” (6).

While this existing scholarship offers rich insights into the history of the wax cloth trade and into the cloth’s appropriation by West African users, it remains ethnographically silent on the production side of the story. Steiner and Sylvanus’ texts provide valuable in-depth historical discussions of wax cloth design practice in Europe, sparking my questions about how actors on the production end of Dutch Wax cloth’s trajectory, like designers and advertisers, make meaning of and through their practices. If we recognize Dutch Wax cloth as a cross-cultural, Euro-African commodity, how might we consider how the cloth is made to mean not only by its West African users, but by its European producers as well? And how might the object’s layered and “dense materiality” (Sylvanus 2016) offer a window into these dynamics? This multi-sited ethnography, the first taking wax cloth as its object, addresses these questions.

**The ontological politics of Dutch Wax cloth**

A practice-centered mode of inquiry takes as its premise that reality is multiple. Rather than starting from the notion that things or facts *are*, it recognizes that facts take the shapes they

---

7 Scholars like Kondo (2009), Terrio (2000), and Paxson (2013), have brought a similar interest in the meaning-making practices of Japanese workers and producers of commodities like French chocolate, and American craft cheese respectively.
do as a result of particular performances/actions/practices. That they are "historically, culturally and materially located," and thus, that they are multiple (Mol 1999, 75):

Talking about reality as multiple depends on another set of metaphors, not on those of perspective and construction, but rather those of intervention and performance. These suggest a reality that is done and enacted rather than observed. Rather than being seen by a diversity of watching eyes while itself remaining untouched in the centre, reality is manipulated by means of various tools in the course of a diversity of practices. (77)

The multiplicity of Dutch Wax cloth was thrown into relief as I looked for images to illustrate this introductory chapter: What could stand in for "Dutch Wax cloth"? A close-up of a design? If so, which design? One of Vlisco's "classics" from the early 20th century, or a more recent design? A black-and-white photograph of West African women wearing the "traditional" three-piece outfit known in Togo as a complet? One of Vlisco's recent advertising campaign images, featuring a black model wearing new or old Dutch Wax cloth prints crafted into "European" fashion styles? Each of these images would be more than just an illustration. Each would represent a particular enactment of Dutch Wax cloth, a representation of a version of the cloth brought into being through a situated material practice at a particular moment, and each with its own logics: designing (which aesthetic, created with which tools, when?), wearing (which bodies, what dress styles?), advertising (to whom, by what means?). Selecting just one of the images would be a reification, an artificial stabilization of Dutch Wax cloth.

Mol outlines some of the questions that ensue from the multiplicity of reality: How are decisions made; what is at stake in choosing one version of reality over another; how do
these different versions of reality relate to one another (also see Mol 2002)? This is what she denotes ontological politics—"the way in which 'the real' is implicated in the 'political' and vice versa" (1999, 74). That concern is the underlying motivation for this inquiry into Dutch Wax cloth and what its complexity and multiplicity makes visible about Africa in the world today. Indeed, by taking as a premise that Dutch Wax cloth is multiple, my inquiry sheds light on the mutual constitution of the material and the ordering of power. And given that Dutch Wax cloth in the moment I captured linked not only Europe and West Africa, but (West) Africa and "the global," this approach is particularly well-suited to elucidating my question about how Africa in the world is articulated in this moment.
From top left: Young women in Lomé, late 1960s (Photo courtesy of Emilienne Folly); Dutch Wax cloth design (Design by Vlisco, photograph by author); Vlisco billboard, Lomé 2014 (Photograph by author)
Structure of the dissertation

Each of the following chapters centers on a different way of “doing” Dutch Wax cloth, of engaging with it through situated material practice. In each site of practice, I show how the relationship between Africa, African bodies and forms, and “the global” is negotiated.

Recognizing that this dissertation is itself an enactment of Dutch Wax cloth into a particular kind of thing (namely, a dissertation), I begin with a discussion in Chapter 1 of making Dutch Wax cloth into a research object. Using the printing of the cloth as analogy, the discussion draws attention to the craft of ethnographic research. It brings to light the means by which the research came to look as it did, unpacking the contingencies and exigencies of the research endeavor and shows how Africa-in-the-world is ethnographically produced at the nexus of commodity networks, an array of material practices, and affective ties, playing out through a range of objects, and locations across the Netherlands, Togo, ‘the West,’ ‘Africa,’ the Internet.

The order of the subsequent chapters mirrors the chronological progression of the Dutch Wax along its trajectory from design studio to market: designing and advertising in the Netherlands, and selling, buying, and tailoring in Togo.

Chapter 2 analyzes design practice in Vlisco’s studio, asking how “Africa” manifests in Vlisco designers’ creation of Dutch Wax cloth designs. The chapter argues that Dutch Wax prints’ African-ness—understood as a recognizable visual form or aesthetic—is the product of a dialectical interaction between technical skill and the historically-grounded, material specificity of Dutch Wax cloth. The realization of this dynamic form is contingent on the configuration of design practice in the studio, which is itself significantly influenced by how
the company envisions itself (textile manufacturer for Africa vs. a global design and fashion brand). Demonstrating how reconfigurations in Vlisco's design studio threaten to change the designs’ aesthetic, the discussion highlights how Vilsco's remaking into a global design brand simultaneously produces greater visibility for Dutch Wax cloth—and the African-ness it signifies—in the design arena, even as the recognizable “African” aesthetic of the designs is transformed. Africa-in-the-world plays out here as a simultaneous presence and absence, visibility and invisibility.

Chapter 3 examines the making of advertising images for communicating Vlisco's new brand identity as a global luxury fashion brand. Through Vlisco's advertising images, Dutch Wax cloth has become increasingly visible in settings beyond Africa, which, to the extent that Dutch Wax cloth has long been a signifier of African-ness, might be taken as an indication of Africa's further inclusion into the global. What I suggest in this chapter is that this new visibility belies a more complex set of dynamics. I argue that the advertising images Vlisco creates do both inclusionary and exclusionary work: inclusionary in that they communicate luxury through black bodies wearing textiles that are read as African, thereby communicating luxury through two qualities (blackness and African-ness) that have historically been seen as antithetical to it. But even as Vlisco's advertising images expand boundaries in this manner, they also mediate a process of exclusion in that they reify other standards for the embodied representation of aspiration, namely body size and age. I show how, faced with reconciling their core African consumers' preferences with those of the “global” fashion industry, Vlisco adopts industry standards and adjusts them along the margins. In this negotiation of how to make a commodity historically targeted to African consumers palatable to a market beyond Africa, the resulting images simultaneously push
against and reinforce standards that have long excluded African bodies from the realm of the global.

Where Chapters 2 and 3 looked at the manufacturer’s efforts to open its products up to markets beyond West and Central Africa, Chapter 4 examines the means by which the company’s products continue to be taken up in its original markets. The chapter turns to the selling of Dutch Wax cloth in Lomé. In it I argue that sellers mediate both the uptake of the textiles of Vlisco’s new brand identity through a kind of craft work that engages sellers in a reflexive, instrumented interaction with customers. In the space of Vlisco’s FSS specifically, sales staff mediate the uptake of not only Dutch Wax prints, but also of Vlisco’s new brand identity, through this same craft work applied in a new setting. The discussion reveals the constraints that the current economic situation in Togo places on the Dutch Wax cloth trade in Lomé. The Africa-in-the-world that emerges here is one where participation in the trappings of global for many Africans is still significantly constrained by the economic disparities characteristic of the “New Africa.”

The concluding Chapter 5, on loving, briefly considers the possible futures of Togolese consumers’ love for Dutch Wax cloth in the face of the constraints laid out in the previous chapter. It suggests tailoring practices as key to these futures as they offer the means to both participate in the Dutch Wax cloth economy and to circumvent or push back against the brand.
CHAPTER ONE. Researching

Introduction

This chapter unpacks the “blackbox” (Latour 1987) of my research on Dutch Wax cloth, laying bare some of the multiple ways of knowing that were enlisted in the conceptualization of this project and the contingencies of its implementation. To do so, it adopts the process of printing Dutch Wax cloth as guiding metaphor. It puts forth the experience and process of making Dutch Wax cloth into a research object as a succession of steps that progressively narrow an infinite field of possibilities—for Dutch Wax design as for research project, a blank page or screen—into a concretely delineated and filled in form—the colored-in design and this project’s final research methodology.

Step 1: Base design. I start this discussion of my process of researching Dutch Wax cloth by presenting a set of situations and experiences that spawned the questions I would come to pursue in the dissertation. If the methodology I ultimately adopted for the research is the final design, I consider these experiences to be the indigo-and-white “base design” that will be given shape and color over the next two steps.

Step 2: Blocking. In Dutch Wax design, blocking is the process by which designers reconfigure their base design into multiple possible designs, a way that they impose different ways of seeing the design by drawing out particular aspects of it. A single design thus has multiple possible blockings, and this multiplicity is made visible when a given colorway is applied to the different blockings. Similarly, the scholarly literatures I drew
from, as a product of disciplinary commitments, recast my initial interests (my “base
design”) into research questions and a methodological framework.

Step 3: Applying the colorway. The next stage of Dutch Wax print design once blockings
have been set is the application of different “colorways” to each blocking, a 3 to 5-color
subset of the entire palette at the designer’s disposal. With regards to this research project,
this stage can be conceived as the application of the toolkit of ethnographic methods within
the frame delineated by the body of academic scholarship brought to bear in Step 2. The
“colorway” of ethnographic practice for this research project consisted of situated
observations, participation in activities where possible, formal and informal interviews,
note-taking, and analysis. In this section, I present my research methodology.

Step 4: Zooming in. A completed, colored-in wax print design features an array of colors. It
can be difficult for an untrained observer, at first glance, to determine how the colors and
other effects of the designs were produced: how a blue color wash over the whole design
turned yellow spots into the green ones in the final print and added depth to the orange, yet
left the dark indigo lines untouched. Similarly, the conventions of presenting the “research
methodology” can leave the document silent on the unanticipated circumstances and
interpersonal interactions that ultimately gave the research project its shape. In this section
then, I zoom into key points of contact during my research experience, playing out
particularly during negotiations for access to field sites and informants, that gave the
project both its shape and its feel.

The methodology that produced the research presented in this dissertation is thus the
product of the ethnographic practice “colorway” applied to the “blocking” delineated by my
disciplinary allegiances over the "base design" of my initial interests, life experiences, and curiosities. Presented in this manner and drawing from wax cloth itself, the chapter puts forth my experience of researching Dutch Wax cloth as the superposition of various ways of knowing. By way of unpacking where the research came from and why it looked and felt the ways it did, the chapter draws out the stakes of my position as researcher. It also makes plain the fact that this research project could have turned out otherwise. Using my experience as researcher as a prism, this chapter also brings to light the multiplicity of Africa-in-the world and what happens when these different categorizations come into contact through the practice of ethnographic research.

**Step 1: Base design | How it all started**

I remember what I was wearing the day my family left Lomé in 1991, at age eight. My mother had recently had overalls made for me out of a classic wax print, and I wore them with a white t-shirt. I remember the outfit because it was the first time I had been allowed to wear a white t-shirt: I was known to be a rather messy child, and white had always been off-limits. The print out of which the overalls were cut was and still is a very popular design, both in Lomé and in the wax cloth universe broadly, where it can

*Base design (Source: Design by Vlisco. Photograph by author)*
be found in a wide range of colorings. In the coloring of my overalls, the background was white, striated with light blue veins, and the leaves and flowers were a deep, almost-black indigo. I came to learn the name of the print when I returned to Lomé for my dissertation fieldwork, nearly twenty-five years later: nye munyi devide be ha-o: literally, “I am not some kid’s age-mate” in my mother tongue, Mina. Or, in other words, I am not just anybody. It would have made for a good story to say that my mother had chosen this print for me because it evoked what she saw in or wished for me. But it turns out that it was just chance: as popular as the design was—maybe precisely because it was so popular, so popular it was generic—my mother never knew its name.

***

2004. I am in Lusaka, Zambia, riding the minibus from home to the hospice where I’m volunteering. I’ve come to relish the 30-minute commute across town; it’s a time when I can escape the deafening loneliness and uncertainty that line my every day here. I always hope to get a seat by the window. That way I can look out, tune out the other passengers, and daydream with abandon.

I’ve been thinking a lot about how every woman here seems to bleach her skin. Already in Lomé, my friends and I had learned to recognize the signs from Congolese music videos: look at the knuckles and the ankles, those stubbornly dark betrayals amidst suspiciously caramel-colored skin. These signs endure here in Lusaka as well. The women look burned, their faces a panoply of colors. Instead of looking light, they look raw. This has been weighing on me. How could they possibly look in the mirror and find their red, scarred, disfigured faces more beautiful than they were when they used to be brown?
Chapter 1. Researching

The natural hair movement had just taken off in the US when I left for Lusaka in 2003, with singers like Jill Scott and Erykah Badu prominently wearing their hair free of chemical processing. Erykah Badu was known for her towering “African” headwraps. Dreadlocked India.Arie had recently released the track *Brown Skin* (“Brown skin\You know I love your brown skin\I can’t tell where yours begins\I can’t tell where mine ends”). These songs were the soundtrack of my college years, a central part of my coming into African American culture. During those years, I successively grew dreadlocks, shaved my hair, grew it back out into an Afro, wore headwraps almost daily. All of this was part of what I brought with me to Lusaka, along with my excitement about “going back” to Africa, my hopes of seeing what Africans were doing for themselves and of drawing attention to local grassroots efforts to respond to the HIV crisis in the country.

Today, I forgo my customary minibus daydreaming for a little rugged field measurement. I decide to count how many of the women that I see on the street as the minibus rides past seem to be skin bleaching. The tally by the time I reach the hospice: three out of four.

***

I used to love the *Cosby Show*, or *Papa Bonheur*\(^8\), as the show’s French-language edition was titled when it screened on national television in Lomé during my childhood. I especially remember longing for little Rudy’s hair. It was so perfectly straight and long, just like the hair of the other black girls on the *Just For Me* hair relaxing treatment cartons. My mother and sister had recently started having their hair relaxed and I so badly wanted to have mine relaxed too. But I was too young, my mother insisted. And so every Sunday, I continued to sit between my mother’s legs, while she did battle with my thick hair. After undoing the last week’s plaits, she would comb my hair out, part it into small pieces that she would then

---

\(^8\) Literally, *Daddy Happiness*
tame further with a comb, before then winding black cotton thread all along the length of each hair partition. My entire head thus tamed into long thread-wrapped sticks, my mother would weave the sticks into a pattern, gathering them close to my skull, either into what is known in the US as a French braid—or what we called anagoda, the hair style of the Nagos, the Yoruba—tucking the ends in. Plaiting with thread was good for the hair, it made it grow fast, everybody knew. But it was so old-fashioned. What I really wanted was a relaxer.

***

In Lusaka, I rediscovered wax cloth, known there as chitenge, and quickly became obsessed with it. Was it because the cloth reminded me of Togo? Of my mother’s closet? Was it because it somehow signified the African-ness that I so often felt shut out off with my American accent, American shoes, American education? Shopping for fabric and attempting to craft it into garments or accessories for myself soon became my favorite pastime. As a child in Lomé, I had hand-sewn rudimentary outfits for my Barbie dolls with fabric scraps, I had made cotton-stuffed fabric dolls, and, as my recently rediscovered childhood journals reveal, I enjoyed drawing fashion styles. In Lusaka I bought a sewing machine and taught myself how to use it during the many empty hours that made up much of my time there. My mother had had a sewing machine for as long as I could remember and even though I can’t remember when exactly, I know that I had watched her use it; the basic knowledge I gathered from watching her made up the foundation for learning further on my own. As my Lusaka-acquired fabric collection attests, I didn’t know the difference at the time between varieties of wax-printed cloth. I paid no attention to the quality of the cotton, or to the colorfastness of the prints, or to their place of manufacture. It didn’t occur to me that these things mattered. My purchases were exclusively guided by the cloth’s designs. I knew of the names wax hollandais [Dutch wax] and wax anglais [English wax], and I took for granted that this cloth was synonymous with being African: it was our thing.
Chapter 1. Researching

***

When I applied to MIT's doctoral program in History, Anthropology, and Science, Technology, and Society (HASTS) in December 2008, my proposed research was a historical and ethnographic study of the pathologization of alcohol use in public health interventions in southern Africa. Though I had long envisioned myself as a save-the-world, on-the-ground type, my time in Lusaka had shifted my interest from doing this work to instead studying those who did. I was particularly curious about the power dynamics playing out in the global health industry in Africa, their racial politics and historical underpinnings. In my mind, these were questions about the politics of shaping African bodies in transcultural and transnational encounters, questions that resonated with the distress I felt about the women who bleached their skin, my longing for Rudy Huxtable-like hair.

My first clue that I might need to reconsider this plan was the emotional toll the preliminary research during my first year of graduate study took on me. As I encountered and shrank back from the violence contained in my exploratory readings on colonial regimes of biopower in Southern Africa, I recalled the admonitions of faculty and mentors: when you select a dissertation topic, keep in mind that you will be working on this research for at least the next ten years. Were these the texts that I wanted to wake up to for the next decade? If academic inquiry often boils down to obsession, did I want to obsess over this? I did not.

***

2011. My mother unfurls one of the tightly rolled pieces of fabric she keeps, away from view, in a basket on the top shelf of her closet. I am filming her for my final project for a documentary filmmaking course. I am thinking of this film project as part of the preliminary research for my dissertation research. This print, she explains, is the one
her maternal aunt wore as a high school uniform in 1960s Lomé. The print—a densely packed arabesque pattern, thickly outlined in indigo blue with red and gold underlays, each shape punctuated with a central star, the whole thing laid over a minutely checkered background—has a name: *Lomé hoinyi*, Lomé's pride. My mother purchased this particular roll—in the standard 6-yard length—at a Ghanaian-owned variety store in nearby Silver Spring, Maryland. “I have many pieces that I keep like this, brand new,” she tells me. “I have a hard time putting scissors to the cloth. When I am feeling a bit homesick, I take them down, and I look at them. And I remember my mother, my aunt, my grandmother... The cloths are like a photo album,” she says. “Of course, we also have photos. But when I look at the cloths, they make me feel a little bit better.”

***

The possibility of wax cloth as a dissertation research project first emerged during a casual conversation with my sister at her house in central Massachusetts on a weekend afternoon after my first year of graduate school. It was the summer of 2010. At the time, wax cloth was my happy place. At my sewing machine, and on the floor of my Somerville studio apartment, I cut up and assembled fabric for scarves for myself, a baby quilt for my new nephew, a new bedspread. I no longer remember what exactly we were talking about, my sister and I, but I must have been thinking aloud about the origins of Dutch wax. Was it really *hollandais*, Dutch? Did it come from Holland? If so, was it still *made* in Holland? I recall my sister saying, "Maybe it could be an interesting thing for you to study...." I remember excitedly, apprehensively running my first search for "wax cloth" on Google Scholar when I came home that evening.

***

As the possibility of wax cloth as an object of anthropological and STS inquiry moved into focus, a flurry of questions swept in: Who draws the designs? Are they Dutch? How do they
know what to draw? How do they know what African consumers will like? Do they have particular ideas about how the cloth should look in order for Africans to like them? If so, what might be learned from their design process about how they imagine Africa? If it does come from and continue to be made in Holland, does that mean it is a Dutch thing? What would it mean for it to be a Dutch, and not an African, thing? Could it be both? What would it mean for this cloth that spells Togolese-ness and African-ness, not only to me, but so broadly that it has been taken up by African-American Afrocentric movements as a marker of pride in African heritage, what would it mean if that cloth comes from Holland? If wax hollandais is indeed made by Dutch people in the Netherlands for African consumers, how might I think about the questions that motivated me to pursue graduate studies in anthropology, about the politics of how African bodies are shaped through encounters between Europe and Africa? What does power look like here? In what directions does it flow, what forms does it take, and with what implications?

**Step 2: Blocking | Imposing a way of looking**

*Different blockings of a single design (Source: Vlisco.com)*
Over the course of three semesters of coursework, and directed readings between 2011 and 2013, I sought out bodies of literature through which I could conceptualize my questions about Dutch Wax cloth into a dissertation research project. Enrolled in a graduate program in anthropology and science and technology studies, the bodies of scholarship I settled on were: postcolonial theory; craft studies and material culture studies; design and user studies; and anthropology of design. The goal was to craft a project leveraging the theoretical insights from these bodies of work to devise a project that could address the gaps in the existing scholarship on wax cloth, and, by extension, the questions I was concerned with. Below is how I articulated the relevance of my research interests to existing scholarship in my dissertation prospectus, the outcome of this stage of research design.

**Postcolonial studies and the mutual constitution of Africans and Europeans**
The mutual constitution of Africans and Europeans has been an important theme in postcolonial studies. While earlier scholarship tended to adopt a more dichotomized and static frame (Fanon 1994[1952]; Said 1979; Tagg 1988; Lutz and Collins 1993; Ryan 1997), there is today widespread recognition that both colonized and colonizer were made through the imperial project, and, moreover, that their subjectivities were multiple, fractured, and dynamic (Mudimbe 1988; Gikandi 1996; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Ballantyne and Burton 2005). Despite its tremendous influence, however, postcolonial studies have been criticized for under-theorizing the material world in the workings of power-knowledge (Parry 2004; Loomba et al 2005; McLeod 2007; Anderson 2009). Moreover, the continued relevance of the field in the 21st century, in a "globalizing world" characterized by multi-directional, transnational flows of capital, people, commodities, and ideas, has been questioned. I suggest, however, that postcolonial studies are as relevant as ever, as they offer tools for historicizing contemporary global networks and elucidating their relationship to power relations dating back to the imperial era, and beyond (Walley 2004; Behdad 2005). While the postcolonial literature underscores the mutual constitution of identities between colonized and colonizers, this constitution of identities is taking on new forms in the contemporary period that both build upon past histories and represent ruptures with that past.

**Craft studies, material culture studies**
Scholarship on craft and on material culture more broadly has demonstrated how subjectivities are produced through engagement in practice. Practitioners adopt new techniques of the body (Mauss 1973), or a different habitus (Bourdieu 2000), as they embody tacit knowledge of their tools and materials (O'Connor 2009; Grasseni 2009; Herzfeld 2004; Collins 2010) and generate new moral, social, and political selves (Kondo
Chapter 1. Researching

1990; Terrio 2000). Consumption can also be understood as productive practice. Productive of bodies, through food or clothing, for instance (Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Küchler and Miller 2005); social relations, through use, commodity circulation, and gift exchange (Appadurai 1988; Weiner 1992; Miller 2009; Foster 2008; Gewertz and Errington 2010); and taste itself, as consumers learn what they like through a collective and reflexive engagement with objects (Hennion 2007).

While existing scholarship has shed light on wax cloth’s meanings and functions for its West African users, no study to date has considered the same for the cloth’s designers, let alone linked the two sets of actors. Anthropological scholarship on material culture has, however, established both production (Kondo 1990; Bourdieu 2000; Herzfeld 2004; O’Connor 2009; Collins 2010; Paxson 2012) and consumption (Bourdieu 1987; Appadurai 1988; Weiner 1992; Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Küchler and Miller 2005; Hennion 2007; Foster 2008; Miller 2009) as dialectical, productive practices through which individual and group identities are crafted, as raw materials are transformed into objects on one hand, and objects are given meaning through use on the other. In her study of French artisan chocolatiers, for instance, Susan Terrio (2000) demonstrates how, drawing from discourses on wine and gastronomy, chocolatiers established themselves as guardians of an ancient craft of chocolate-making. In the process, they reshaped consumption patterns, re-educating French palates and instituting new taste standards for chocolate, while also securing their status and livelihood. Thus, even as we ask how understandings of “African-ness” are produced by and for West African users of Dutch Wax, we must also ask how the European Dutch Wax designers’ subjectivities are being shaped through their craft practice.

To that end, my project adopts both production and consumption spaces as research sites. In so doing, it builds on scholarship on commodity networks (Mintz 1986; Weiss 1996, 2003; Foster 2002, 2006, 2008; Hansen 2000; Straight 2002; Holtzman 2009; Gewertz and Errington 2010), which analyzes how human and non-human actors link production and consumption, and how the commodity’s materiality shapes the spaces it traverses. For instance, I draw inspiration from Burke’s study of the introduction in Zimbabwe of European-produced toiletries, for which there had previously been no need (Burke 1996). Burke illuminates the structures and mechanisms that created new relationships between people and the commodities they used and identifies a wide array of factors. These included white attitudes towards black bodies, European and Zimbabwean notions of hygiene, existing manufacturing infrastructure, and the framing of new needs as a sign of civilization. Furthermore, Burke sees Zimbabweans’ new needs as the outcome of a complex interplay between producers, consumers, and the networks linking them. Similarly, though using a multi-sited ethnographic approach supplemented by archival research, I propose to examine the mutual constitution of people, a commodity – cloth, and representations in the making of wax prints in The Netherlands for West Africa.

**Design and user studies**

STS scholars have demonstrated the interdependency and mutual constitution of human and non-human actors (Callon 1986; Latour 1993; Mitchell 2002), raised critical questions about expert and lay knowledge, and designers and users of technologies (Bijker, Hughes & Pinch 1987; Akrich and Latour 1990; Oudshoorn & Pinch 2003). All of these themes are relevant to my proposed study of Dutch Wax. Moreover, conceptualizing this cloth as a socio-technological object, much as Francesca Bray
Chapter 1. Researching

(1997) approached cloth as a technology of gender in her study of “gynotechnics” in late imperial China, makes Dutch Wax a legitimate object of study for STS.

Some STS scholars have also attempted to draw attention to the potential usefulness of STS tools for design studies. In a special issue of the journal Design Issues dedicated to STS and design (2004), Woodhouse and Patton argue for a greater STS focus on what they denote design by society (“of, by, and for the people,” 1), centered on questions of participation, expertise, benefits, and accountability in design processes (2004). They offer a critique of what they consider to be design studies’ overly narrow focus on designers and users, at the expense of the social contexts and variety of forces shaping the creation of products. Their notion of “design by society,” a recognition of the multiplicity of actors in design processes, is presented as an alternative to this approach.

**Anthropology of design**

Scholars in the fields of design and anthropology have engaged in a number of conversations in recent years to examine possibilities for cross-pollination. Their conversations have taken various forms. Some are considering the extent to which design methods might be used to inform ethnographic practices, namely through a conceptualization of ethnographic inquiry as a kind of design process engaging a particular set of actors, relationships, and products (Rabinow & Marcus 2008). Design methodology in this view is seen as a possible future for the study of culture. Others, such as Suchman have however argued that design, as a localized, historicized set of practices, be instead approached “as a problematic object for an anthropology of the contemporary,” rather than as a blackboxed “model for anthropology’s future” (2011).

In addition, Gunn and Donovan in their edited volume, Design Anthropology (2013), consider possible modes of interaction between the two disciplines. DA-Design Anthropology, efforts are made to bridge the two disciplines by replacing the distinction between designing, producing, and using with a reframing of all three as skilled practices, where none is privileged over the other. Analyses approach people’s engagement with things—whether through making, using, or preparing for usage—as objects of inquiry, and privilege movement, gesture, rhythm, and time in these interactions.

**Existing scholarship on Dutch Wax cloth**

Early scholarship on wax print cloth was primarily historical. Kroese (1976), Littrell (1977), and Nielsen (1979), for instance, discuss the cloth’s origins, tracing its trajectory from South-East Asia to West Africa, by way of Western Europe. More recently, Steiner (1985) and Sylvanus (2007) address questions of creativity and authenticity in wax print production and trade by examining cross-cultural exchange during colonial and postcolonial times. Christopher Steiner considers wax prints to be hybrid, Euro-African artifacts and, based on an analysis of particular wax print designs and archival records, attributes the prints’ success in West African markets in the early 20th century to European producers’ attainment of “sensitivity to African aesthetics” (97). Tracing the cloth’s transnational origin story, Sylvanus theorizes the evaluation of wax prints’ “authenticity” in various spheres as a shifting quality: it is a product of both the gazes—of wax cloth manufacturers and the cloth’s West African users—to which wax prints are subjected and of the functions the cloth is expected to fulfill.

**Preliminary research**
I conducted preliminary research in The Netherlands over the course of three months in Summer 2011. During this time, I recorded over ten hours of oral histories with four retired Vlisco designers, as well as the former Head of Design, who worked at the company from 1980 to the early 2000s. These conversations yielded fascinating insights into design practice, the structure of labor, and the creative process at Vlisco for the better part of the 20th century. They seemed to suggest, for instance, that designers created their images with certain precepts about what African consumers would like – for instance, the conviction that Nigerians liked red and gold color combinations, while Ghanaians liked browns and whites, and Congolese pink and gold. What are the origins of these perceived preferences, given that both the cloth and the people wearing it are mobile? In other words, if, for example, cloth sold in Ghana is known to be traded throughout West Africa, and Ghanaians live in Nigeria, Togo and Congo, how does one come to articulate “what Ghanaians like”?

During my time at Vlisco, I also explored the company’s archival collections, investigating the various stages that designs undergo from conception to final printing by reviewing records and holding conversations with retired designers. The contents of the archives were eye-opening: an extensive collection of National Geographic magazines and of the Journal of African History; “inspiration books” where designers from the early 20th century collected images, magazine cutouts, or sketches of museum exhibits that would serve as the basis for future designs; original hand-drawn, oil paint sketches; travel reports from trips to Africa dating as far back as the 1940s; photographs from the early 20th century to the present of designers at work; etc. These materials gave me a glimpse of design practice in the past century, and of the means by which designers learned about their African clients, insights that have informed my proposed project.

In addition to conducting ethnographic and archival research at the Vlisco Museum, I also volunteered to help organize the museum’s collection of hundreds of thousands of wax print samples. By learning to read the numbers that designs are assigned in production, I gained insights into the material components of a design that “matter” (base color, color combinations, year of creation, etc.) from a production standpoint.

**Step 3: Applying the colorway to the blocking | Doing the ethnography**

The bodies of scholarship, research design training, and preliminary research of the previous step yielded what might be considered an outlined drawing of the final design, ready to be colored in: the dissertation prospectus. The next step of making Dutch Wax cloth into a research object was then to color in this drawing, to bring the research outline to life by applying the tools of ethnographic research practice. Below is the research methodology, a *post hoc* description of the research I undertook for this project. It might be compared to the colored-in design. Like the design, the research methodology can be deceptive in its apparent systematicity: its linear outline can fail to convey the
happenstances and intimacies that gave it its shape (or appearance) in practice. Zooming into some of these intricacies will be the subject of Step 4. But for now, the colored-in design.

**Overview of the research methodology**

This dissertation is based on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted in the Netherlands and Togo between June 2013 and September 2014. The research traced a collection of Dutch Wax cloth on its trajectory from design to use: from design in Vlisco’s studios in Helmond, the Netherlands, to the production of the marketing campaign for the collection at the company’s headquarters in Amstelveen, a suburb of Amsterdam, and on to market in Lomé, Togo. In Lomé, I observed the arrival and launch of the collection, selling and buying transactions in various points of purchase, including Vlisco’s flagship store in Lomé, Vlisco partner boutiques, and market shops, as well as transactions and operations in tailor shops where Dutch Wax cloth was crafted into garments. The ethnographic research was supplemented by archival research in Vlisco’s archives in Helmond.

A multi-sited ethnographic approach “traces a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity” (Marcus 1995, 96), investigating the systems in which a cultural formation like Dutch Wax cloth circulates as not only the backdrop for its circulation, but as also constituted along the object’s path through these different sites. Networks have also figured as central objects of analysis in STS scholarship, particularly with the development of actor network theory, with its emphasis on tracing the action linking human and non-human actors as the means to understand the production of socio-technological orders (Callon 1986; Latour 2005; Law and Hassard 1999). This methodological approach was particularly well-suited to my inquiry into how Africa as place-in-the-world was mobilized, reflected,
and produced through the design, marketing, and use of Dutch Wax cloth between Europe and West Africa. Adopting a multi-sited, network-centered approach to the study of Dutch Wax cloth made it possible to bring production and consumption into a single frame, and thereby to consider the dialectical process through which Africa as category was negotiated and stabilized along the cloth’s trajectory.

Linking different sites of value production, my inquiry focused on the practices through which value was produced in each location, and the mechanisms through which these regimes of value were coordinated to keep Dutch Wax cloth moving from one node of the network to the next. Annemarie Mol’s concept of the object multiple (2002), with its focus on how an object is enacted as a multiplicity of objects through situated practices, offered a valuable frame for both interpreting my findings and organizing them in writing. Each chapter of the dissertation focuses on a different way of “doing” Dutch Wax cloth along the object’s trajectory (researching, designing, advertising, buying-selling, and tailoring).

Below, I provide further details on each of the sites where I conducted research:

**Vlisco design studio, Helmond (June-November 2013)**

Vlisco’s design department is housed at the company’s original site, in the industrial city of Helmond, in the south of the Netherlands. Helmond has been home to Vlisco’s factory since 1846 and the site still houses most stages of the production process, from the design of prints to the shipping of containers of cloth to wholesalers. At the time of my fieldwork, the design department fell under the purview of the Creative Director, and consisted of fourteen designers, who worked closely with technical drawers in the design support section of the department. The Design Manager oversaw day-to-day activity in the studio.
Chapter 1. Researching

The timing of my arrival in the studio in June 2013 fortuitously coincided with early stages of designers' work on the July 2014 collection, Fantasia. I was thus able to observe this process and engage designers in conversations about particular designs for the collection, which I then tracked once they reached market in Lomé. In addition to these design-specific conversations, I conducted hour-long interviews with ten of the fourteen designers in the studio, about their practice, their path to Dutch Wax print design, and their experiences at the company. Most of these conversations were audio recorded, and supplemented by handwritten notes. I also interacted informally with the designers on a daily basis in the studio, over meals or coffee. In addition to individual interviews, I attended design team meetings with the Creative Director, Design Manager, and/or other departments (e.g. Sales and Marketing). I wrote notes on my observations during these meetings and throughout my time in the studio by hand, transferring them weekly to computer files.

In October 2013, I observed and took part in Vlisco’s exhibit for the prestigious Dutch Design Week 2013 in the city Eindhoven. The company had decided to participate in this event for the first time in the Design Week’s fifteen-year history as part of their ongoing rebranding efforts. I volunteered as a hostess for the event, handing out materials to visitors and answering questions they had about the exhibit. I was also a speaker on a panel alongside the company’s Creative Director and the Marketing Manager for the VAC-Togo (Vlisco’s Togolese affiliate), on the significance of Vlisco for West African consumers. My participation was premised on both my identity as both a Togolese woman, and a researcher on Dutch Wax cloth. My participation in this event garnered valuable insights on how Vlisco leveraged the discourse of design in the crafting of its new brand identity.
The opportunity also arose during my time in the studio to join half of the design team on a ten-day research trip to West Africa (Cotonou, Benin; Lomé, Togo; Accra, Ghana) in late November-early December 2013. The trip offered a rare opportunity to observe firsthand one of the means through which designers learn about the consumers for whom they create. I paid for my own travel and housing arrangements for this trip, and was taken in as a member of the team, accompanying them on all their events during the journey. In Benin and Togo, I helped out by providing translation from French to English.

In Vlisco’s archives in Helmond, I reviewed documents such as travel reports from the 1940s to 1980s by Vlisco sales and design management, the “inspiration books” of an early 20th century designer, and notebooks containing feedback from West and Central African sellers on the company’s design offerings. In addition, I conducted interviews with four retired designers who worked at the company between the 1950s and late 1990s.

**Vlisco headquarters, Amstelveen (January-March 2014)**

Vlisco’s marketing and communications department is housed in the company’s new headquarters in Amstelveen, a suburb of Amsterdam. Over the course of three months in the department, I attended team meetings during which decisions were made for upcoming collections—both the July 2014 collection, for which I had observed the development of designs in Helmond, but also the March 2014 collection, for which planning was already underway when I arrived. Observing the process for two collections enabled me to glean what of the development of marketing campaigns was standard and what was customized from campaign to campaign. In addition to team meetings, I observed the production of promotional activities such as the filming of online tutorials or planning for Facebook campaigns, and I attended the weeklong photo and video shoot for the July 2014 collection’s
ad campaign in February 2014. Conversations I held with members of the marketing and communications team about their practice at the company and how they came to work at Vlisco supplemented the meetings I attended, and the observations and interviews I conducted.

While in Amstelveen, I also conducted interviews with team members in Vlisco's market research department, to understand both what they considered knowledge worth gathering about consumers and how they approached this task. I also attended the sales meetings for the July 2014 collection in Helmond in March 2014, attended by staff from the sales department at Vlisco headquarters, sales and/or country managers from the company's affiliates in Benin, Togo, Nigeria, and Congo, and management from the marketing and communications and design departments. I was also present for the first instance of a new meeting during which designers received feedback from market research and sales staff from Vlisco's key African markets on how designs from the previous collection had fared on the market. This meeting brought into relief clashes in the conception of a design's value, even across departments within the company.

And finally, I attended two company-wide meetings during which Vlisco's top management presented the company's ongoing restructuring efforts. Vlisco had been in the midst of restructuring since 2006.9 Though these meetings only offered a partial and punctual look at this process, they shed light on the story Vlisco "told itself about itself" and how that was evolving/ being redefined.

Lomé (December 2013, June-September 2014)

My research, across my two stays in Lomé, focused on three forms of practice: selling, buying, and tailoring:

9 In fact, the company's CEO has changed since I completed my fieldwork, and some of the staff members I interacted with during my research are no longer at the company.
Chapter 1. Researching

**Selling and buying: Vlisco flagship store and partner boutiques**

I observed the arrival and launch of the July 2014 collection, a process that involved an invitation-only cocktail party held in Vlisco’s flagship store in Lomé as well as promotional activities in partner boutiques. Beyond collection-specific activities, I observed transactions in Vlisco’s flagship store, as well as in five partner boutiques and market shops in Lomé (where new collection, past collection, and “classic” prints were sold).

My intention had initially been to interview Dutch Wax cloth buyers during their store visits about their selection process (how they chose which prints to buy), and to use these visits as entry points for recruiting them for further in-depth interviews about their use of the cloth and their “consumer journey.” However, I encountered two significant obstacles to this goal. First, very few clients visited these various selling points during my observations, and most visits lasted only a few minutes, just long enough for visitors to inquire about the price of cloth and perhaps have a cursory look around before leaving. The short duration of the visit, as well as the rather minimal rapport between shopkeeper and visitors during these interactions did not give me the opportunity to approach visitors as I had intended. In instances where the client’s visit lasted longer, however, I was able to observe and take notes on the transaction, and ask the visitors a pre-determined set of questions about their purchase. In addition to observing transactions, I conducted interviews with shopkeepers in each of the retail selling spaces, as well as with four Dutch Wax cloth wholesalers on how they came to this practice and learned their craft. Sellers are also wearers of Dutch Wax cloth, so my conversations with these women yielded insights on the cloth’s use and significance from not only a seller’s perspective, but also from that of a user.
Tailoring: Vlisco partner stylists and independent tailors

I conducted interviews with six Vlisco partner stylists. Being Vlisco partners amounted to occasionally being featured by the company in the context of their promotional activities, and receiving financial or material support for fashion shows. For each of these tailors, however, both their practice and their clientele long predated their involvement with Vlisco. As such, interviews with them spoke to the tailoring sector in Lomé, including and going beyond their involvement with Vlisco. Interviews addressed the tailors’ trajectory to tailoring as a profession, the components of their practice, and their interactions with clients. I observed three of the six tailors’ practice (including interactions with apprentices, workers, and clients) during daylong visits, and another two during a series of 10 daylong visits over the course of three weeks. I recorded 8 hours of video footage focusing on one of these two tailors.

For tailoring as for buying, the research I ultimately did took a different form than what I had envisioned doing. In addition to interviews and observation, I had initially intended on taking part in a tailoring apprenticeship myself, as a way into the embodied and tacit dimensions of learning and doing tailoring (see O’Connor 2009). However, my timeline in Lomé was not amenable to this plan: the apprenticeships I found required enrollment (students typically enrolled for two to three years), and a full-time, all-day commitment, which I would not have been able to honor alongside the other sites I needed to attend to during the three months during which I conducted this portion of the research. Though I was not able to accomplish the participant observation I had hoped for through an apprenticeship, I did participate in a different aspect of the tailoring economy, as a client placing orders and interacting with three tailors with different profiles: one who operated out of a small studio; another who was the relative of an in-law and saw clients in their
homes; and another who was a Russian seamstress who had followed her Togolese husband back to Togo twenty years prior and set up a workshop in her home and catered to a relatively well-heeled clientele. My experiences with these tailors supplemented the material I gathered from my interviews and observations to shed light on how value is produced both through tailoring practice and interactions between tailors and clients.

**Step 4: Zooming in | Girl meets field**

‘I hated it. I hated all of it.’

I am sitting in my new therapist’s office in Cambridge, Massachusetts, talking about my fieldwork experience. A recently PhD’ed friend once told me that the secret to getting through the dissertation writing phase of graduate school was to have a good therapist. I took her advice and sought one out soon after returning to Cambridge from fieldwork.

‘I really, really hated it,’ I add for emphasis, in case I wasn’t clear enough the first two times. ‘I couldn’t wait to get out of there.’

For the past few sessions, my therapist and I have been trying to figure out the insomnia that has been plaguing me. I have never had sleep problems before, but for a couple of weeks now, it’s taken me hours to fall asleep, no matter how tired I am when I lay down. When I do fall asleep quickly, I wake up after an hour or two, and then spend the next couple of hours trying to lure sleep back. I have tried it all: regular bedtimes, sleeping teas, meditation, vigorous exercise, yoga, not worrying about not sleeping, not working in bed, temperature regulation, light control... None of it seems to be working; sleep remains elusive.

‘What’s playing through your mind while you’re laying there?’ my therapist asks. ‘This dissertation thing... The writing. The chapter I’m working on, how to put it all together... Whether I can do this.’ The dissertation feels like more than just another requirement. It feels like the penultimate evaluation of the last seven years. The test of whether I have learned all that I was supposed to learn. It feels like everything is at stake.

Towards the end of our first conversation about the insomnia, the therapist suggests that my anxiety might have to do with the prospect of finishing graduate school and moving into a new chapter of life; becoming an adult and whatever that might mean to me. Usually her insights are spot on, but this time her interpretation doesn’t feel quite right. I feel like she hears me better during our next session: it is the task of writing itself that is making me anxious, not just the idea of finishing. The task of writing, and the possibility—what feels like the likelihood—of failure.
'You have to allow yourself to write your own dissertation,' she tells me. 'Even if that means "failing" in your eyes.'

Somehow those words, buoyed by trusted friends’ advice to put aside a challenging chapter and move onto a different part of the dissertation, provoke a release. That night, for the first time in weeks, I fall asleep soon after going to bed, and sleep through a full, uninterrupted eight hours. The same happens the next night, and the night after that. I can feel the regained ease in my body, the absence of the knot that had lodged into my stomach for the past couple of weeks.

'The good news is that I’m sleeping again,' I tell my therapist the next time, 'I am feeling less anxious. Just making room for the possibility of failing, and letting that be OK is helping a lot. It's making it easier to work.' She smiles, she's pleased. I continue.

'The thing, though, is that I feel like there's a really real possibility of this whole thing flaming out, just blowing up in a really big way. The dissertation feels like a test of whether I have learned all that I was supposed to learn during these seven years. And when I sit to write, sometimes it's OK, but eventually I get to this point where I feel like I could have, I should have done better. I should have asked harder questions, I should have talked to more people. I was too shy. I was too scared. And that impacted the research I did. And every time I sit down to write, I have to face that.'

She pauses, looks to the side, thinking, then back at me. What was it like, doing the research, she asks.

'I hated it. I hated all of it.' I'm surprised by the force of my words. 'It was so hard. I couldn't wait to get out of there.' My speech quickens, I'm looking to the side, fiddling with my piercing. Some hesitation at first, a couple of false starts, then a flow of words:

Since my family left Lomé, there had always been this idea that going back could be dangerous for us. But people who had left and gone back told us it was fine now, it was safe. But it was always in the back of my mind. What did people think of me, of what I was doing there, asking these questions, and why? As an ethnographer, you depend on your “informants” opening their lives up to you. How do I get people to do that in a place where there is so much mistrust, where not so long ago, saying the wrong thing could mean being disappeared? How do I take notes during conversations, record interviews, ask for signatures on consent forms? When they ask what my last name is during interviews, what are they trying to figure out? What will they do with that information? In the Netherlands, I was constantly thinking about what it meant to be me in the spaces I was in. Constantly aware of my blackness in these very white spaces, conflicted between the friendliness of my informants and the problematic things that could sometimes come out of their mouths about ‘Africa’ or ‘Africans.’ Trying to reconcile my reactions. Was I being unreasonable? Too harsh? Not critical enough? It took so much effort each day to drag myself out to do my research.
was that, for over a year, while being alone in these foreign places. Yes, and the loneliness, always the loneliness.

I hated all of it.

Sometimes, once the colorway has been applied to the blocking of a design, the entire length of printed fabric is then put through a final color wash. It is not easy for the untrained eye to notice that a piece of fabric has been put through a wash. To tell, one has to look to the edge of the cloth, to see if the background color is white all the way to the end. If it is not (and this is a piece of real Dutch wax), then that means the fabric was put through a color wash. The color wash and the ensuing interactions with the already printed and colored-in design reminds me of the multiple forms the interactions of the ethnographer might take with research sites and informants. At times, harmonious blending occurs and the research relationship blossoms and is mutually beneficial. At other times, the interaction is more tenuous, and while there is some degree of “blending,” the resulting color, the research relationship, might not be such a palatable one. And in other cases, there is no blending at all, no research relationship is formed. In the case of Dutch Wax design printing, none of these outcomes is inherently good or bad (though the designer might prefer a certain color combination over others, or dislike some outright). Moreover, the colors often combine differently on fabric than they do in the computer program in which the designs are drawn; as such, the final print is always somewhat of a surprise. Much of the same applies to ethnographic research and the following section zooms in on my research project to examine some of these dynamics.

First, however, it is important to note that taking Dutch Wax printing process as metaphor for doing ethnographic research breaks down somewhat with the color wash analogy, as where the wash is optional in wax cloth printing, the ethnographer is always and inevitably
part of the research process. In fact, she is the instrument through which data is taken in. Moreover, the ethnographer's subjectivity shapes the ethnographic project at all steps of the process, from conception to implementation, not only once in the field. But I do find the analogy evocative, so for the purposes of this analysis, let us take the color wash to be a necessary and constitutive part of the wax cloth printing process. I hope the reader will forgive me this imperfect extension of the metaphor.

**Negotiating access: Harmonious blending**

Vlisco has a reputation for being very difficult to access. One scholar I had encountered prior to commencing my fieldwork recounted her repeated failed attempts to gain access to the company. It wasn’t hard to believe, considering the opacity of the information available in the literature on Dutch Wax cloth about the company's operations. In fact, I was told on more than one occasion during my fieldwork that the reason Vlisco had never employed African designers had been the fear that they would learn the craft and transfer this knowledge to would-be Vlisco competitors in their home countries. As a result, I have often wondered why I had been able to secure access to Vlisco where so many others had failed. For a long time I considered the access that I gained to Vlisco to be the product of serendipity. As I reflect on my trajectory to and through this research, however, I am increasingly inclined to think that in addition to serendipity, my status as a young Togolese-American woman, along with the social capital I gleaned from my affiliation with an elite world-renowned academic institution probably didn’t hurt.

My access to Vlisco started in Denmark. In 2011, one of my MIT faculty advisors attended a conference in Denmark, where she met a professor in anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. At dinner, where they were joined by some of the Dutch professor's students,
my MIT professor noticed the wax print scarf that one of the Dutch graduate students was wearing. The observation prompted her to bring up my research topic, at the time still in its infancy, which in turn elicited an invitation from the Dutch professor for me to reach out to her for possible contacts in the Netherlands. True to her word, the Dutch professor soon forwarded me the contact information for a number of people with varying degrees of affiliation with Vlisco, among them a professor in art history who had worked on the Dutch manufacture of Indonesian-style batiks (the precursors to the wax prints later developed for African markets) and the curator of African collections at a Dutch museum who had organized an exhibit on wax cloth designs.

When I arrived in the Netherlands in June 2011 for preliminary research, I set up meetings with both. The meeting with the curator yielded the contact information for a retired Vlisco designer very passionate about Vlisco’s work and active in publicizing it, and for the person in charge of the Vlisco archives. I set up meetings with both of them, and soon secured access to the archives and a regular visiting schedule there. Once in the archives, I obtained the contact information for Vlisco’s Creative Director, under whose purview the design department, where I was hoping to conduct my research, fell. I sent him an email explaining my project, but obtained no response. The staff members I was interacting with at the archives assured me that this was not uncommon, as the Creative Director travels frequently and is notoriously difficult to get a hold of.

One day while I was in the archives, the Creative Director came in for a meeting. I introduced myself and mentioned the project I was hoping to work on. His interest was piqued when he heard that I was studying anthropology; his own university training had been in fashion and anthropology. It was he who ultimately and enthusiastically granted me
access to the design studio when I returned in 2013. During that longer research trip, I ran
into him one morning on the train platform in Eindhoven, where travelers from Amsterdam
make the required connection on to Helmond; he forewent his Business class seat to join me
in the Coach section and we discussed my project and his work further during the 10-
minute train ride to Helmond. Throughout my research, he routinely made himself available
to me for meetings (more than once in the Grand Café at Amsterdam Centraal train station
to accommodate his busy commuting schedule) and he remained my touch point
throughout my time at Vlisco, introducing me to colleagues in other departments, informing
me of upcoming meetings I should attend, encouraging me to take pictures in the studio (I
had held back because of the posters prominently displayed on all doors that featured a
giant camera with a thick red line across, in the manner of no smoking signs). He seemed to
enjoy speaking to me about his work, his understanding of why Vlisco's prints had so much
success in Africa, his vision for upcoming collections of designs. He occasionally made
suggestions about avenues to follow in my research, reiterating each time that it was
ultimately my work and that he did not want to influence it.

It was the Creative Director's idea that I participate in a panel during Dutch Design Week in
October 2013 with the Marketing Manager for Togo, who happened to be a relative of mine.
He had met her many times during business trips to West Africa and loved that it was our
involvement with Vlisco, in two different capacities—she as an employee, and me as a
researcher—that reunited us after 20 years, via Facebook, no less. He saw in our story the
perfect illustration of the enduring value Vlisco prints have for West African women and
wanted us to give a talk during the Design Week to both the general public and to Vlisco's
brand and marketing department (which includes both design and marketing and
communications staff). He emphasized that he just wanted us to focus our talks on "the
Chapter 1. Researching

stories," our personal connections with the cloth. Taking part in this panel not only gave me a chance to see how Vlisco told its story, both to the public and to itself, but it also afforded me greater legitimacy within the company.

I was confused for a while after my talk by how friendly and warm people—Vlisco staff members—who had previously been distant had become. Several of them approached me to compliment me on my talk and to thank me for sharing my stories with them. As part of our participation in this panel, my relative and I were featured in an article on Vlisco in a prominent Dutch newspaper where our stories were used to illustrate the significance of Vlisco's products for West African women and culture more broadly.

For a long time I attributed the access that I gained to Vlisco exclusively to chance: my professor being at that dinner in Denmark with the Dutch professor; the Dutch professor's student being there and wearing a wax print scarf that night; the museum curator agreeing to meet with me; the Creative Director being in the museum on a day that I was there; the fact that he had studied (and remained excited about) anthropology; the fact that I had a
relative who worked for Vlisco in Lomé, that we found each other on Facebook, and that she was well-liked and respected throughout the company. Each of these circumstances played an undeniably critical role in the access I gained to Vlisco and the trust that I benefited from throughout my research.

The possibility of there being another side to the story only occurred to me when a fellow anthropology graduate student friend mentioned that perhaps the people at Vlisco also felt like they stood to gain something from having *me* write about them. Where I had only thought about how lucky I had been to gain access to the company, my friend drew my attention to what Vlisco stood to gain from my presence. A piece of academic scholarship produced by a scholar affiliated with a world-renowned institution could certainly be validating (assuming, of course, that its analysis was laudatory). The fact that I am Togolese might have lent me even more credibility, as I could potentially speak to the subject not only from a place of intellectual/academic authority, but also from a personal, emotional, affective perspective. The newspaper article is a case in point.

At the same time, the fact that I wasn't *too* Togolese was also probably an asset. Being a Togolese person who had not lived in Togo for over two decades and who was deeply implanted in the US might have made the threat of corporate espionage less of a concern with my presence. Moreover, as a "halfie" (Abu-Lughod 1991), someone who lived across African and Western—in my case, American—cultures, I represented a key target demographic for Vlisco in its rebranding efforts. I am hardly suggesting that those who welcomed me into Vlisco only did so as the result of calculations about what they could gain from my presence at the company. Certainly I gained much, much more from my time at the company. But I do think it is worth considering that perhaps luck and charm were not the
only forces at play in the access I obtained and that both sides potentially stood to benefit from my time at the company.

**Negotiating access: No blending**

The extent to which my presence might have been considered threatening came into relief during one of the sales meetings I attended in Helmond, about halfway through my fieldwork. Sales and country directors from Vlisco’s subsidiaries in Benin, Togo, Nigeria, and Congo were constituting the “baskets” for their respective countries, in other words, the quantities they would be purchasing of various designs for each of their markets. I was in a corner observing and taking notes on meeting participants’ comments on the selection of designs and the interactions within the group. At one point, I approached one of the country directors to introduce myself; at the time I was considering conducting fieldwork in other African locations beyond Lomé. This was my first encounter with the director. His name had come up repeatedly during my conversations with the Creative Director, Design Manager and others at the company, owing to his long tenure at the company—he was one of the longest-serving directors at Vlisco in West Africa, a veritable repository of institutional history, which made him an all the more attractive informant for me.

The country director’s reaction when I introduced myself and told him, in French (an indication that I was African), about my research project was something along the lines of: “If it were up to me, you wouldn’t be in here.” I was somewhat confused at first. He had had a smile on his face as he spoke, and so I hesitated for a moment, thinking that perhaps he was being playful. But after he spoke, he turned away from me and rejoined the group he had been working with. The interaction was all the more jarring that by then all my interactions with Vlisco staff in the Netherlands had been positive. At worst when I met new
people they seemed a bit surprised and puzzled about what exactly “doing research” entailed (“What do you take notes on?” was not an uncommon question), but they were typically welcoming and appeared pleased that I took an interest in their work. Such a positive reaction befuddled me somewhat, given Vlisco’s reputation for being so unwelcoming to outsiders.

The country director’s reaction, however, was actually more in line with what I had expected from the company prior to starting research. It is impossible to say for sure why he reacted to me as he did that day. Maybe he was having a bad day, maybe he resented the fact that I approached him as directly as I did, maybe he found it ill-advised for the company to reveal so much of itself to a virtual stranger, maybe he was concerned about industrial espionage, maybe he was suspicious about what an “anthropologist” might have to say about the work of the company to which he’d devoted his life. But what this interaction brought into relief for me was how differently my presence could be construed within the company: from one perspective I might present an opportunity for positive publicity or validation, while from another, I might pose a threat. If nothing else, this interaction reminded me not to take for granted the fact that so many doors had been opened to me during my many months at Vlisco, because, as the interaction showed, they could just as easily have been closed.

In his discussion of anthropological studies of expertise, Dominic Boyer (2008) touches on issues of access when working with experts, whom he describes as “professional intellectuals socially ‘like us’” (42). By that, Boyer seems to mean institutional actors of high status, possibly from within the same culture and with a high level of educational
achievement. When conducting ethnography among such informants, Boyer notes, the threat of losing access always looms:

(...) the threat of force, of exclusion, of surveillance, of pursuit is never far away.

Cultures of expertise are usually socially privileged, quasi-sovereign, often able to restrict ethnographic access, to monitor the acquisition and subsequent circulation of their expert knowledge, and even, if they are so inclined, to police ethnographic and theoretical content. They offer obstacles like intellectual property rights, offices of corporate communications and non-disclosure agreements that would-be ethnographers must navigate. (43)

The result, Boyer argues, is an excess of politeness: “there are certain questions that are just not asked” (43). Though I take issue with Boyer’s definition of the category of “expert,” with its troubling implication about the entitlement with which anthropologists conduct research among informants of lower social status, I consider his point about the fear of losing access to a research site important. It certainly was a core concern for me throughout my research at Vlisco, particularly given how serendipitous my access to the company had seemed.

**Negotiating access: Tenuous blending**

My Togolese-ness intervened in my research in Lomé in a tenuous manner. The access I obtained at Vlisco’s headquarters in the Netherlands facilitated my access to the Lomé offices. My first research trip to Lomé had been with the Vlisco designers and design manager in December 2013. I had met the Togo Country Director at that time. I suspect that the way that I had been included as part of the team by the Vlisco design staff throughout this trip served as an important form of validation from the head office and facilitated my access to the Lomé offices. Perhaps the fact that I am Togolese and that a relative of mine...
worked at the Lomé offices also made me less of an unknown entity. The Country Director granted me permission to speak with staff members and to observe the activities I wanted. Conducting the Lomé portion of my project would have been very difficult without this access. Dutch Wax traders, who are considered Vlisco partners, like Vlisco itself, reputed for being very secretive about their practice, for fear of corporate espionage in this highly competitive market. Being vetted by the Vlisco office both in Lomé and in the Netherlands granted me a certain degree of legitimacy and therefore access to the traders’ stores that would have been otherwise difficult to obtain, especially as a Togolese person.

In his ethnography of post-Cold War Togo, anthropologist Charles Piot describes the suspicion that has pervaded Togolese society since the Eyadéma dictatorship (2010). Spanning 1963 to 2005, the authoritarian regime clamped down especially tightly on the population in the late 1980s amidst a wave of pro-democracy movements blowing throughout West Africa. The clashes in the late 1980s-early 1990s claimed thousands of lives and brought the country to the brink of civil war. And led my family to leave Togo. The disappearances, arbitrary arrests, and torture produced a climate of fear and a deep feeling of mistrust, as people feared expressing or being accused of expressing critiques of the ruling regime. This climate of suspicion is not unique to Togo, but rather a reported feature of life under authoritarian regimes or post-dictatorship societies, both in Africa and beyond. Though there has been some degree of détente in the Togolese political arena since Eyadéma died in 2005, a degree of guardedness and suspicion still permeates interactions in Lomé. As a Togolese person, even one who has not lived in the country for over two decades, I am necessarily implicated in this regime of mistrust in a way that perhaps I might not have been, were I foreign.
An additional strain on this portion of my research was that traders were sometimes reluctant to share details of their operations, perhaps because they suspected that I might have been gathering information for Vlisco. Indeed, even though Dutch Wax cloth traders are contractually bound to Vlisco, they have their own interests. And sometimes the activities they pursue to secure their own interests—such as trading with Chinese manufacturers of Vlisco design counterfeits—are at odds with those of Vlisco. As such, though benefiting from Vlisco’s validation helped me gain access to certain field sites and informants in Lomé, many of my interactions with these informants remained rather guarded. This set of circumstances was compounded by the relatively short time that I had built into my research design for the Lomé portion of the project; more sustained and varied interactions would have likely created greater trust.

The experience of doing the research

All of this left me feeling dissatisfied with the research I conducted, in Lomé especially. As the opening vignette seeks to convey, I found the research very difficult, and writing it up almost as challenging. In processing the emotional valence of this research experience after the fact, I am realizing that much of that difficulty hinged on who I brought to my research—a black, Togolese, American woman affiliated with an elite American educational institution—and how that positioned me in relation to my field and informants in each research site.

Like the wide range of possible outcomes of color interactions when a colored-in print is put through a color wash, my interactions with my various field sites observed different logics. The combined outcome of each of these encounters was the overall tenor of my research experience: It was difficult, and I hated it. But then again, sometimes, a particular colorway
applied to a particular blocking of a particular design, all of it put through a particular wash can make magic. It can bring back to life a long-forgotten effect, or create a new, beautiful, unexpected one:

Christmas 2014, Maryland. I'm excited because I managed to find the wax print my mother had asked for. It had been one of her favorite designs, but she had, in characteristic fashion, given it away to a Kenyan colleague who had admired it one day, when she wore it at a work meeting in Nairobi in the 1980s. It's been almost 30 years, and my mother still misses this fabric. "It's the one with the birds, you know, coming out of the cage..." "Si tu sors, je sors?" I asked. "Yes!" She seems surprised that I know the name. "In pink and gold, make sure."

It took a lot of digging, both in Helmond and in Lomé. Si tu sors, je sors is a popular design, and pink and gold is one of Vlisco's standard colorways. But the combination of that design and that colorway was hard to come by. But I finally managed to unearth it, towards the end of my fieldwork in Togo, in a boutique on the edge of the Grand Marché. 10

My mother says I am impossible to shop for. Always so picky about colors, style, always changing what I like. But now she knows what to get me for every birthday, every Christmas, she says triumphantly. After midnight on Christmas Eve, as I hand her pink and gold Si tu sors je sors wrapped in a plastic bag, fresh from Lomé, she hands me a weighty giftwrapped package. I recognize the heft, the density of the bundle. I rip it open: Angelica, in yellow and pink, and Hibiscus, in white red and gold, fresh from the Ghanaian variety store in Silver Spring, Maryland.

10 Along with its extensive selection of Dutch Wax print classics, the boutique where I found the print was known for its wide array of skin bleaching products. In fact the shopkeeper was known for making customized concoctions for her clients. She had once told my biracial cousin, deemed to have benefited too little from her mother's white skin: "Just come into the boutique some time, we will arranger [arrange, fix] your skin for you. We'll make it very nice."
Conclusions

Each of these steps on its own tells a story of researching Dutch Wax cloth. Taken together, however, the steps bring to light the means by which the research came to look as it did, the contingencies and exigencies of the research endeavor. In teasing apart these steps of the process in this chapter, my aim has been to demystify research methodology, and to create space for varied, sometimes contradictory, facets of my experience: the excitement of formulating research questions about a topic that truly interested me; the nagging interpellation of observations in my everyday life; the trials of academic legitimation; the joint work of serendipity and social capital; feelings of confusion and self-doubt; the work of writing itself; the pull of family ties and personal histories—each of these has been a constitutive component of researching Dutch Wax cloth. Surely I have left out plenty even in this dedoubling exercise—such as the successive reformulations of my research questions over the many months of preparation, or how the bodies of literature to which I attached the project evolved over time, or the relationships, coping strategies, and support structures that sustained me through the doing of the research. But by at least starting to unpack the process I undertook for this research project, the chapter has illustrated by now well-rehearsed arguments in anthropological, STS, and feminist scholarship about the significance of the ethnographer’s positionality for the doing of research, the entanglement of the personal and the political, and the production of knowledge across heterogeneous assemblages of human and non-human actors (Haraway 1988; Abu-Lughod 1991).

What does this discussion of researching Dutch Wax cloth make visible about negotiations of Africa as organizing category in this historical moment? First, it puts forward ethnographic practice as one manner of constituting “Africa-in-the-world.” Marcus writes of
Chapter 1. Researching

multi-sited ethnography: “Just as this mode investigates and ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites” (1995, 96). In that sense, the trajectories traced in this multi-sited ethnography of Dutch Wax cloth can be understood as situating the categorization of Africa at the nexus of: commodity networks, an array of material practices, and affective ties, playing out through 2-D designs on computer screens, printed fabric, publicity images, crafted dress, cherished gifts, in and across design studios, marketing departments, shop floors and market stalls, tailor studios, the Netherlands, Togo, ‘the West,’ ‘Africa,’ the Internet.

Furthermore, my journey both to and through this research project brought into view and into contact different Africas-in-the-world, the old and the would-be new, an encounter mediated through my person as a hyphenated African benefiting from the privileges afforded by my institutional affiliations, language skills, and social networks. The political turmoil that provoked my family’s departure from Togo in 1991 also produced the environment of suspicion (whether real or imagined or somewhere in between) that permeated my research in Lomé in 2014. In my Dutch field sites, my hyphenated Africanness bought me trust and access. It also potentially presented my host institution an opportunity for greater visibility, in both academic and commercial realms, across the US, Europe, and West Africa. Through my undertaking of this research, Dutch Wax cloth created a new tradition between my mother and me in the US, building on traditions we had left behind in Togo: the giving of Dutch Wax cloth as the sealing of a bond. The ethnographic research process facilitated these encounters, making visible points of tension, moments of continuity, and the emergence of new forms.
Chapter 1. Researching

Having considered how Dutch Wax cloth was enacted into a research object through the practice of ethnographic research and the manifestation of Africa-in-the-world in this enactment, I now turn in Chapter 2 to the doing of design and what it makes visible.
The flags and grey cluster of buildings are my cue to gather my belongings and head to the exit; I have arrived in Helmond, home to Vlisco’s factory and design department since 1846, when the city was part of the now virtually inexistent Dutch textile industry. My 5-minute walk from the train station takes me through a largely deserted shopping strip, a block of residential units, past an office plaza facing a vacant red brick structure that looks like it was once a storage facility. Vlisco’s buildings, of which I had lost sight since the train, suddenly come back into my field of vision. Thick grey slabs of concrete, the company’s blue sun logo, the Dutch flag waving next to an assortment of African flags: Togo, Ghana, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Congo DRC. Over the next several months, the path will typically be deserted during my walk; occasionally I’ll come across a dog walker, or another person heading, like me, towards Vlisco.

On my first day in the studio, Louisa, one of the designers that I had met during my preliminary fieldwork two years prior, takes me to the workspaces of the other two young designers, whom I had met then. They greet me warmly, with the customary three cheek kisses reserved for informal acquaintances. They ask me how things are in Boston, inquire about my family. We are all about the same age, in our late 20s to early 30s. I feel an affinity with these young designers. Is it odd to say that they look and feel like people I could be friends with, in my regular Cambridge life? While they are artists and far more Euro-cool in their dress than I am, I felt like there was a certain resonance in our styles, a certain casualness in their dress and demeanor that was not unlike what I knew back home.

After chatting with the young designers, Louisa walks me over to Raf’s desk. With almost 40 years of experience in the studio, Raf represents the other end of the experience spectrum from Louisa and her cohort, who have been at Vlisco for three to five years, and even more recent hires, like Paula and Brigitte. I had spoken briefly with Raf during my first visit two years prior. “Oh, you’re back,” he exclaims when Louisa takes me to his desk, standing up to greet me warmly with the three kisses. Like the others, he inquires about home, asks me how long I will be in the studio. When I mention my intentions of staying around for the Dutch Design Week four months hence, he starts to tell me about an assignment he is working on for Vlisco’s exhibit for the renowned expo that draws audiences from throughout the country and Europe. Hesitating for a moment, he looks to Louisa, and says, “I don’t know if I can show...” To which Louisa responds enthusiastically, “Yes, you can show, she’s one of us now!” Raf pulls out a notebook and printouts from his bag, and tells me about his assignment for the Design Week.

Louisa soon returns to her desk and Raf picks up where she left off, walking me to the workspaces of other designers that I have yet to meet. He offers to clear up his drawing table for me—he doesn’t use it, he says; he does all his designing, when he’s in the office, at the computer on his desk. At the moment, his drawing table, which abuts the wall, with windows overlooking the parking lot and the front of the building, is strewn with books, folded fabric, and paper printouts. Raf goes looking for a chair for me. I am touched by his generosity. I now have a workspace between him and Albert, the other veteran designer, and across from Camille, a young female designer, hired almost a year ago. “Just scream if you have any questions,” Raf tells me, looking over to my new space as he settles into the chair at his computer. “And feel free to move around, now that you have an idea of where things are.”
Every morning, as I step onto Vlisco’s grounds in Helmond, past the bicycle hangar to the right, bypassing the guard post where I obtained a visitor’s pass on my first visit, up the stairs to the design studio, through the door with the large “No Photographs” sign to make my way into the designers’ area, I marvel at the fact that I have made it behind the scenes of Dutch Wax cloth designing.

Vlisco’s design studio feels eclectic, vibrant. The space has high ceilings with exposed pipes, windows line three of the walls along the studio’s perimeter, and overhead halogen lights ensure that the lighting is always bright, regardless of the often gloomy outdoor conditions. The studio space is open, partitioned into individual areas by frosted plexiglass panels in some cases, and mobile partitions in others. A long table at which designers typically eat their lunch occupies the central area, flanked by a tall bookshelf. On both the table and bookshelf are stacks of design, art, and fashion magazines, including the occasional Amina (West African women’s magazine). And everywhere, there are stacks of wax cloth: on floors, on top of desks, on chairs, overflowing from shelves, draped over mannequins, hanging on the wall.

The designers are grouped more or less in their cohorts in the studio: Raf and Albert together on one side, Camille, Maarten, Annette, all from the most recent cohort are on the same side of the studio. Each designer has a desk with a large-screen Mac desktop, and a large drawing table on which often rest an array of objects, from stacks of fabric to sketches to drawing tools. The space surrounding the tables reflects individual designers’ work style. Some, like Maarten’s, are spartan. Periodically, the young designer lays out paper printouts of designs he is developing on the floor, but otherwise, the floor is clear, his desk bare. A few images hang on the panel separating his workspace from Camille’s.

And then there are workspaces like Raf’s corner of the studio, where printouts of completed designs are tacked on foam boards leaning against the back wall. The floor is covered with paper printouts, the desks with books, the walls with pieces of fabric—like the imitation of one of his designs that another designer came upon in India—and family mementos. Or again, the drawing table, which Raf generously cleared for me, and which, over the two years spanning my fieldwork and return visits, Camille gradually transformed into a greenhouse, covered with green and purple plants at different stages of growth.
Interlude

Vlisco’s offices in Helmond (Source: Photograph by author)
Introduction

This chapter asks what the designing of Dutch Wax prints in Vlisco’s studio today makes visible about the negotiation of Africa’s place in the world in this historical moment. Dutch Wax cloth design practice at Vlisco has undergone waves of change over the course of the company’s 100 years of creating these prints. While many of these changes – in the tools of design, training structures, and the organization of design practice – were in line with changes in the European textile industry throughout the 20th century, the most recent wave of changes in the configuration of design at Vlisco came with the company’s rebranding efforts.

When I arrived for research at Vlisco’s studio in Helmond in June 2013, the company’s efforts to reposition itself as a global design and fashion brand had been underway for almost seven years. Fabric sales to West and Central Africa still accounted for 98% of the company’s sales, but a number of new initiatives throughout the company sought to increase Vlisco’s visibility beyond Africa to provide the grounding necessary for the company’s plans for future product innovations (beyond textiles) and sales in the Global North. These changes played out in the design studio as well. I argue that the reconfiguration of design practice at Vlisco in the company’s move to become a global design brand manifests in the design’s aesthetics and reflects negotiations of Africa-in-the-world.
Designers in Vlisco’s studio at the time of my research spanned forty years of practice, and could be loosely be organized into three hiring cohorts, from the 1970s, 1990s, and 2000s. Like the designers in Keith Murphy’s (2015) ethnography *Swedish design*, who did not see themselves to be doing “Swedish design” even as the forms they created seemed to reproduce a particular “cultural geometry” specific to Sweden, Vlisco’s designers did not see themselves to be creating “African” designs. Rather, designers across cohorts saw their practice as being about creating “good designs,” a process that often meant creating “for themselves,” even as they took into account their knowledge about the users of the textiles they designed.

Murphy argued that the “Swedishness” of these designers’ pieces was created both through interactions among designers in their studios—which facilitated the reproduction of particular forms and of a particular ethic of “care” in the objects—and outside of the studio, in curatorial, commercial, and policy arenas, where the completed objects were interpreted as “Swedish design.” Similarly, I suggest that it is through design practices like an apprenticeship-based model of training that the aesthetic or forms of the designs that came to be known as “African print” were perpetuated and reproduced in Vlisco’s studio throughout much of the company’s history.

But changes in the configuration of practice in the studio in the last half-century, and, most acutely, since the launch of the rebranding initiative in 2006 seem to be remaking this aesthetic. Indeed, older designers in Vlisco’s studio at the time of my research harbored concerns that the designs coming out of Vlisco today in recent years were no longer Dutch.
Chapter 2. Designing

Wax designs; that they had lost their essence, raising questions about whether these designs were the same kind of thing as the designs historically printed by the company.

Even though my informants at Vlisco did not articulate this question of Dutch Wax cloth’s aesthetic or ontological continuity in this moment in terms of its African-ness or the place of Africa in the prints’ bringing into being, I do. I argue in this chapter that the historically recognizable aesthetic of Dutch Wax designs are the product of the designs’ historical, embodied “African-ness.” This “African-ness” is not reducible to particular forms, but rather is the product of a dialectical interaction between technical skill and the historically grounded, material specificity of Dutch Wax cloth. And it is at the heart of what has made Dutch Wax cloth “Dutch Wax cloth.” I suggest that, as Vilsco seeks to remake itself as a “design” brand, the cumulative effects of both incremental and punctual changes tied to the rebranding efforts—the combination of new designer profiles, new modalities of training, the use of digital tools, and a faster turnaround time for the design process—remake Dutch Wax cloth designs into a new kind of thing.

The analysis highlights an irony in the articulation of Africa’s place in the world as seen from the doing of Dutch Wax cloth design: as a historical signifier of African-ness, Dutch Wax cloth’s visibility in new arenas like the design world communicates a vision of African inclusion and participation in the global. Yet at the same time, the designs’ aesthetic that has been read as “African” is being transformed, partly as a consequence of the cloth manufacturer’s efforts to remake itself into a global design brand.

The approach I take to analyzing design at Vlisco in this chapter echoes Murphy’s, in its recognition that the politics of design play out across a range of sites. Murphy approaches
design as a form of “world-making” that plays out through an array of “actors, practices, forms, and ideologies” across multiple sites (2015, 2). Design practice gives objects form but it is through practice in other domains, such as museums, the policy arena, and the commercial realm, that “the political is applied to the material,” that the objects are made to mean (7). My discussion of design at Vlisco demonstrates how practice in the studio is shaped by the economic context within which the Dutch Wax cloth trade unfolds, how these forces manifest in the ways that designers create, how they relate to their work, and how their practice and the prints they create are put forward and “read” beyond the studio. Like Murphy then, the analysis I put forth here is premised on the idea that “[t]hings and practices, forms and matter, people and processes, and history and language, all of this and more is tightly entangled in the very existential fiber of design [my emphasis], and understanding design as a social force means following each of these as they move, tracing their relations, and accounting for their reciprocal effects.” (7)

I begin by laying out changes in the configuration of design practice at Vlisco in the last half-century, changes that were embodied in the cohorts practicing in the studio at the time of my research. I highlight the concerns of designers from the oldest cohort that changes in design practice at Vlisco over the course of this period threaten to fundamentally transform Dutch Wax prints, before turning to an analysis of what makes Dutch Wax cloth recognizable. The discussion in this chapter speaks to what makes an “African” thing (Ebron 2002; Chumley 2016). It reveals the prints’ African-ness—taken here to mean a recognizable visual form or aesthetic—as a dynamic quality produced through action across a heterogeneous assemblage (Latour 2005) of skills, tools, embodied knowledge, and the historically grounded, material specificity of Dutch Wax cloth.
Part 1: Design practice at Vlisco

Organizational changes

Vlisco started producing wax print cloth for West African markets in 1914, after several years of failed attempts at mastering the new printing technique (Sylvanus 2016). Until the 1980s, the company’s textiles were distributed throughout West Africa by European trading companies, which in turn distributed the textiles through a network of local wholesalers with their own retail distribution networks extending throughout West Africa and into Central Africa. As a result of the liberalization of West African economies in the early 1990s (which were enacted under pressure from the World Bank and IMF’s structural adjustment programs), Vlisco found itself facing serious financial difficulties: The markets in which they had previously maintained a near monopoly were now flooded with significantly cheaper, Chinese-produced copies of their designs (the copies cost as little as one tenth the price of Vlisco textiles). Combined with the disastrous effects of the 50% devaluation of the CFA franc\textsuperscript{11} in 1994, which rendered the company’s textiles unaffordable to the majority of West African consumers overnight, these macro-economic shifts left the company in dire straits (also see Sylvanus 2016).

Relief came in 2006 in the form of a buyout by Actis, a private equity firm specializing in Global South markets. Actis’s aim was reportedly to double the company’s output within five years, in order to (according to rumors circulating among staff at Vlisco) then resell the company at a sizable profit. Hired to advise on how Vlisco might be restructured or “modernized” to withstand current market realities, a business consulting firm drafted a report entitled \textit{Fighting the Dragon}, articulating Vlisco’s future vision: As it could not compete with Chinese manufacturers’ lower price point, Vlisco would instead establish

\textsuperscript{11} The CFA franc is used throughout Francophone Africa, the heart of Vlisco’s trade on the continent.
itself as a high-end global design and fashion brand and target markets beyond Africa, namely by developing products other than textiles.

With Vlisco’s new business orientation came a new stratum of managers drawn from the European fashion industry. Among others, this new management team included a Creative Director, a new position created to oversee not only the design department, but also new creative projects at the company, namely collaborations in the luxury and fashion world. The company also started leasing a new, glossy building in Amstelveen, in the Amsterdam metro area, to house its administrative, sales, and brand and marketing offices. For some time, there was talk about also moving the design department to Amstelveen, although those plans did not come to pass. There was significant opposition from design staff, who felt that it was core to Vlisco’s identity and products for designers to be close to the factory, as designers benefited from understanding manufacturing processes, and often drew inspiration from production accidents and “failures.”

In keeping with its new identity as a design and fashion brand, and also to establish itself as the original source of new wax cloth designs on African markets, Vlisco started releasing its new designs in 2006 as quarterly collections. To keep up with the increased pace that this new rhythm demanded (previously, new designs were released ad hoc throughout the year), new designers were hired. As a result, the experience of designers in the studio in 2013 spanned 0 to 40 years, with the most experienced designers, the Master designers, having joined the company in the 1970s, and the most recent cohort of hires starting between 2012 and 2013. The Creative Director explained that he selected the new designers, identified through placement agencies, based on the extent to which their personal “handwriting” fit well with the “Vlisco story.”
The cohorts differed significantly from one another in terms of training, age at entry, and place of origin. Albert and Raf, the two master designers, had come into the studio in the 1970s, under an apprenticeship model of training, at a time when designers in Vlisco's tekenkamer (drawing room, as the design studio was known at the time) were all male, and hailed from Helmond (home to the Vlisco factory since 1846) and neighboring areas. The cohort following them, however, included women, like Marlene and Julie, who joined the studio in the 1990s. Both came from towns neighboring Helmond, but had been formally trained in textile design at the nearby Eindhoven Design Academy. The youngest cohort, evenly split between men and women, came from much further afield, residing in cities like Utrecht, the Hague, Amsterdam, and Rotterdam, commuting up to three hours by train daily to come to work in Helmond. Besides the Dutch nationals, others came from the UK, Italy, Poland, and Mexico. Designers from this most recent cohort were not necessarily trained in textile design. Some of them, rather, had backgrounds in illustration and graphic design, which the Creative Director found to often be more resonant with the wax print aesthetic.

Vlisco has never employed an African designer. In the mid-late 20th c., as the then-design manager explained it to me, the reasons for this were concerns on one hand about corporate espionage—that the designers would learn the tricks of Dutch Wax cloth design and take them back to the then-nascent West African wax cloth manufacturing industry—and, on the other hand, a lack of confidence in the abilities of African designers to be "creative" enough for the job. At the time of my research in 2013, the enduring absence of African designers in the studio was explained as: "We don't look at where designers are from, we just hire good designers." With this statement, the Creative Director meant that he did not specifically seek out African designers but would not be opposed to hiring one, if the
designer fulfilled the required qualifications for the position. Realistically, given the channels through which designers are hired—European placement agencies and word-of-mouth in the Dutch design world—the chances of a designer based in an African country being considered for a position at Vlisco are extremely slim.

**Design practice across generations and designer cohorts**

The changes in design practice at Vlisco over the last half century are thrown into particularly sharp relief because designers spanning almost this entire period worked alongside the newest recruits to the studio. I now turn to some of these changes, highlighting older designers’ concerns that together the changes amount to a fundamental transformation in the aesthetic of Dutch Wax cloth designs; not just changes in degree, but changes in kind.

**Training**

The photograph of Vlisco’s studio in the 1960s, back when it was still the tekenkamer (the “drawing room”), shows men in white lab coats seated or standing at evenly distributed tables. Yard-long films of in-process designs cover the tables before them. The men are bent over these images, their torsos all hovering above the images at almost the same angle. They work with brushes, jars of paint or ink by their side. Not all the men in the photograph are wearing lab coats however, nor can they all be described as men, in fact; those not wearing lab coats are considerably younger and at least one appears to be a child.
The work of the dessinontwerper (designer; literally "drawing designer") in the company's early days was to replicate Javanese batiks for machine production. Apprentice designers were enlisted in this process, through which they learned the craft of textile design. New hires in Vlisco's design department at the time started out with prior drawing experience or being able to demonstrate a certain level of skill, and then spent several years shadowing more experienced designers, completing their designs, before progressively moving on to more elaborate tasks. Only after at least five years spent completing older designers' designs or copying existing designs, could younger designers begin to propose their own sketches.

This was the model that Jan and Karl found when they came to work at Vlisco in the 1950s. I met them in the Vlisco Museum, a somewhat grandiose name for the hangar where the company's paper archives along with hundreds of thousands of yard-long samples of its textiles are stored. Along with other retirees, Jan and Karl volunteered at the museum most
Chapter 2. Designing

Wednesdays to help sort and label new designs or new colorways of old designs to be added to the company's extensive archive. Popular for having created one of Vlisco's iconic designs, of a fan, Karl relished talking about his experiences at the company. He was already in his late 80s, and mentioned more than once, triumphantly, that he was one of only two designers of his generation still alive. Jan was soft-spoken, with a gentle demeanor, and though more reserved than Karl, he also generously shared of his experiences with me at Vlisco.

"The first 5 years, they didn't look at it when you had your own idea," Jan told me. "Only the elder people who were there for a long time, they made their own designs. But when you are so young, they didn't accept it all the time. Afterwards, it was all different. Then they said, well, make a sketch, and let's see it. And they said, yes, that's ok... I think that will be sellable, so make it."

A native of Helmond, Jan, like most working class young men his age in this time, found his way to Vlisco at 16 in 1952, by following in his male relatives' tracks.

I heard about the job because my father was working here. He used to repair the machines. My father's uncle also, he was doing etchings on the copper rollers. They needed some designers but only in the technical department. That was not the department I was interested in. I liked more to design things. ... I asked for it, and I had to make some proofs. I had to draw something so they could see. I had some drawings from school but they wanted to see what I could do really. ... They asked me to draw something like a vase with flowers in it and all kinds of things. And after a week, then I finished it, and they said it is OK, I could start immediately. So I had no vacation [laughs] but I was very happy to get with the job.
The skills Jan had acquired painting letter signage for businesses in the town while he was still in school proved to be transferable to his work as a designer at Vlisco. “Here [at Vlisco] I made no letters, no alphabets, but I was able to paint very secure, because I had a very steady hand. And that's what you needed then. If you had to paint a circle, it should be exactly round, same as with the letter 0 or Q or whatever.” Jan recalled his first day in the studio: “They put me on a table, and they gave me an example of a design, and told me what they wanted to change on it. And that I have to copy it with the changes, so they could print it afterwards. That was my first design.” The process took over two weeks, during which the design manager offered pointers as young Jan worked. “And that’s how you learn it, by doing it. There was no school to have it.”

Karl, who also came to Vlisco in 1952, was 23 when he started. Also a native Helmonder, Karl enrolled for a certificate in drawing at the Akademie Industriële Vormgeving in nearby Eindhoven, today known as the Design Academy Eindhoven, after returning in the late 1940s from fighting in the Indonesian war of independence. Vlisco had ties with the nearby Akademie at the time, and after submitting samples of his work, Karl was hired. There were twenty designers in the studio at the time, he recalled.

In those early years, the designs young apprentices copied were primarily replicas or adaptations of batiks from the company collection. Designers proposing original designs became the norm starting in the 1970s. But orders and instructions also came from meetings between representatives from the European trading companies that distributed Vlisco’s textiles throughout West Africa. “The customer asked for some special things. He sent a sketch or photo, or a letter, and asked for designs like that or that, but smaller,
bigger...” Jan recalled. “Then, the director of the factory, he also had ideas and said I’d like to have designs from this sketch, or this photo, or he had a book, and said, look at this, make a design of it...”

During biannual meetings held at Vlisco’s Helmond headquarters with representatives from European trading companies and dubbed “The Zoo,” the representatives received design proposals from the tekenkamer, suggested revisions, and considered different colorways for the new prints. They also brought fabric samples or sketches from their respective markets to have replicated or adapted. As an influential cadre of West and Central African wholesalers like Togo’s Nana Benz rose throughout the second half of the 20th century, these women would also send sketches via the trade representatives or bring them to Helmond themselves to place orders, a process anthropologist Nina Sylvanus has denoted “collaborative design” (2016). Jan and Karl stayed at Vlisco their entire working lives, retiring in the 1990s.

By learning how to draw wax prints by copying or completing existing designs, under the oversight of more experienced designers, designers of Jan and Karl’s generation developed both an aesthetic feel for wax prints and the techniques of the body (Mauss 1973) and habitus (Bourdieu 2000) to bring the prints into being (Herzfeld 2004; Lave 2011). This mode of enskillment ensured coherence or a “family resemblance” across all prints, even if the images depicted in the designs themselves varied widely, from plants to geometrics to objects. Of the fourteen designers in the studio at the time of my research, two came in under the apprenticeship training model: Albert and Raf, who enjoyed the status of Master Designers on account of their forty years in the studio. The apprenticeship model of training would come to an end in the 1980s, as a result of broader shifts in the structuring of textile
labor, whereby the training of textile designers shifted from the factory to design schools (Raizman 2003).

Typically joining Vlisco after a few years of freelancing in graphic design or illustration following formal training in European design or arts schools, designers from the most recent cohort had little to no exposure to wax print cloth prior to joining the studio. Geert, the most recent hire, had first come across Vlisco's designs in pictures he saw online of a European fashion designer's runway show—one of Vlisco's collaborations with European designers. The designs had caught Geert's eye and he had looked up Vlisco, which is how he came to learn of the company's extensive history. Like the other designers hired since the company's restructuring, Geert had spent his first couple of weeks on the job in the archives, perusing the thousands of prints cataloged there. In addition, he kept on his desk a copy of a coffee table book with large-size color images of Vlisco designs that had been produced on the occasion of a museum exhibit by the company in 2012. These resources, in addition to the fabrics that lay around the studio and exchanges with the other designers, served as Geert's introduction to wax prints. As was customary with new hires in this model of practice, he was encouraged to start drawing immediately. The design manager would review his designs, giving him feedback on what worked and what didn't, and when she deemed a design ready, she would recommend it for inclusion in a collection.

Even with the present-day modality of training in Vlisco's studio, a certain degree of referencing could occur across designs (and designers), and across generations. Camille, who had started in the studio a year prior to my fieldwork was excited to see the design she had created on her very first day in print for a recent collection. One of the master designers' prints had been the inspiration for it. When she told him as much, he shared with
her that his own print had been inspired by an old one he had come across in the archives one day.

But I would argue that something different is communicated from one designer to the next in this model from what was transferred under the apprenticeship model. Learning how to draw Dutch Wax cloth by apprenticeship was about more than deriving inspiration from a finished product. As with other forms of apprenticeship (Lave 2011; Herzfeld 2004; O’Connor 2009; Dilley 1986), learning through apprenticeship involved watching, imitating, and, over an extended period of time, acquiring new bodily techniques and deepening one’s skills and practice. While the new training modality in the studio does not preclude drawing from the long history of design at Vlisco, embodied in the company’s archive of designs, the visual relationship between old and new designs it produces is inevitably different as new designers bring their embodied knowledge of other design traditions to bear on creating Dutch Wax cloth prints.

**Tools**

Changes in training practices in Vlisco’s studio have been compounded by changes in the tools used to create designs. Up until the 1990s, designs were created by hand, with designers drawing and painting the images which would then be approved and translated into “technical drawings” to be etched onto the copper rollers through which the wax-covered cloth would be run. Computers were introduced in the 1990s, again, following trends in the textile design industry more broadly (Raizman 2003).

But Albert, who joined the studio in the 1970s, has rejected computers outright. To this day, he creates all his drawings by hand, drawing with pencil or charcoal, or painting; his was
the only workspace in the studio today without a Mac desktop. “They create dead lines,” he railed during a conversation in his workspace one afternoon. “The lines have to be alive. I never use the computers. Yes, it’s possible to create those lines with the computer, but you have to go very slowly. Raf (the other master designer) does it; but he works very slowly [anyway]. A lot of the things I see now, they look dead. [But] the re-engravings of old designs that are being done now, you look at them and immediately you see something is happening. Now, a lot of what I see, nothing’s happening.” For Albert, tools were not incidental to the type of image produced; rather, from the line on, they created different kinds of images (Ingold 2009). Albert explained why tools matter for the kinds of designs one creates:

On the computer, the lines always have the same structure. But when you draw with a brush [he picks one up], when I am angry, like a child, I [he mimics furious scribbling], if I am happy, I draw a different way. I tried the computer [he shakes his head]. It only made me angry. You draw here, and you look here [looking ahead, while hand draws below—not looking at hands. Waves it away], no no no. When I draw by hand, I am drawing...I don’t know how to say it...closer to myself. [Makes motion of brush stroke starting on the paper and flying beyond]. When I draw by hand, if I am angry, or happy, or sad or stupid, I draw differently. Also, computer-based designs are actually easier to copy.

As he speaks, Albert looks around, gestures towards the piles of papers he has strewn all over the floor. Along the length of the divider separating his workspace from the next are piles of paper printouts of designs in progress, at least a dozen of them, at various stages of completion. He set up an easel in the middle of the floor, where he occasionally paints. The walls of his workspace, the edges of his desk, the windowsill—all are covered with images:
photographs from his extensive travels—which inspired many designs over the years, stills and hand-painted posters from Bollywood films, photos from a trip to Tibet, models wearing Vlisco cloth, a market scene from Niger, gruffly scribbled sayings in Dutch ("Keep away," warned one of them), a photograph of his wife... There are piles of wax cloth on the cabinet next to his drawing table, and under the table. He would periodically change the fabric laid out on top of the piles or hang one on the pipes overhead.

Albert's observations point to the interrelatedness of tools and techniques of the body: new tools demand new techniques of the body, and tools mediate the interaction between the maker/designer, his materials and the final product. For Albert, something of the affective, emotional experience of drawing gets flattened through digital drawing tools. Moreover, as a result of how these tools erase the designer's surfeit from the image, according to Albert, images created with digital tools are more easily reproducible.

Though Albert is categorical about manual tools' superior capacity to convey the drawer's emotion, designers in the studio who came of age with digital tools felt that these tools did offer possibilities for affective communication. Gijs joined Vlisco after working as a freelance illustrator for five years after completing his degree in illustration. His initial ambition, in his younger days, had been to be a cartoonist. But after trying his hand at it, he realized he didn't have the particular brand of patience required to work on cartoons full-time. A position happened to open up in Vlisco's design studio and he soon joined the team.

As a rule, Gijs spends a couple of hours each month in the local library, looking at graphic design books, trying to "get as much of the images into my head," he said, and sketching. It was during one such session that he came up with a design of umbrellas floating in little
puddles of water, some right side up, some upside down. He told me he had wanted to create a design with umbrellas for a while. “Umbrellas, because they are very popular in Vlisco designs, and also because they can have lots of meanings. That’s good, because then people can attach their own meanings to the print. Even for this one,” he says as he points to a day-old 8”x11” pencil sketch pinned to his idea board, “the story’s already there in my mind, but I try to leave it open so people can make their own stories.”

Like Camille then, who drew inspiration for her first design from an existing Dutch Wax cloth print, Gijs was interested in perpetuating Vlisco’s design tradition, and he did so through his knowledge of Vlisco iconography and of how users engage with the company’s textiles; the “stories” he is referring to are the names that designs are given by traders on the market in West Africa. By “leaving [the design] open” for users to assign it their own meanings, Gijs honors the cloth’s usage tradition in his design process.

When I came upon his process with this design, Gijs had been working on it on and off for four weeks. I sat behind him for hours and watched him work on the computer as he applied details to the image. “With these patterns, sometimes you see a line, and you try to follow it,” he said as he seemed to get into a groove with a particular set of detail additions. It felt magical to watch the image come into being on the screen. A little green stripe added to existing navy zigzags, a shifted green undulating line lain over another, blue one. Piece by piece, design details came together. Gijs created different color blockings for the image—different schemas for applying color to the designs—using an automated function in Photoshop for the first time, on the recommendation of another young designer in the studio. The function yielded over 300 variations of the design and Gijs reviewed them quickly, deleting those that did not appeal to him immediately. He moved quickly, using a
stylus pen on a pad in front of the computer. Over the course of two days, Gijs whittled down the 300 possibilities to seven distinct color-blocking combinations. Though he was pleased with the final results, he wasn’t sure he would use the automated function again; while it was certainly the most thorough approach to considering all possibilities, he wasn’t sure that it was ultimately necessary.

Tools mediate designers’ process and their sense of themselves as designers. Though they clearly influence the shape that designs take, they alone do not determine this shape. Digital tools, for instance, can be leveraged to reproduce the “old” Dutch Wax cloth aesthetic—as Albert describes Raf doing, just as they can mediate the application of other aesthetic or stylistic norms to the Dutch Wax cloth design process.

**Design process**

A core element of Vlisco’s new business strategy following its acquisition by Actis in 2006 was the adoption of a collections-based approach for releasing new designs. If Vlisco could not stop copies and counterfeits of its prints from being created, it hoped that with a clear brand presence and highly visible marketing campaigns drawing from the fashion industry, it could establish itself as the originator of new designs, and thus its competitors as copiers (hence the emphasis on Vlisco as “original” and “authentic” in brand and marketing communications). The company started releasing four collections each year, significantly increasing the speed of output expected of designers.

Under the new collections logic, the standard starting point for new designs in the studio is a “mood board” for each new collection. A key instrument in the fashion and design worlds,

---

12 See Paxson 2012 for a related discussion on craft cheese makers’ use of tools.
the mood board is aimed at capturing the “vibe” or “feel” of a collection through images, words, and colors. The Powerpoint presentation of the collection concept at Vlisco, assembled by the Creative Director and his creative development team included images drawn from fashion magazines, blogs, and art exhibits. It also included the color card for the collection, the palette designers would apply to their designs. The images depicted a wide range of subjects: fashion models, buildings, abstract geometric patterns, furniture, paintings, street art. Led either by the Creative Director or the Design Manager, mood board presentations to the designers lasted about an hour and took place approximately fourteen months prior to each new collection’s launch. In the presentation for the December 2014 collection, the Creative Director elaborated on the images he presented with references to artists’ works, for instance likening the desired effect of the collection to that of an exhibit he had recently visited in Paris. Designers occasionally jotted down notes during the presentation and asked clarifying questions, typically about the images’ source.

Inspirations for Vlisco designs have always had a wide array of sources, ranging from personal interests – as was the case for Karl, one of the retired designers, who called himself “a plant man” because plants were his favored design subjects – to existing textiles, to artifacts from museum African art exhibits, to sketches from traders (see Sylvanus 2016 for more on historical design practices at Vlisco). This wide range of inspirations for designers’ process holds true in the studio today, even with the collections approach, as designers typically have a number of sketches underway at any given time and use the mood board presentation to help them decide which to pursue for the collection at hand. But the new collection approach removed the cloth’s African traders as possible partners in the design process. In effect then, the collections approach to organizing the design process centralized
Chapter 2. Designing

the design process and instituted new stylistic referents, consciously drawn from trends in
the European fashion and art worlds.

***

The designs stand out all the way from the far end of 18septemberplaats, the
edge that borders the road separating the plaza from Eindhoven's central train
station. They cover the first-floor windows of the Philips Lichtoren building, a
prominent part of the small city's landscape. Soon I can make them out: to the
left, it's Ventilateur, with cyan-blue fans set against a rich gold-orange; and to the
right, that's The Hand, its three palms and severed fingers yellow against a deep
red background; and beneath the neon-lit "IGLUU," the name of the space where
Vlisco's exhibit will be showing during this Dutch Design Week, a more recent
design that looks like something between a chain link and woven ropes. The links
are navy blue, cream, and pale yellow, set against a pastel orange background.
In their prominence, all these shapes and colors are conspicuous, incongruous
against the grey, concrete landscape.

I'm walking, and she surprises me, to the right. Her body covers a space two-
floors high of the building's glass panels, above the department store, The
Society Shop. In the image on the building, the dark-skinned model stands erect,
body squared slightly away from the camera so that as she looks straight ahead,
she is perpetually looking past you, the viewer. Like she's purposely ignoring
you. She wears a tall headwrap made out of wax cloth, and a mauve accent on
the wrap is picked up in the teardrop-shaped earrings dangling from her ears and
in the innermost circle of the design on her chest. She is dressed in a long-sleeve
tunic with a double shirt collar buttoned to the top. The print of her tunic
prominently displays classic designs like Gramophone on her chest, and
Ventilateur, upside down, on her lower body. The print is a patchwork of designs,
shapes, and colors—gold, green, mauve, red, yellow, multiple shades of blue,
triangles, concentric circles, V shapes shooting out of shoulders, echoed by the
sharp angles of her collar—but somehow, the combination doesn't feel dizzying.
Her wrists are adorned with thick bangles and in her hands she cradles a golden
sphere; one hand is carefully cupped beneath the ball, the other rests on top.
She does not smile, her gaze is defiant, frozen. There is an ever so slight curve
in her upper lip that takes me back to the African women so often depicted in
ethnographic portraits. Something like disdain seething behind would-be neutral
eyes and a steeled face. In the corner of the poster, Vlisco's logo, name, and
tagline: “Since 1846.”

I have walked this path from the Eindhoven train station across
18septemberplaats many times before, mostly in 2011, when I stayed in
Eindhoven during my preliminary research in Vlisco's archives in Helmond, a 10-
minute train ride away. The image of the model, here, with no other black body—
besides mine—in sight; the wax prints, laid out as they are, looking playful
and...trendy next to the neon sign above an expensive brasserie; the ubiquitous
dense rows of precariously packed black bicycles of the Dutch urban
landscape... The juxtaposition is unnerving.
Chapter 2. Designing

Poster advertising Vlisco and site of Vlisco's exhibit in Dutch Design Week 2013
(Source: Photographs by author)

***
Part 2. When do Dutch Wax cloth designs stop being Dutch Wax cloth designs?

The changes in practice in the studio over the course of Vlisco’s history (not only since 2006) have been aimed at modernizing the company, at adapting it to changing market conditions and industry practices. For older designers who have watched these changes unfold over the last four decades, however, between the increased pace of work, digital tools, and the new modalities of training, the cumulative changes are running dangerously close to transforming Vlisco’s designs beyond recognition.

"Is this one of yours, Albert?" A print hanging on one of Albert’s tables had caught my eye. The indigo of its leaves was deep, the details of the leaves almost inscrutable under the layers of color. “No, this is a very old one. We have it here to show what can be done with Superwax\textsuperscript{13}. It’s a special way of breaking the wax—it must be done veeery carefully. The Superwax today are flat," Albert lamented, “there’s too much white." He dug up another print to show me—messy, black and red, Javanese style designs. “Is it Indian," I ask, for it doesn’t quite look like wax cloth, maybe because what would be indigo-colored in wax is red here. “No, it was made here at Vlisco. This is just a test piece, they wanted to see how the small crackling worked.” He unfolded it. Each of the three panels had the same underlying design, but the crackling was progressively denser in each panel. And the effect is breathtaking. “This is very easy to do,” Albert said, “very easy. But...” He shrugs as if to say, “but they just don’t want to.”

---

\textsuperscript{13} Where wax block prints are made using three colors, superwaxes are made with five. As a result, the fabric undergoes more stages of printing and is more expensive than the wax block.
We look at the other little bits of fabric Albert has tucked away. They all have that messy, veiny, dark, unpredictable look of old wax prints that I love so much. Albert continues:

[A design], it’s like a plant, it has to grow; maybe it’s something, maybe it’s not. ... I still don’t know what makes a good design. ... People think it’s very easy, that you can sit and after 5 minutes, you have a flower. But it’s not. it takes time... and then you get a golden flower. Sometimes you start something, you think it’s a good idea, and after 5 minutes, aah, it’s a stupid idea. And then you have to start again. I always start my day with a white page. You have to give it time; in the olden days, designs would stay up on the wall for 2-3 months! But now it’s fast fast fast.

Raf, the other master designer, agrees with Albert that the designs coming out of the studio today are increasingly unrecognizable as Dutch Wax cloth. “Back then, in the day of people like Karl and Jan,” Raf remarked as we talked one day by his desk, “you couldn’t tell the difference between different designers’ designs – who drew what. And today, there’s a huge
Albert and Raf's fears are not unfounded, it seems. During my research in Lomé, a longtime employee of the VAC-Togo, Vlisco's Togolese subsidiary, commented on the new designs coming out the studio in Helmond: "Innovation is good, but people [here in Lomé] don't find/see themselves anymore in today's designs [les gens ne se retrouvent plus dans les dessins d'aujourd'hui]." The old designs had magic in them, he explained, a magic that is lacking in the new prints. The VAC-Togo employee's remarks were echoed by a customer's reaction to a saleslady's suggestion of a new collection design in one of the boutiques where I observed Dutch Wax cloth sales in Lomé: "Oh, those designs that you wear and people don't even know you're wearing *tchigan*?" The customer rejected the fabric outright.

As Paxson (2012) has argued with regards to American craft cheese, in order to be viable or sellable on the market, commodities—even craft commodities, which exhibit a great deal of variation from one item to the next—must be recognizable: "The tradition of the cheesemaker's art is a sedimented social history that, in the United States, allows for improvisation but does not escape the structuring structure (or the formative form) of the retail marketplace. If a cheese is named or described as a Chaource, it should not more closely resemble a Robiola" (156). A very similar argument could be made about Dutch Wax cloth today: while design practice that brings the prints into being must necessarily be adaptable and adapted to the constraints of the industry and market realities, Vlisco's continuity in its longstanding markets would seem to hinge on its ability to keep creating

---

14 *Tchigan* is the appellation for Dutch Wax cloth in Mina, the language of trade in Lomé and one of Togo's national languages.
recognizable forms. And changes in practice in the studio seem to compromise that recognizability.

**Creating “good designs”**

But perhaps creating forms that were recognizable to African consumers familiar with the Dutch Wax cloth aesthetic was *not* the aim of design practice at Vlisco under its new orientation. Indeed, as the company sought to remake itself into a global design brand, its public relations rhetoric seemed to emphasize the fact that its design practice was not geographically specific. As the Creative Director said to me during one of our conversations, design at Vlisco is “not about Europe and Africa, it’s about good design.” This statement left me perplexed: Why did the Creative Director set “good design” in opposition to the geographic locations of Vlisco’s trade? Designers in the studio, across cohorts, seemed to echo this sentiment when they insisted that their aim was not to create “African designs” when they sat at their desks, but rather to bring careful attention and work to their ideas in view of creating something that *they* liked.

In the words of Maarten, from the youngest cohort:

> What I love the most about my job is that I’ve never had to make anything “African.” We don’t make animal print, don’t make giraffes, don’t make kente. We don’t make a *pastiche* out of Africa, you just make what you want to do. We [the designers] are not selected for our “African vibe.” That’s what I like – that there’s a contradiction. That’s tremendously funny and cool. That one designer can design what he sees – a tulip or what – and it can go to the other side [Africa]. (...) When it’s over there, it’s

---

15 Handwoven West African textile historically produced in Ewe regions of Ghana and Togo (see Picton 1995).
out of our hands. Once it’s there, we’re really not important anymore. If they don’t like it, they really won’t buy it.

Maarten’s views about not only the undesirability, but, really, the impossibility of creating in a manner that is somehow fundamentally tailored to the company’s African clientele was echoed throughout the studio. For designers across generations good design practice hinged on creating images they were satisfied with, not images that imagined African consumers would appreciate.

Albert, the Master Designer, explained that, for him, creating a good Dutch Wax design was not about thinking about what “African women” want, because that is both dynamic and unknowable. Rather, what made a design work was the emotion that the designer communicates into and through it. And to accomplish that, the designer needs to bring technical skill, but also creativity, a fresh mind, and personal experience from beyond the studio to bear on the design process:

You have to make a design—for me—that is mystical, always with a meaning. Not just a drawing, a painting; the painting has to do something with you. I don’t know what to draw for someone else! Don’t know what you need! I always draw for myself. I don’t know the people. We talked a lot about it, here in the department, but nobody had the answer. ... I don’t know what African women want. They tried that, they said, make another one like the bestsellers—like we did one with parrots or elephants, I don’t remember. But it never sold one yard. But I can make an airplane, you name it. That’s what makes designing here really interesting. You can go into the skies, or into the ground, all over the world. It’s about stories, emotions, tension. I only can try to do something everyday, again. To [snaps fingers] get something. I always start with a white page because I never know where my pencil will go. It has
to be a surprise. ... But I never think about, ‘What shall I make today for the African continent.’ But I know when you’ve seen something of the world, it’s easier to combine and you can mix that into... one complex of everything together, to get a real diamond.

Similarly, for Louisa, who has been in the studio for five years:

I can’t know what they [the customers in Africa] will like. There are so many different people and some people like the same thing that other people don’t like. Today, they say we can’t draw animals, including birds, because it’s not good for Muslim customers. But when you look at the classics\textsuperscript{16}, some of them have animals, and they’ve worked for decades! So I draw for myself, I try to make a good design, something I will like.

How to interpret the significance of the prints’ African history and of African consumers for the design process at Vlisco? How does it intervene in design practice, and what bearing might it have on when a Dutch Wax cloth design stops being a Dutch Wax cloth design? These are the questions I consider in the next section of this chapter, through a discussion of Vlisco’s involvement in the 2013 Dutch Design Week and a designer trip to West Africa that same year.

\textit{Making Dutch Wax cloth “Design”}

Becoming a design brand in large part means becoming recognized as such in the design arena (Murphy 2015). Vlisco’s aspirational identity as a global design brand thus

\textsuperscript{16}“Classics” refers to the company’s bestselling designs, some of which have been in print for almost a century, and most of which have been given names on by traders in West and Central African markets. See Domowitz (1992) for more on wax cloth naming practices in West Africa.
commanded forays into new arenas, such as collaborations in the design and fashion world, as the company sought to gain visibility in Europe. Among these activities was Vlisco’s participation in October 2013 in the prestigious Dutch Design Week, for the first time in the company’s history. Each year since 2004, the highly mediatized expo gathers designers from across the Netherlands, drawing crowds from throughout the country.

In response to the question “Why tell the story of Vlisco at Dutch Design Week?” on the handout distributed at the company’s installation, Vlisco’s CEO offered the following answer:

Now is a time of great change for Vlisco. We are evolving from a factory making fabrics for Africa to a design house. We want to show that with the Vlisco brand our vision is global, we are not only focusing on Africa. Through ‘Vlisco Unfolded,’ our concept for Dutch Design Week, we want to show the multiple layers of Vlisco and just how innovative we are.

Though it presented some historical artifacts (e.g. inspiration books from the early 20th c.), the exhibit focused on the company’s iconic designs, designers’ process (through sketches of current designers’ recent designs), collaborations with European fashion and artists, and product innovations, such as leather handbags embossed with Vlisco designs and silk scarves, etc. A weeklong series of daily talks examined Vlisco’s rebranding efforts, through discussions of the global luxury and fashion industries and of Vlisco’s current activities in these realms.

One of the featured collaborations in the exhibit was an image from a prominent Dutch artist duo, remade into a Dutch Wax cloth print by Vlisco and used for the upholstery of a vehicle in the artists’ installation. The assignment to convert the image into a wax print had
fallen to Raf, one of Vlisco’s master designers. I would like to argue that the challenges Raf encountered as he tried to remake the artists’ design into a Dutch Wax cloth print potently illustrate how “Africa” intervenes in the Dutch Wax cloth design process. They highlight how the cloth’s specificity as a commodity intended for a particular market binds it to the specificity of its market, and thus why Dutch Wax cloth design cannot not be “about Africa.” Raf’s experience with this rather specific assignment echoes how Africa comes up in the practice of Vlisco designers more broadly.

“I’m still not getting the click from it.”

From his desk, Raf looks up at the 5-foot tall image, tacked to the foam board where he pins works in progress. I have just asked him how it’s going; he looks at me and shakes his head as he sighs and laughs softly: “Same, still stuck.” The image before him is a green and tangled mess of masks, snakes, and car parts in dense jungle-like foliage. “The good thing,” he tells me, “is that it won’t be sold in Africa, it’s only for the Design Week.” That had been one of Raf’s concerns yesterday—how to make the design appropriate for sale in Africa, given the elements it contains. Raf is relieved.

Turning this image into a Dutch Wax cloth design has proven to be a difficult assignment, even for this master designer. For the first couple of days after receiving the assignment, Raf would stand before the paper printout of the original image for several minutes at a time, arms crossed, chin in hand, and then sigh as he walked back to his desk, frustrated. The problem was that, in his opinion, this image simply could not be translated into a wax print. For one, it contained “forbidden elements” – masks and snakes, which (along with owls and faces, generally)—Vlisco designers do not include in wax designs following feedback from
their West and Central African colleagues that the images are associated with witchcraft for the cloth’s consumers in their markets.

Besides the images depicted in the print, the technical specifications of the artists’ image also made translation into a wax print challenging. The image had too many colors, Raf explained. Fifteen—when, due to wax print manufacturing processes, a wax print can only have three. Moreover, it was too dense; in order for it to look like a wax, there would need to be more space between the image’s components. And to complicate matters, Raf explained, the image had no depth because it was drawn in Microsoft Illustrator, rather than Adobe Photoshop, the software Vlisco designers typically employ. “It looks more like a poster than a textile print,” Raf says. All the lines have the same thickness, “they are almost...clinical.”

“And...it...is...a bit of caricature,” Raf added with hesitation, concerned about criticizing another artist’s work. When I prodded him on why he didn’t simply remove the elements that are typically forbidden in Vlisco wax prints, he explained that this was their (the artists’) image, and that he could not transform it into something else. What he wanted to do is create something that would correspond to their expectations, but he would also like to feel good about it. And, at that particular moment, that felt to him like a rather impossible task.

Raf and I stand, staring at the artists’ image on the wall.

“Sometimes it’s difficult when you’re not connected to the picture,” he starts.

“Connected how?” I ask. He ponders the question, collects his thoughts for a few moments.
"...You know....surfing....? I do it quite a lot, when I go to Indonesia. And there are some times, when you are there—you get the wave, you’re on the board, you can stand up...many things come together...and then it just goes on its own.... It’s like that. I can’t explain it, but many things come together."

"It just flows," I volunteer.

"Yes! It just flows. Maybe it’s like clearing your head, clearing it of the many possibilities, and finding the right one; that’s the hard part. But once you have that, it’s like it goes by itself. But for now I’m still not getting the click from it, [from this design]."

This assignment is difficult for Raf because while it is a design assignment calling on the same technical skills that he deploys for all the prints he creates at Vlisco, the image it depicts is wrong. The image embodies clichés about Africa that Raf finds offensive and that betray both the Dutch Wax cloth aesthetic and, in a sense, the cloth’s African users as well. Creating the designs requires a feedback loop between design-in-progress and designer and the image’s problematic nature interferes with the communication (Ingold 2009). Raf leverages his technical expertise in addressing the challenges the assignment poses, but his struggle is palpable. To get through the block, Raf decides to use the lines as a starting point, to start redrawing them so they are less uniform. “Maybe something will come that way....,” he says. He zooms in to the image, focusing on the basics of the image, lines, shapes, details within a shape, in a sense blowing up the image such that the snakes and the masks and the jungle disappear—momentarily, long enough for him to complete the task at hand.

Something did come. As Raf redrew the lines, the idea came to him to replace the spark plug in the artists’ image with a spark plug from a popular Vlisco print from the 1960s, 6 Bougies. With the spark plugs thus replaced, Raf could better see what the masks near them had to
look like in order for the image to work: a grammar of sorts emerged, with which he could revise other elements in the image (Ingold 2009). Fulfilling the technical requirements for wax prints, reducing the gap between lines to the requisite 4-centimeter maximum to ensure proper printing, for example, also helped Raf rework the image. Typically, designers incorporate small lines into the gaps in their designs to address that concern. Raf decided to use some of the smaller elements in the image, such as the leaves and the snakes, to break the gaps and provide the necessary support for the larger pieces—the masks, exhaust pipes, and sparkplugs. And then he opened up the design, so that instead of the leaves, masks, pipes, sparkplugs, and snakes being entangled, they started to emerge as individual, if connected pieces against a backdrop that hadn’t existed in the original image. It made the objects look like they were dancing, giving the wax design a playful quality that the original drawing lacked.

After adding color to the image and sending off the files to the artists, Raf printed out yard-size paper copies of the images, and laid them in his workspace, behind his chair, to return to after a few days. And then he waited for the artists’ reaction.
Raf’s experience with this assignment suggests that Dutch Wax cloth design is not in fact just about “good design.” Raf brought his technical design expertise to bear on the process (e.g. following lines and creating space), and he certainly derived a sense of satisfaction from solving these technical quandaries, but the spirit of the image was not right and that left him uncomfortable even once the technical challenge had been resolved. Like other forms of craft practice, the process of creating Dutch Wax cloth designs amounts to a feedback loop between designer and design-in-progress, mediated by tools and skill. And because the designs are always intended as commodities (rather than, say, art objects, which might remain in the aesthetic realm) their bringing into being necessarily engages the specificities of the market (Becker 1979; Paxson 2012; Murphy 2015). Dutch Wax cloth design cannot be decoupled from the specificities of place or of the object’s users, history, and materiality. Dutch Wax cloth’s African story is at the heart of what makes Dutch Wax cloth Dutch Wax cloth. The enduring importance of Vlisco designers’ travel to West and Central Africa, discussed next, reflects this fact.

**The West Africa trip**

Vlisco’s sales and design managers have been traveling to current and prospective African markets for Vlisco’s textiles since the early 20th c. Travel reports preserved in numerous binders in the Vlisco archives document their visits to distributors in active markets, typically European and Lebanese traders (and as the years passed, West and Central African female wholesalers), with their notes on which designs were selling well and which were not, customers’ quality complaints, price, design, and quality competition on the market. For places where Vlisco did not yet trade, the travel reports contain information about the textiles that were available on the market, and how Dutch wax prints might compete there. The trips fulfilled not only market research goals, but also provided inspirations for designs.
Albert, the master designer, remembered the design manager in he and Raf’s early days in the studio regaling them with stories from his journeys: “The manager, he made a lot of long trips to Africa—every 2 years or so, he would go, for 2-3 months.” Albert reminisced. “He couldn’t draw, but he could tell really good stories. Like looking at a movie—you just watch, and your mouth falls open. Not many people can tell a story, you know. We used to hide and listen to the stories he would tell colleagues about his trips—like little children hiding under the table when grandpa is telling a story about the war.”

Designers started traveling to African cities where Vlisco’s textiles were sold in 1986. The management’s decision to have the designers travel themselves was motivated by the belief that their practice would benefit from their having a better understanding of not only how the textiles were used by their buyers, but even just seeing how the prints looked on bodies. Indeed, unlike France or Great Britain, which, as a byproduct of their colonial pasts in West Africa, have significant West African immigrant populations, the Netherlands largely does not (one notable exception is a Ghanaian immigrant enclave in the Zuidoost suburb of Amsterdam). But for Vlisco designers working and living in Helmond—a ninety-minute train ride from Amsterdam—the only exposure to Africa in the 1980s came from reports in newspapers, on television, or on the radio. Even at the time of my research in the studio in 2013, the designers reported that the only times that they saw Dutch Wax cloth worn in vivo was out the window of the studio, when West African customers came to make purchases at the factory boutique on the Helmond grounds. Many of the designers in the studio also frequented African fashion blogs daily to see how wax prints were being worn as a source of inspiration in their process (and, I suspect, also in hopes of coming across specifically one of their designs.)
From the first trip to Togo and Zaire (present-day DRC), the designers’ trips to Africa were envisioned as a means of informing their process: from seeing the cloth worn to seeing how the colors looked in the light *there*, or against the backdrop of African urban landscapes, to serving as a source of inspiration. With the company facing financial straits in recent years, the trips have become increasingly infrequent. But my time in the studio in 2013 happened to coincide with a planned trip, which would take half of the designers, mainly from the most recent cohort, to Cotonou, Lomé, and Accra over the course of 10 days. The Creative Director was a staunch advocate for these trips, despite pushback from upper management, which deemed them nonessential, particularly in the company’s financial situation at the time. But the Creative Director insisted. “I think it’s important for them to see the colors, how the fabric looks on people’s skin, even how the light falls there... The light in Africa is very different from the light in Holland,” he had remarked to me.

There was a great deal of excitement in the studio in the weeks leading up to the trip as designers met with the design manager to plan out the stops on their journey. Besides the standard market visit, the designers were eager to learn about the local arts scenes, to visit museums, and meet other artists in the cities on the itinerary. They came to the planning meetings with resources such as information on each city obtained from the Internet, and recommendations from older designers who had traveled to these countries before. For all but Albert and one of the younger designers, this was to be the first visit to the African continent.

The journey in December 2013 took us by road along the West African coast, from Cotonou to Lomé to Accra. It involved visits organized by the staff of Vlisco’s local subsidiaries to the market stands of traders who sold Dutch Wax cloth and tailors who partnered with the
Chapter 2. Designing

company, as well as meetings with local artists, and visits to historical or tourist attractions. During market visits, the designers attentively leaned in as their local colleagues translated remarks by sellers about which designs had been doing well, concerns they had about printing quality, or the difficulty of selling all the cloth they had in stock.

![Vlisco designer looking out at Vlisco billboard in Cotonou, Benin](Source: Photograph by author)

But most of the action during the trip happened on the bus, as we undertook the long, traffic-clogged commutes through the streets of the West African cities. The designers gleefully pointed out to each other people they spotted wearing a design that they or one of their colleagues back in the studio had created, enthusiastically snapping photographs. One designer said he had made the mistake on his last trip of not sketching during the journey, and he felt like he had lost many ideas. So this time, he kept a notebook close and jotted down ideas throughout the week. Pictures were *de rigueur* throughout the trip—pictures of plants, market and street scenes, interesting patterns in the sand or fence wiring. They were intended to serve equally, it seemed, as personal keepsakes and as resource documents.
when the designers returned to their drawing tables. One designer, who had just completed her first year in the studio and for whom this was the first visit to Africa, was excited to create a new design based on a variety of palm leaf she had never seen before; she captured it in a photograph on her smartphone.

Designers across all cohorts found these trips to African sites to be extremely formative; they recounted the journeys as eye-opening, often overwhelming and humbling experiences. Karl, who worked at the company from 1952 to the late 1990s, was part of the inaugural group of designers that traveled to Togo in 1986. There he saw a banana plant for the first time. He created a design of this plant upon his return to Helmond. “It was amazing to see the designs everywhere, but when I came back, I couldn’t draw anything for a long time!” recalled Louisa, of the most recent cohort, who had gone on her first trip two years prior. “When you see it like that, you realize that it means so much to people, and you want to do a really good job with it.” Her remarks resonated with Marlene’s, of the 1990s cohort. Marlene remembered how during her first trip to Africa—to Niger—with Vlisco, everywhere the Vlisco group went, children followed them, asking for pens: “Madame, bic17, bic…” And so when she returned to Helmond, she decided to create a pen design.

The centrality of “Africa” to the doing of Dutch Wax cloth design is manifest in the designers’ account of these trips and the significance they hold in the design process. The trips to African countries were deemed essential to designers’ practice, in a range of ways. They provided exposure that was meant to inform their process and they gave designers an appreciation for the significance of the designs they created, recommitting them to a high standard of practice once they saw what the cloth means to its users. By giving designers a

---

17 French word for pen.
better understanding of what happens to and with designs downstream from the studio, the trips to Africa were an integral part of enhancing not only the designers' creations, but their identities as designers. The geographic specificity of the prints they created intervened in their practice in a perhaps intangible, but certainly non-negligible way.

Conclusions

The African-ness of Dutch Wax prints does not rest in particular forms created from a preset grammar, but rather it is the product of an ongoing, reflexive engagement between the designer, the image in process, and the designer's embodied knowledge of what a Dutch Wax print was or looked like. The reproduction of a recognizable aesthetic thus hinges especially on embodied knowledge of the Dutch Wax cloth aesthetic, a form of “skilled vision” (Grasseni 2009) or “tacit knowledge” (Collins 2010). This is how designers could in the past draw “for themselves” while creating designs that honored the specificity of the object and of its significance for users.

In this view, the prints' African-ness was built into the images, mediated by the designers' work, but it was African-ness by virtue of the earlier prints' appropriation by African users: these users had made the designs theirs and thus helped to stabilize the aesthetic – what made a Dutch Wax cloth a Dutch Wax cloth. Designers in turn, through embodied learning, re-engaged that aesthetic in the development of new designs, in the interaction between designer, image in process, and Dutch Wax cloth aesthetic, mediated by the designer's skill. This is why Raf's process as he worked on the design for the Dutch Design Week was stalled for a while – because the image was not talking back to him, because it did not embody that aesthetic – it did not speak the Dutch Wax cloth language, one might say. To translate the image, Raf leveraged his experiences, starting with lines and image details to give the print
the right "look." But this was but a technical, surface remedy, because fundamentally, the image could not be a real Dutch Wax cloth because the images it depicts and the spirit of the image, were not right.

This analysis shows that the specificity of the object and of its users cannot be teased apart from the practice of Dutch Wax cloth design: design as object/image, design as commodity, and design as technical know-how are all interdependent, bound up with one another in the making of Dutch Wax cloth designs. The prints’ recognizability—Dutch Wax cloth as Dutch Wax cloth—depends on this relationship, and the prints’ African-ness is at the heart of it.

What then to make of Vlisco's presence at the Dutch Design Week? On one hand, the company’s billboards and exhibit, featuring black bodies and “African print” cloth in this space seems to augur the arrival or presence of “Africa” in a space where black bodies and African-ness are hard to come by. But on the other hand, when we consider the changes in design practice and in the aesthetic of new designs’ in this Vlisco as design brand moment, Africa-in-the-world manifests as simultaneously present and absent, visible and invisible. Next I consider how Africa’s place in the world is negotiated in the advertising of Dutch Wax cloth.
CHAPTER THREE.
Advertising

The young woman walks towards the camera. She is brown-skinned and her hair is styled in an amorphous curly haze. Her face has Barbie doll qualities: features delicate, eyes almond-shaped, skin smooth and even-toned. She smiles softly at the camera and her gaze lingers as she sashays across the frame and along the bed, before she finally looks away sensuously. She is wearing a floor-length sleeveless dress cut from two classic Dutch Wax cloth designs in blue, orange, and gold. As she glides past the bed, the camera pans from her face down to the bed, on which folded pieces of classic Dutch Wax cloth designs are spilling out of what looks like a large gift box. Stopping in front of the dresser, the woman reaches for framed black and white pictures of herself holding a baby. The voiceover begins.

A mother’s beauty is passed on to her daughter.

The voice is a middle-aged black woman’s, her accent a crisp British-West African suggesting high social status or education level. A quick succession of shots follow. The woman is now with two young children. Here she is rubbing noses with the baby. Now she is stroking classic Dutch Wax prints on the bed.

Her love of life and wisdom, bestowed as gifts.

The woman is twirling and bouncing the baby—clad in the same fabrics as she is, as the toddler—also wearing the fabric—looks on.

And that is why a mother passes on...

It is now the toddler’s turn to be twirled and bounced, holding the laughing woman’s hands.

...that there is only one wax hollandais.

Woman and baby turn to face the camera in time with the words “wax hollandais.” The woman is heavily made up. She smiles knowingly towards the camera, as the baby gazes off-frame.

Vlisco wax hollandais.

The woman, alone once more, sashays back the way she came, past the bed and out of the frame. The shot lingers for a second after she has walked off, and the container holding the fabric on the bed is now more clearly visible. It is not a gift box, but rather an ivory-colored suitcase, lying open atop immaculate white sheets and pillows in what looks like a hotel room.

Vlisco, the true original since 1846.

A white background, with the words THE TRUE ORIGINAL and Vlisco’s logo fades into the shot of the suitcase on the bed, eventually covering it.

A mind-blowing new collection, now also available in shorter lengths.
This 30-second advertisement, posted by Vlisco to YouTube in early 2015 perfectly exemplifies brands' appropriation of consumer love in the creation of surplus value.

Anthropologist Robert Foster (2005; 2007) has argued that to derive a profit, brands — his example is Coca-Cola — appropriate not only the labor of production workers, but also that of consumers, who, through their “consumption work” (Miller 1997) imbue the brand with meaning. This value that consumers produce for the brand—the consumers’ “labor of love”—is then re-appropriated, through mechanisms like consumer research and brand management, into the brand’s process of value creation (Foster 2005). “The premium price that consumers pay for brands [thus] represents a charge levied for access to the meanings, social relations, and affect that consumers themselves have produced” (Foster 2007, 718).

As such, “brands represent the appropriation of the appropriations of branded goods by consumers” (ibid), or differently put, the appropriation of consumers’ love labor.

This analysis certainly holds for Vlisco. Consumer love is at the heart of the company’s brand communications, and of its strategy for ensuring generational continuity as the company seeks to develop new product offerings and expand to markets beyond Africa as a “global luxury” brand. The “Love through the generations” television advertisement above is a particularly remarkable illustration of this process of appropriation because consumer love is not only made explicit in the ad, but it is in fact the focus of the ad. But the appropriation of consumer love also figures in other forms of brand communications for Vlisco, such as its self-definition as a “love brand,” as in this quote from the company’s Creative Director in a feature on Vlisco in a “brand storytelling”: “There’s something special about Vlisco (...) it’s become a ‘love brand’. People here in Africa feel they own the brand” (Schäfer). And, to the extent that it is the company’s customers, through their appropriation

18 https://youtu.be/ndyLoqxpN_o?list=PLHWAreZPwtj6aZUdPiUNfPEqXEPFNNlXH

113
of Dutch Wax cloth into meaning-making practices, who have made the product’s “originality” and “authenticity” valuable qualities, the tagline of the company’s brand and logo—“The true, the original”—also reflects the appropriation of consumer love for brand value creation. As Foster puts it: “the persons of consumers enhance the value of brands” (Foster 2005, 11).

But which consumer-persons enhance the value of Visco’s brand, precisely how, and to what effect? Vlisco’s consumer research has found that, of the different consumer categories emerging in their findings, the most loyal group are the so-called “traditionalists,” also colloquially referred to at Vlisco as “the mamas.”19 These are older women of not necessarily affluent means but who value Dutch Wax cloth because it was the cloth that their mothers and grandmothers had valued for both dress and the signaling of social status. It is these customers’ longstanding labor of love that Vlisco’s brand is built on. The images in the aforementioned video reflect several aspects of this labor: Dutch Wax cloth as an object of the female realm, and, more particularly, a form of female wealth; the cloth shared by mother and daughters, symbolizing the affective ties they share; a woman’s Dutch Wax cloth collection stored in a suitcase, the customary mode of storage of the cloth in West Africa; Dutch Wax cloth as inheritance passed down from mother to daughter (Sylvanus 2011; Bickford 1994). The Dutch Wax cloth consumers who primarily engage in these meaning-making practices, and continue, through these performances, to make Dutch Wax cloth a valuable object, and thus Vlisco a valuable brand, are “the traditionalists” identified in the company’s consumer research.

---

19 I discuss the company’s consumer research and its findings in further detail below.
But even as the value with which these women imbue Dutch Wax cloth is appropriated into Vlisco’s advertising images, the women themselves—or the women they would like to see featured, women who look like them—are absent from the brand’s public image, in its advertising images featured on billboards in West African cities, on the company’s website, or on social media pages like Facebook and YouTube. Indeed, while the “traditionalists” are older women, the models featured in Vlisco’s advertisements are young. Although, in many West African cultures, larger body size is valued, particularly among women of a certain age, as a sign of high social status (based on presumed fertility and wealth), perhaps especially among what Vlisco pegs as the “traditionalist” demographic, the models in the company’s ad campaigns are invariably Western fashion industry standard thin.

This chapter examines the appropriation of consumer labor in the production of advertising images for Vlisco. While, as Foster has shown, the appropriation of consumer love in branding is a mainstay of branding activities, the Vlisco case highlights how, in cases where the consumers’ visual aesthetic does not “fit” the brand identity, brands create surplus value through a combination of appropriating consumers’ labor of love and the erasure of these very consumers in ad images. I argue that this play on the visibility of the company’s core consumer group is a cornerstone of the brand’s efforts to remake itself from a manufacturer of African products to a global brand, a form of appropriation of consumption work that goes beyond the standard appropriation by brands.

This selective visibility of different African bodies, I contend, is characteristic of the present moment of African being in the world. Through Vlisco’s advertising images, Dutch Wax cloth has become increasingly visible in settings (and on bodies) beyond Africa, which, to the extent that Dutch Wax cloth has long been a signifier of African-ness, might be taken as an
indication of Africa's inclusion into the global. What I suggest in this chapter is that this new visibility belies a more complex set of dynamics. I argue that the advertising images Vlisco creates do both inclusionary and exclusionary work: inclusionary in that they communicate luxury with black bodies wearing textiles that are read as African, thus leveraging two qualities (blackness and African-ness) that have historically been seen as antithetical to luxury. But even as they expand boundaries in this manner, the images also mediate a process of exclusion in that they reify other standards for the embodied representation of aspiration, namely body size and age. Faced with reconciling their core African consumers' preferences with those of the "global" fashion industry, Vlisco adopts industry standards and adjusts them along the margins. In this negotiation of how to make a commodity historically targeted to African consumers palatable to a market beyond Africa, the resulting images simultaneously push against and reinforce standards that have long excluded African bodies from the realm of the global.

By discussing the politics of advertising images and brand value creation at the nexus of the local and the global, this chapter illuminates the tensions and contradictions that play out in Vlisco's efforts to remake itself from a manufacturer of an "African thing"—Dutch Wax cloth—into a global luxury brand. Where Chapter 2 considered how the company's rebranding played out at the level of the designs themselves and their bringing into being, in this chapter, I examine how it manifests in the qualification of the designs (Callon, Méadel, et al 2002) through advertising, in the commodity aesthetics (Haug 1988) and commodity images (Mazzarella 2003) that seek to make the company's products desirable to consumers as they move along the commodity chain.
The case I examine in this chapter resonates with Mazzarella (2003) and Foster’s (2008) studies of branding at the local-global nexus, albeit with some twists. The main twist is the direction of the relationship between local and global in the advertisers’ practice. Coca-Cola, the subject of Foster’s analysis, must be made local; and for the Indian ad executives in Mazzarella’s study, local goods (an Indian mobile communications brand) is made locally desirable by leveraging the global aspirations of consumers and their associations of mobile telephony with globality. In Vlisco’s case, however, the advertisers’ task is to make an object seen as local (African) into a global one. In my analysis of advertising practice at Vlisco, I consider what is made visible about articulations of African-ness in this effort to make a local brand globally legible, the reverse of Foster’s glocalization—which is, unfortunately, much harder to portmanteau (lobalization?).

Like Mazzarella I show how African-ness and globality are rendered aesthetically, visually, and materially in the making of advertisements. Mazzarella argues that advertisers are turned into “brokers of cultural integrity” as they “present [cultural integrity and globalization] as eminently compatible and mutually reinforcing,” albeit through the deployment of essentializations of Indian-ness (2003, 14). In much of its public relations discourse, Vlisco makes the same argument about the compatibility of “Africa” with global luxury fashion. Examining the development of the company’s advertising campaign however suggests that there exists a gap between PR and the material and practical realities of Vlisco’s efforts to undertake the local-to-global refashioning of its products and brand. The advertisers in Mazzarella’s study are able to “provide a model for how a ‘world-class’ or ‘aspirational’ – and yet at the same time Indian – commodity aesthetic can be constructed. And in so doing, [they] also offer one solution to [the] problem [of] the ambivalent value of ‘Indian’ as a differentiator in a globalizing landscape of brands” (98).
demonstrate this ambivalence in the case of Vlisco as well – ambivalence about the compatibility of “Africa” with “luxury” or “aspirational” – though I argue that, unlike in Mazzarella’s Indian case, the ambivalence here remains unresolved.

I start by framing my analysis of the appropriation of consumer labor in Vlisco’s branding by discussing how the company learns about its consumers in this rebranding moment, and what findings have emerged from this consumer research. I then turn to Vlisco’s aspirational brand identity and the aesthetic standards that this brand identity demands for brand visual communications. Next, I move to how these two pieces are brought to bear on each other in the production of the company’s advertising images. I highlight the challenges that differences in the norms reflected in consumer preferences and global luxury fashion industry standards pose to the conceptualization of advertising campaigns that both communicate Vlisco’s aspirational brand identity and speak to the needs and preferences of their current consumers. These norms play out on and through the body of the model, as well as the dress styles, body poses, and imagery depicted in the ad campaign images. Finally, I tie these parts together with a discussion of the chapter’s central argument: that the making of the advertising images makes visible the simultaneous appropriation of the labor of core consumers and the erasure of these consumers in brand communications.

Branding Vlisco

Studying consumers, constituting consumers

I was sitting in on a meeting between Vlisco’s Director of Consumer Research and a Dutch filmmaker who had recently been contracted to create a short film documenting the trajectories of a handful of women representing “consumer types” in Accra, Ghana. This kind of consumer research was part of Vlisco’s rebranding efforts. “They thought they knew
everything about what Africa wanted, so why do research?" the Director of Consumer Research said of the company's management throughout the 20th century. Contrary to this attitude, which she deemed arrogant for failing to take seriously African consumers' discriminating tastes, the Director of Consumer Research's vision for Vlisco going forward was that the company become truly "consumer-centered." That would mean committing to learning about how consumers used their products and having that information guide all aspects of the company's operations, from design to marketing to distribution and market strategizing. This is a broader trend in brand practice today, as Foster (2005), Arvidsson (2005), and others have explained.

The director's assessment of the history of consumer research at the company is belied somewhat by the extensive travel reports by Vlisco sales and design managers in the company's archives dating back to the 1930s (as discussed in Chapter 2), documenting recorded information about sellers' feedback on matters like how designs fared on the market and the colorfastness and success of colors, information that arguably came from consumers. In other words, it is not the case that there was no interest at Vlisco in consumers' reactions to the company's products throughout the 20th century, but rather that the nature of the knowledge gathered about consumers and the shape that this learning should take differed from current industry practices.

Indeed, a relatively recent phenomenon dating to the early 20th c., consumer research has become a cornerstone of contemporary marketing practice (Pridmore & Lyon 2011; Arvidsson 2005; Cochoy 1998). Today, knowledge about consumers "and the corresponding ability to appropriate consumers' point of view and share their universe are considered mandatory for marketers" (Grandclément and Gaglio 2011, 87). As Foster has argued,
learning about consumers’ attachment to a brand and the meanings it holds in their lives in order to then integrate that information into the crafting of brand communications is at the heart of the “new economy” (Foster 2008; also see Arvidsson 2005, who argues that consumers’ “meaning-making” constitutes the core of a brand’s value). In other words, consumer research is essential for “putting consumers to work” in the service of the brand (Zwick, Bonsu & Darmody 2008). Consumer research today takes a number of forms, from focus groups (Grandclément and Gaglio 2011) or open-ended one-on-one interviews or surveys, to Internet tracking services (see Arvidsson 2005).

Consumer research at Vlisco at the time of my research included focus groups and filmed interviews with consumers in select African cities on their “consumer journey,” supplemented by feedback from management and marketing staff at the company’s African subsidiaries, and tracking of user commentary on social media. An ethnographic market study conducted in Ghana, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (RDC) in 2011 to understand consumers’ wax cloth consumption habits yielded the consumer categories that were in use at the company at the time of my research. The study aimed to learn more about consumer needs in order to better orient Vlisco’s marketing, development, and design strategies. Over the course of two weeks, a team of four Vlisco staff members conducted focus groups and one-on-one interviews with a total of 50 women and men (primarily women) identified by Vlisco store staff in each location. They recorded footage of some interviews and of some of the women’s closets, and followed a subset of them to their tailors, where they interviewed them about the process of having garments made. The data was analyzed and edited into short films circulated to Vlisco’s upper management to demonstrate the complexity and untapped potential of the company’s African consumer

---

This interest stems from Vlisco’s intentions to expand their activities in the near future to also include ready-to-wear or made-to-order garments, in addition to uncut cloth.
base. The Director of Consumer Research found film to be a particularly powerful medium, for it enabled Vlisco staff to see and hear "directly" from consumers themselves.\textsuperscript{21} The opportunity that qualitative research offers marketers to "see" consumers is indeed reportedly a chief draw of the methodology (Grandclément and Gaglio 2011), all the more heightened at Vlisco, one might imagine, given the geographical gap between the company’s central operations in the Netherlands and its customer base in West and Central Africa.

\textbf{Vlisco’s taxonomy of the African consumer}

Out of the data collected through this consumer research project emerged eight consumer personas created by the advertising department, each formulated for the three populations of interest to the market research team at the time: "The African woman," "The African man," and "The Afropolitan woman." The personas included: "the image builder," "the youthful mix and matcher," "the creator," "the thoughtful pragmatic," "the careerist," "the life enjoyer," "the fashionista," and "the traditionalist." Large-size posters presenting each of these personas were prominently displayed in the conference room where I sat in on the meeting between the Director of Consumer Research and the filmmaker. Each poster featured a photograph of a woman standing in for the persona in question, accompanied by a name (not the woman's real name) and age, a tagline under the photo capturing the essential traits of the persona, a quote from the interview conducted with the woman, and text and photos under the headings "Inspiration," "Style," and "Daily life." Less prominent on the poster (in smaller font, and under the female persona) was a similar layout for the male version of the persona, reflecting the company’s priority focus on female consumers.

\footnote{21 See Foster 2007 for more on the use of video in consumer research.}
The personas are for internal use. They were mainly intended to help Sales and Design staff anticipate and/or evaluate consumers' reactions to design propositions, and Marketing and Communications staff develop campaigns. The Director of Consumer Research explained that though marketing professionals recognize that personas are not fixed—that one individual can have multiple personas or inhabit different personas under different circumstances, personas have proven to be richer and more flexible than the sex- and age-driven market segmentation methods that were previously standard in marketing research. The “traditionalist” and “fashionista” personas have proven to be the most enduring at Vlisco, as they encapsulated the two poles of the company's consumer base: respectively, its current, established consumers, and the consumer category it hopes to conquer.

In Vlisco's taxonomy, the “traditionalist” is conservative, hesitant to cut wax cloth. She only wears her wax cloth as a jupe-pagne, only cutting 2 of the standard 6 yards, for the blouse, as is the customary practice, a strategy deployed to preserve the cloth over time. The traditionalist is older, more established socially, and she is driven by “traditional” values such as family and religion. The photograph representing this consumer category on the poster was that of a sober-looking woman, in her late 50s or early 60s, the oldest of the women displayed. She wore a simple wax print outfit—sleeveless, a conservative neckline, and a straight skirt, and stood in front of stack of cloth in a shop, hands held together in front of her body. Her tagline on the poster was: “Getting respect by meeting society's expectations.”

The “global fashionista,” on the other hand, is young, outward-looking, quick-changing. She follows trends, frequents fashion blogs, and cuts different kinds of clothes from wax cloth —

---

22 This practice is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.
in contrast to the traditional “jupe-pagne” or “kaba and slit” (long straight skirt with matching top and wrapper) of her mother’s generation. Her tagline on the posters in the conference room was: “Crazy in love for fashion trends.” The accompanying photograph featured an exuberant-looking woman in her early twenties, wearing black tights and a loose, thigh-length, long-sleeved red button-down shirt (not made from wax cloth), a bejeweled cell phone in one hand. She faced the camera, leaning in a little; it looked as if the photographer had caught her on the edge of laughter. The quote attributed to her was, “My dog is named Gucci.”

What are we to make of Vlisco’s consumer personas? Approach them with some skepticism, certainly. Indeed, consumer personas are inherently ambiguous, as they offer the possibility of differentiating among different consumers, but also reify consumer “types.” As sociologist Donald Slater points out, the information obtained through commercial market research need not be “empirically correct (...) but it must be knowledge that makes sense to the marketers” (2002: 247, my emphasis). As a result, the personas can become self-fulfilling categories, more a reflection of marketers’ tools and of the ideas they bring with them to the research than a reflection of consumers.

Moreover, consumer research constitutes its subjects, from “individuals into consumers and populations into markets,” in the words of anthropologist Arlene Dávila (2001, 3), a move with political reverberations. Dávila demonstrates in her study of the Hispanic marketing industry how efforts to capture “Hispanics” as a consumer category in effect contributed to constituting the category of “Hispanic,” which homogenized a diverse population. These consumer personas are thus not to be taken for granted as reflective of Vlisco’s African clientele. But whether or not they reflect “reality” is almost besides the point, as the
categories are certainly reflective of the moment I came upon in how “African consumers” were imagined at Vlisco. Indeed, there was a great deal of excitement in the company’s market research department about the “new African consumer class” or again “the rising African middle class” and its promise for Vlisco’s future business on the continent and the “traditionalist” and “fashionista” categories embodied this vision of Africa today.

The Director of Consumer Research felt that there was a tendency at Vlisco to cast “traditionalists” as poor and unsophisticated, and “fashionistas” as modern, wealthy, urban, and sophisticated, a bifurcation that she didn’t think was accurate: “Our African colleagues know you can be traditionalist and sophisticated but here people still don’t always get it,” she remarked. But as a result of this bifurcation, the “fashionista” stood as counterpoint to this caricatured traditionalist: sophisticated, urban, young—global. Indeed her full appellation ("the global fashionista") clearly marked that “she” was not geographically tied to Africa. Rather, what characterized her persona was her adherence to non-geographically bounded standards—“global” standards. As such, the “global fashionista” served as a proxy for the global consumers Vlisco was hoping to reach with its new brand identity and product offerings—the “new Africa”; she stood as a transitional figure between Vlisco’s past and hoped-for future. In other words, as much as they purported to capture consumers, the categories of the “traditionalist” and the “global fashionista” constituted particular and distinct forms of African being in the world: one of which, the “traditionalist,” was constructed as incompatible with globality; the “old Africa.”

**Communicating to different consumers**

Ines, the Director of Brand and Communications, and I are sitting in the conference room in Vlisco’s Amstelveen headquarters; she is giving me an overview of the approach to creating
communications campaigns for the brand. Vlisco’s opening of this new location—near cosmopolitan Amsterdam, whereas the company’s historical headquarters are located in remote Helmond—itself represented a means of communicating the company’s new aspirational identity as a global brand. The area looked recently built up, bordered by open, undeveloped land and highways (“Walk towards the open fields,” I was told when I called my contact at the office, lost, trying to make my way there on the first day). During my commute from the metro station to Vlisco’s offices, the bus passed a series of buildings housing multinational companies like LG, Reebok, and Esprit. The passengers and people waiting at bus stops wore business suits, frequently purchased tickets on the bus instead of tapping the ubiquitous transportation pass, and asked for information in English. All of which suggested that they were either new to the city or only passing through this global brand enclave. Compared to the picturesque Amsterdam landscape of row houses and canals, this section of Amstelveen, with its open spaces, glass-front corporate high-rises, and wide roads gave off a generic business park aesthetic.

Vlisco’s building sat at the end of a narrow road with buildings on one side, and land under development on the other. The complex housed other business offices—an architecture design studio, a chic restaurant. Vlisco’s building featured floor-to-ceiling windows all around, with a large lobby set up in a minimalist style; besides the reception desk, two stylized red armchairs were arranged next to a coffee table on which were laid company newsletters and promotional brochures. A small installation comprising of a rack with draped and folded wax cloth and a small handheld mirror had been set up in the lobby and after the Dutch Design Week, some of the mannequins from the company’s exhibit were moved to the lobby. Wax fabric was strewn high up overhead. The lobby felt not fully moved into.
Ines came to Vlisco from previous agency work in marketing and communications and an academic background, as part of the management shake-up spurred by the company's rebranding. At Vlisco, she oversaw the team handling brand communications: from content and graphic design of print materials to the production of advertising campaigns and the coordination of marketing efforts with marketing staff in the company's various markets. Ines's team consisted of six staff members, mostly in their early thirties, who had also joined Vlisco since the company's restructuring. The team's workspace was located on the second floor on the building, in a wing separate from the Sales department, decorated with posters of past campaigns and promotional events, and racks of artfully displayed Vlisco fabric. Conversations in the workspace unfolded in Dutch and English, with a spattering of French during phone calls to colleagues in the company's francophone African subsidiaries.

Ines and her team were responsible for communicating Vlisco's new brand identity. The brand communications they produced needed to appeal to both established consumers—the "traditionalists"—and to aspirational consumers—the "global fashionistas," and the communications team faced challenges with both groups. For one, they found that the new textile designs did not speak to the "traditionalists," even though market research had shown them to have the highest level of brand loyalty. These women valued the fact that it was "Hollandais" (as Dutch Wax cloth is known in West Africa) that their mothers and grandmothers wore, and they sustained the cultural significance of the "classic" designs by continuing to purchase these prints. As a result, "classics" accounted for approximately ninety percent of Vlisco's sales.
For Ines, changes in the look of the designs coming out of the studio, the result of shifts in
design practices discussed in Chapter 2, were part of the challenge. She expressed concern
about the recognizability of Vlisco’s products to their consumers under the new approach to
design: “Today designs are changing a lot, especially the javas\textsuperscript{23}, with new designs and
colors,” she explains. “In the early days, design was about a collaboration between designers
and traders. How far can Vlisco go without watering it down too much?” Like Steiner (1985)
and Sylvanus (2016) (and the designers from the oldest cohort discussed in Chapter 2), Ines
seemed to suggest that the “collaborative design” process of Vlisco’s pre-rebranding days,
where the textiles’ African traders were more directly involved in the development of new
prints, yielded textiles that better reflected consumers’ tastes and that might have thus been
easier to sell.

Another challenge facing Vlisco’s advertising efforts, as Ines explained it, was that the
“traditionalist” category was not renewing itself. Mother-to-daughter transmission of Dutch
Wax cloth love has been a cornerstone of the cloth’s (and of Vlisco’s) cultural continuity in
West Africa. But the company’s consumer research found that where the adult women of
today had inherited a love of Dutch Wax cloth from their mothers, these same women were
not passing the knowledge down to their daughters, likely as a result of the cloth’s extreme
cost against the backdrop of economic crisis and decreasing purchasing power in West
African countries.\textsuperscript{24} Also, it is possible that where for the women themselves, Dutch Wax
cloth had been a way of performing modernity and cultural self-determination in the post-
independence period of the 1960s and 1970s (Sylvanus 2013b), for their daughters, the
cloth came to signify old-fashioned-ness. “What makes Vlisco West African for younger

\textsuperscript{23} Javas are wax-printed textiles also produced at Vlisco, but their printing is slightly
different from that of Dutch Wax cloth.

\textsuperscript{24} See Chapter 4 for more on this.
generations, as the passing down [from mother to daughter] gets watered down?” was one of the questions with which Ines and her team grappled as they conceived of marketing and communications activities. For that reason, Ines explained, Vlisco’s brand communications could not neglect the traditionalists, but it also needed to look beyond them and aim to reach younger consumers—specifically, the fashionistas—through different strategies.

Where previously a mother’s love for Vlisco’s textiles had been enough to ensure her daughter’s (especially given the lack of competition on the market), the disruption of mother-daughter transmission of attachment to Vlisco’s products, combined with the changing aesthetic of the products, left the company in the position of needing to at once keep mothers’ love and woo the daughters on their own. As a result, the company’s brand communications needed to reach established consumers by sustaining their attachment to the brand in the face of (or despite) unrecognizable products, and also draw in new consumers through a brand aesthetic that spoke to them, all while communicating the brand values of a global luxury fashion brand. Given that they were to communicate a luxury brand, the advertising images for Vlisco’s campaigns needed to be “aspirational.” But how to reconcile what “aspirational” looked like for their different consumer groups in the images? To the extent that the “traditionalists” were pegged as old-fashioned, the question facing Vlisco’s communications staff became how to create a “fresh new brand,” in the words of the Communications Director, without losing the traditionalists. The communication of these brand values is the subject of the next section.

**Picturing global luxury fashion**

Luxury brand management experts have reported that the trend for luxury brands like LVMH and Dior in recent years has been to adapt their product development and brand
management practices to the preferences of élite clients in “emerging countries”—the rising numbers of “US millionaires” in countries like India and Brazil (Hoffman and Coste-Manière 2013). Vlisco was aiming for this same élite market in Africa and beyond, but unlike brands like LVMH and Dior, it needed to build its identity as a luxury brand from the ground up.

How then did Vlisco bridge the dual imperatives of making itself recognizable as global luxury—to reach its aspirational consumer base—**while** adapting itself to the specificities of its established clientele? As I show below, this proved to be a constraining position for Vlisco’s communications staff, as, in order to be recognizable as “global luxury,” they avoided veering too far from the core industry standards for communicating luxury in their advertisements, at the risk of alienating their core consumers. This is the negotiation brought to light in the making and the ultimate outcome of their brand communications images.

*From concept to campaign*

“The concept is the start of it all,” Ines, the Director of Communications told me. “To come up with the material for each campaign, we look at the concept and we think about what would be consumer friendly.” The concept Ines is referring to is that developed by the Creative Director and his team (as described in Chapter 2), a collection of images, words, and a color palette, meant to serve as inspiration for Vlisco staff working on different aspects of collections—in particular design, advertising, and merchandising. The “look” of the campaign, based on this concept, is decided upon over the course of a series of meetings where decisions about the campaign imagery, photographer, model, and fashion styles to be featured in the campaign are coordinated. The overview and framing of the collection’s concept established, the group moved on to the details of the images to be created for the campaign: the choice of photographer, model, and fashion styles. It is in these choices that
the negotiations of brand identity (“global luxury”) aesthetic standards and consumer preferences played out most markedly.

**The photographers**

“They’re the hot photography duo of the moment,” Ines, the Communications Director, remarked about the photographers for the *Fantasia* campaign during the collection planning meeting. The choice of photographers was guided by Vlisco’s strategy to periodically partner with renowned fashion designers and photographers in the making of collections, and the resonance of the photographers’ style with the Creative Director’s vision for the campaign. The young Dutch photography duo (both were 26 years old at the time of the campaign), had recently garnered a great deal of attention both in their home country and in Europe more widely, following a fashion spread they had photographed for Vogue Belgium. The ways they folded bodies into tiny spaces for that spread fit well with Vlisco’s Creative Director’s vision for *Fantasia* as a collection characterized by eclecticism, craziness, excess.

The Creative Director read this aesthetic as part of a broader trend in the world of Couture, the standard for luxury fashion to which he pitched his vision for Vlisco’s direction. Explaining the inspiration for the *Fantasia* concept to the directors of Vlisco’s African subsidiaries during the collection sales meeting in Helmond a couple of months prior to the collection’s launch, he showed a video of a recent advertisement by Dior featuring the same staccato, collage effects he envisioned for *Fantasia*. “This trend is happening everywhere; even in West Africa, it’s happening,” he assured them. “As you see, a lot of people are doing it, even Dior.” A few years prior, the Creative Director remembered, sales directors and management alike had been somewhat hesitant about his proposal of a Japanese-themed
campaign. The campaign went forward all the same, and its launch happened to coincide with a Japanese-themed collection by the fashion designer Galliano, which, for the Creative Director, was a small victory, as it indicated that Vlisco's creative direction was in step with the luxury world of which it sought to become a part. The referents to which the Creative and Communications Directors appealed—Vuitton, Dior, Galliano, all established luxury fashion brands—in describing their vision for this and other campaigns highlight the aesthetic Vlisco sought to convey in its brand communications.

**The model**

An important decision besides the photographer for every campaign is the choice of a model for the campaign. Sitting around the table in the conference room at Vlisco's headquarters in Amstelveen, two months before the Fantasia photoshoot, the Communications Director and members of her team looked through the headshots and specs of the models under consideration for the upcoming campaign. They detailed the pros and cons of different models, in particular the extent to which they fit the collection concept. In the Powerpoint slideshow presenting the various components of the campaign, the slide about the model described her desired profile as "Mature adult but youthful."

The team lingered on one headshot for a moment. "She would be great," the Director remarked, to the others' agreement, "but we can’t afford her," she said decisively as she set that photograph aside and turned to Elise’s. "Again, one of our older models," the Communications Director observed, "because consumers are asking for slightly older models." Indeed, the age of the models featured in Vlisco’s campaigns had been a recurring issue in feedback on campaigns from the company’s core African consumers: the women who constituted Vlisco’s most loyal customer base—middle-aged and older women—
complained that the models were too young and that they did not see themselves reflected in the campaign images. Elise was just in her thirties at the time, but as was remarked during the meeting, that was quite old in “model-years.”

The campaign models’ size had been another frequent point of discontentment on the part of customers. Reporting back to the group on her recent trip to Nigeria during a debrief meeting, Ines said she had heard the usual complaints from customers: “We need more fat ladies on billboards, we need more Muslims on billboards.” The reaction to Ines’s remark around the table during the Amstelveen meeting—a nod, a shrug of the shoulders, a small chuckle—suggested that her colleagues were not surprised, and also that this was not an actionable piece of feedback. Indeed, there was no further discussion of the point at the meeting. Yet a few months later I would hear very similar observations from a Togolese Dutch Wax cloth seller—and wearer—in Lomé: “They [the models] are so thin, you can’t imagine just from seeing the fabric on them, what it will look like on you.”

“But you can’t put the Maggi lady on a billboard and call yourself a luxury brand,” the Communications director had observed during one of our conversations, highlighting the gap between the imperatives of the commercial aesthetic of Vlisco’s desired brand identity—what it means to look like a luxury brand—and the realities of who the company’s core consumers were. A prominent figure in advertisements for Maggi, an international seasonings brand, the “Maggi lady,” in her West African instantiation, at least, is typically a matronly figure. Ample bodied, smiling, motherly, she is generally in naturalistic poses, as opposed to the stylized poses of fashion photography. All of these attributes put her imagery at odds with Vlisco’s aims of communicating aspiration in a manner that would be legible to consumers in African countries and beyond.
Discussions about Elise’s age and size bring to light the limits of the standards Vlisco applies in its picturing/communications of a “global luxury” brand identity. It is noteworthy that while Elise’s age was discussed during the campaign pre-production meeting, her size, however, was not; her professional website lists her measurements as 32-25-34 or a US size 6, placing her within the standard range for female fashion models. Where age was somewhat negotiable (but even then, only slightly, since even though 30 is “really old in model years,” it is not the kind of “older woman” that consumers are complaining about not seeing in Vlisco’s ads), body size was much less so. This issue is hardly unique to Vlisco, though; both age and body size are enduring subjects of debate in the fashion industry, with activists and would-be reformers arguing for greater diversity on both fronts (see Entwistle 2009; Wissinger 2012; Martin 2016).

**Fashion styles**

Beyond the model herself and the photographers who would be shooting the campaign images, another important element of the campaigns are the dress styles the model dons. These garments are particularly important, given Vlisco’s aspirational identity as a fashion brand. At the time of my research, the fashion looks were developed at Vlisco by Cecilia, an in-house fashion and concept designer. The styles she created were based, as the rest of the campaign components, on the concept guiding the collection. A key aim for Cecilia as she conceived the garments was to have the pieces showcase the textile prints—to “create a frame for the designs”—and to resonate with her understanding of Vlisco customers: “the very self-confident, proud, elegant woman.” Like Vlisco’s textile designers, the fashion designer saw her creative process as influenced by a blend of sources—not African first,
explicitly, or self-consciously, but she believed that her knowledge of and interest in African
textiles and fashion necessarily suffused all the styles she created.

The styles Cecilia created for Fantasia were designed to reflect the collection’s theme of excess and clash through unlikely combinations of prints, colors, and patterns. For instance, she included multiple prints in a single outfit, layering a strapless dress over a long-sleeved button-down shirt or a calf-length pleated fabric flap over trousers, combining classic designs in their collection-specific colors with new designs, javas with superwaxes and waxes. Cecilia explained: “For Fantasia we wanted to show the crazy one, the outgoing woman, the woman who dares. (...) My muse, very crazy, was from [the movie] Grease. The blond woman, Olivia Newton-John—the transformation, you know? Off-shoulder, and very tight skirt, and also then that she borrows the jacket of the guy... So we had huge jackets, trench coats... And then the large V-neck, but then layered.”

Cecilia creates two sets of dress styles for every collection campaign: fashion looks for the billboards and online communications, and fashion inspiration looks, meant to be more wearable and accessible to a general public. The fashion looks, shot on the first day of the photo shoot, are seen as more conceptual, whereas the fashion inspiration styles are drawn from more common dress forms in West Africa, such as long straight skirts and blouses. This split was a strategy on the part of the brand communications team to reconcile the needs and preferences of Vlisco’s established consumer base—to see the fabric worn in styles that they could get tailored themselves—with the company’s new identity as a high-end fashion brand.

*Performance of fashion photography*
All of these pieces—the campaign concept, the model, dress, and photographic style—come together over the course of a 3-day photoshoot to produce communications images that reflect Vlisco’s aesthetic of luxury fashion. This section shows how the standards of fashion photography are applied in the shooting of the advertising images, standards that pertain, namely, to the interaction between photographer and the model and to the disposition of the model’s body in the images. This is an important part of how the luxury fashion aesthetic is communicated in Vlisco’s ad images.

Aretha Franklin is playing overhead when I walk into the hangar. The photographers and their team are finalizing their equipment setup, the production staff is putting finishing touches on the set for the first outfit shoot, and Elise, the model, is sitting at a vanity in her bathrobe, thumbing her iPad. Before the shoot starts, we all huddle, about a dozen of us—the Creative Director, the Marketing and Communications Director, some of her team members, the production staff, and the photographers—around a table in the back corner. The Communications Director explains the campaign’s concept, an explanation she directs particularly towards Elise, the model. “Fantasia is meant to be eclectic,” she explains, “it’s a bit like the Memphis movement in architecture, it’s got that 80s feel, that pop-up feeling, with layering, a bit of a mosaic effect.” As she speaks, Ines shows Elise the trial photos taken the day before, to give her a sense of the images they will be aiming for during today’s shoot.

The walls on the set of the photo shoot have freshly been painted white. The set décor consists of white wooden blocks shaped like oversize cheese wedges and super-sized colorful Styrofoam cutouts of details from some of the designs in the collection; the cutouts will be switched out between Elise’s costume changes, to match the prints in each new
outfit. Originally from what is now South Sudan\textsuperscript{25}, Elise and her family migrated to Norway when she was an adolescent. Her mother, who had also worked in the fashion industry, steered Elise in this direction. Though like many models, fashion had been her dream, Elise said she was happy to find work doing commercial photo shoots, such as this one for Vlisco. She worked part-time in a clothing store in Norway, which gave her the flexibility to travel for her modeling work.

Before she steps onto the set, Elise glances at photographs on her tablet, from the practice shoot the day before, when she and the photographers previewed some of the poses and tested the set. Standing next to her, Maite, one of the two photographers, talks her through the images, pointing to what worked and what she’d like her to pay attention to. The resonating bass line of an Afro-house track is vibrating overhead. It’s coming from Elise’s iPad, a YouTube playlist built around the music of Black Coffee, the renowned South African house music DJ. As she sets her iPad down on a nearby chair before being ushered onto the set, Elise looks to me and says cheerfully, “It goes well with this thing,” referring to Black Coffee and the photo shoot. The fashion and concept designer who created the looks featured in the shoot and the hair and makeup stylist usher Elise to the corner of the room where the Styrofoam and wooden blocks have been set up. They have slipped on white booties over their shoes, and are rushing to put finishing touches on Elise’s makeup, adjust her hair, and straighten the collar of her button-down shirt.

Maite, the photographer, is crouching, changing angles, snapping at the camera, which is connected to the computer screen on the desk to the side by a long extension cord. She punctuates her shots with soft-spoken encouragement directed at the model: “Yes, yes.

\textsuperscript{25} Because they are typically hired locally (in the Netherlands), the models featured in Vlisco’s campaigns are typically not African, but of Surinamese descent.
Elise looks focused, tense, a little nervous. She focuses her gaze on the camera, seems to tense up all her muscles for each pose — in her face, her arms, her upper body — she’s pulling. She shifts from one pose to the next with calculated movements. She doesn’t smile; at most a tiny sliver of her teeth shows occasionally through her slightly parted lips. Her stare, at the camera, in the distance, is sultry, sharp — her eyelids are low, her chin juts forward, her cheekbones are angled just so, towards the camera, a textbook definition of “giving face.” A large Mac screen projects the photographs towards the rest of the room moments after the photographer has snapped them. The image editor is sitting at the table, scrutinizing and marking the images on another screen on the same table. Kees, the second photographer, who’s watching the large computer screen as his partner shoots, runs in to readjust a block on the set in between clicks.

Elise has a striking smile. In between shots, as she shakes out her stiffened limbs, it erupts, revealing her perfect teeth — bright, perfectly aligned. Her face seems to take on new angles when she smiles; she almost looks like a different person. But for the poses themselves, there seems to be a strict, if unspoken, no-teeth policy, which stands out all the more each time Elise smiles in between shots. When I ask the photographers after the session why smiling seemed to be taboo for the pictures, they say it is an industry standard and that it had once been explained to them as: “Advertising stole smiling from fashion.” Chiming in, Cecilia, the fashion designer, said not smiling communicates elegance and power. “Models are taught: ‘You must be elegant with your eyes, and arrogant with your face.’”

The mood on the set is cheerful but focused. There’s a great deal of movement and laughter, but time is clearly of the essence. The Creative Director tells me the process is moving...
quickly today. It doesn't always, he explains, but today the photographers are finding the right shots quickly. The poses look uncomfortable, Elise is shaking slightly as she continually stretches and extends her arms and neck, elongating them. For one pose, she is half sitting half leaning on the slanted edge of one of the wedged blocks that make up the set. She's on her side, supporting herself on one elbow, delicately holding up her chin on the tips of her fingers as she looks down the tip of her nose towards the camera. “Nice! Yes! Cool! Yes! Yes! Beautiful. Cool, yes, gorgeous!” The photographers egg Elise on in a soft voice. After every few shots, Elise rearranges her skirt—the slit is very high and the fabric's pattern gets crumpled as she contorts herself into the required poses. The fashion and hair stylists run in between shots, fixing her clothes and rubbing her stiff back and arms, while the photographers review the images on the screen with the Creative Director and the Communications Director.

After about fifteen minutes, the photographers are huddling over the computer screen with the Creative and Communications Directors, as well as the image editor, looking through the

*Vilisco campaign photoshoot (Source: Photograph by author)*
images just shot for this first outfit. The screen is angled back towards the back of room, facing away from the set. The Creative Director says he’d caught a glimpse of a shot earlier that he found “heel mooi” [very pretty]. One of the photographers scrolls through the images to locate it, settling on one a few instants later. He looks up: “I think we got it, yea?” The group acquiesces. Elise is swiftly ushered back stage by the styling staff. A member of the production staff slips on paper booties, grabs a roller brush on extension pole and repaints small spots of the floor white. Mafikizolo, a popular South African group, is playing overhead.

Elise has just walked onto the set in a 3.5 piece outfit consisting of an A-line skirt with plissé tack-on, and on top, a long-sleeve collared shirt with a bustier over it. The tops are tucked into skirt, and altogether, there are five or six prints in the outfit. The production manager, the communications staff, and the photographers express delight when Elise walks onto the set: “What a great look!” the photographers exclaimed. “I think people will react very positively to this collection,” the Creative Director tells me as we look over the printouts of the various fashion looks pinned to a board on the wall at the end of the day. “This is a good collection for you to follow, because we’re pushing the envelope quite a bit with the design combinations, the fashions, the colorings,” he tells me. “Hip-Hop Hooray” is playing overhead.

In contrast to the Creative Director’s assessment, the Communications Director says she is expecting a lot of pushback for this collection. There had been some struggle between the creative (design and styling) and communications sides over the fashion styles, she explained: she found some of the looks too far out and was concerned that they wouldn’t speak to the main consumer base. “All the mixing of different patterns, the clash... People
Chapter 3. Advertising

will say it’s too edgy, not representative of consumers. But it works really well conceptually—with the collection concept. That’s the challenge: brand communications are not supposed to be representative. When you look at fashion, do you want to see reality? I’m not sure. The billboards [for which communications images are created] are meant to be aspirational,” Ines continues. “They serve as an affirmation that we’re a top-level, global company.”

The work of standards

To put itself forward as a high-end fashion brand for a global market, Vlisco pegs the aesthetic for its communications campaigns to the standards of the high-fashion industry. By having black bodies and wax print cloth in these images, the campaigns communicate a particular vision of African globality: one that can be made to fit (into) these standards. But so doing, the images also do exclusionary work, in that they put forth a particular image of what global African-ness does not look like. The model’s disposition in Vlisco’s advertising images stands out markedly when held up against images for Uniwax campaigns, another wax cloth brand in the Vlisco group, designed and printed in Côte d’Ivoire, but for which the group has no global aspirations. In the Uniwax images, the models are rarely alone—they are frequently accompanied by a man, children, or other women. But most strikingly, the featured models come in a wide array of body sizes and they smile. The models’ bodies and their disposition across the two brands’ advertising images reflect the aesthetic standards that Vlisco applies to communicate “global luxury” and “mid-range African” brand identities.

In her discussion of how African-American marketers in the US in 1945-1960 created a “Negro market” as a means of creating visibility for African-Americans as consumers, historian Elspeth Brown (2011) argues that while the images the marketers created did
"rewrite the visual rhetoric of black bodies in commercial representation" (204), they also "codified the color, gender, and class hierarchies of the black bourgeoisie" by depicting black models who fit or performed the standards of "respectable femininity" and "African American discourses of respectability" (205). Brown's analysis clearly demonstrates the inherently political nature of not only creating advertising images for the "Negro market," but also of choosing which bodies to represent in these images.

This case resonates a great deal with that of Vlisco advertising. First, in both instances, the question of expanding the range of possibilities for representing black people in advertising poses itself. Further, for midcentury American marketers and Vlisco today alike, the creation of the advertising images is mutually constitutive with the delineation of a "Negro"/African consumer class in a context where the mainstream had previously refused or neglected to identify one. I contend that the bodies represented in Vlisco's campaign ads at once expand the bounds of the representation of luxury by leveraging black bodies and markers of African-ness to this end, but that at the same time, these images reify the criteria for which bodies can be "global" or "luxury," thereby codifying the boundaries between "African" and "global." The images both expand and constrain. Standards articulate a moral economy (Busch 2000; Busch & Loconto 2010; Star & Lampland 2009) – drawing the boundaries between good and bad, right and wrong. As a result, Vlisco's brand images on the one hand paint a new picture of Africa, through the application of "global luxury fashion" standards, but on the other hand, even as they do so, they reinforce the hegemony of standards that negate the norms that women like Vlisco's established consumers espouse.
Two examples throw the malleability of the standards deployed in Vlisco's advertising and brand positioning into particularly sharp relief. For one, Vlisco did create a campaign with a model wearing a hijab, though it continues to use thin-bodied models in its campaigns, suggesting that in this moment, luxury is compatible with (visible) “Islamic-ness,” in a way that it is not with “fatness.”

The second case offers an illustration of Vlisco's new brand identity getting leveraged by African actors in the depiction of African elite status. I came across Love or something like that, a 2014 film by Shirley Frimpong-Manso, during the Nollywood Film Festival in Paris in June 2015 (Frimpong-Manso 2014). The film follows the lead character, Akwele, a young, successful surgeon played by Ghanaian television personality Joselyn Dumas, as she negotiates relationships with her husband and a recently resurfaced ex-boyfriend. Akwele's life in Accra is the picture of social exclusivity: she lives in a large, bright, home furnished in a minimalist style, with a swimming pool in the front yard; she frequents shops that sell Hermès and Prada, and where she and her best friend are served champagne as the best
friend spends 40,000 cedis—the equivalent of about EUR8,000—on a string of pearls, charged to her married boyfriend’s credit card.

Akwele is also voluptuously shaped. A side view of the young woman in the movie’s opening scene, in which she is wearing a form-fitting strapless dress, drew whispers throughout the theater where I attended the almost sold-out screening. The audience was overwhelmingly black, consisting of a mix of Francophone and Anglophone Africans, as well as French blacks. A few minutes later, that whisper grew to a collective gasp and spontaneous eruption of cheers and applause in response to a back shot of the character—fully clothed—as she and her new husband prepared to share an intimate moment in their bedroom after the wedding. Throughout the film, the camera angles seemed to purposely draw attention to Dumas’ curves, in apparent collusion with the audience, which responded with chuckling and (approbatory) commentary on the actress’s body throughout the movie.

In a scene about halfway through the film, Akwele rouses from a night spent on the floor with her artist ex-boyfriend and now-lover in his villa, draped in a piece of cloth. Accustomed to noticing wax print designs, I tried to make out the design on the cloth to see if it was a print I recognized—it was not. But then I noticed the “VLISCO GUARANTEED DUTCH” written in large block letters on the edge of the fabric, positioned right in the middle of Akwele’s chest. The fabric Akwele donned was not a Vlisco wax cloth, but, rather, one of the limited edition silk scarves the company briefly experimented with in its attempts to introduce new products beyond cotton wax cloth to market as part of its rebranding. The silk scarves, displaying designs inspired by some of Vlisco’s most well-known designs started at about EUR150.
Chapter 3. Advertising

The depiction of Vlisco's scarf in the film corresponds to the positioning Vlisco aspires to with its new brand identity (it is also notable that the character was wearing Vlisco's silk scarf and not a wax print cloth, though she wore the scarf in the manner of a wax cloth). But the actress had a large, curvaceous body—strikingly different from the bodies featured in Vlisco's depictions of global luxury—and in the film, this body was put forward as desirable. Moreover, like Vlisco's brand communications, the film aimed to depict not just Ghanaian luxury, but global luxury that happened to be playing out in a Ghanaian context. This is reflected in the character's uptake of Vlisco's new and expensive product, for instance. But in the film's rendering of high-end African globality, luxury was not incompatible with Dumas' body proportions. Like the Vlisco-produced ad with a model wearing a hijab, Frimpong-Manso's film pushes against the inevitability of a singular embodied representation of luxury.

Conclusions

This chapter has demonstrated how in its effort to put itself forward as a global luxury brand, Vlisco's advertising images push against certain standards about which bodies can represent global luxury (skin color) while reifying others (body size, age). The case highlights the double-edged sword of advertising and its representational practices, demonstrating how the bounds of the categories “African,” “global,” and “aspirational” were delineated through the aesthetic standards applied to the brand images. To put itself forward as a global luxury brand, Vlisco applies industry aesthetic standards to their advertising images. So doing, they expand the bounds of representational standards for luxury, because the advertisements feature black bodies and African print fabric, both of which have historically been antithetical to the representation of luxury. In that vein, the images create visibility for black and African bodies in this arena. But at the same time, the
images reinforce the invisibility of particular black bodies—larger, older—deemed to be too incompatible with the aesthetic of global luxury. As a result, I argue, the images play into the reification of which African bodies can be “global.”

Together, Chapters 2 and 3 have highlighted the ambiguities inherent in the remaking of Vlisco from the manufacturer of textiles for Africa into a global design and fashion brand. In the creating of designs and the making of ad images alike, this transition seems to hinge on a play between absence and presence, visibility and invisibility: the presence/visibility of black bodies and African signifiers in the design arena, and the picturing of luxury fashion, coupled with the invisibility/erasure of those forms—whether bodies or a design aesthetic—seen as too African and thus incompatible with the global. I suggest that the simultaneity of these seemingly contrary forms of being (presence/absence; visibility/invisibility) characterizes the conditions for African inclusion in the global in this moment. Chapter 4 turns to the question from an African location, Lomé. What version of Africa-in-the-world is made visible in this site through the practices of Dutch Wax cloth selling and buying?
Chapter 3. Advertising

*Vlisco campaign photoshoot (Source: Photograph by author)*
Back in Lomé after 20 years. Spotty, hazy memories. Here the house of my childhood best friend, there my primary school, here a huge placard on a thoroughfare announcing that what I remember as my little kindergarten is now a K-12 international school. A vague sense, buried deep down, of knowing where places are in relation to each other. New areas of the city whose names are totally foreign to me. The joy of understanding the Mina being spoken around me, my delight at the poetry of the language and its idioms, my shyness at speaking it. My constant self-consciousness about perpetually being too casually dressed, my realization that I am flubbing the norms of social propriety, neglecting to greet everyone upon entering a room, to make eye contact and exchange a greeting with strangers when walking down the street. My childhood home, the grass of the lawn gone, in its place now only the underlying red soil. The high school my older siblings attended. The statue that my cousin and I used to play under and where I touched a white person’s hair for the first time (she was a Swiss tourist and she gave us a Toblerone bar after we finished braiding her hair). The statue had looked so tall back then; today I tower over it. A new mosaic mural by the Colombe de la Paix monument. The hotel where I had taken swimming lessons, what had been Lomé’s tallest building, now shuttered. A beachfront hotel, paint peeling, colors faded.

I had expected everything to look smaller twenty years later. I hadn’t expected it to look so washed out.

The potholes and the couple of new good roads, built by “the Chinese.” Trying to remember which of the now multiple Chinese restaurants along the beach was the one my parents used to take us to once in a while. The German-owned restaurant on the edge of the Grand Marché whose cheeseburgers I had relished as a child, and which I now, a vegetarian, abstain from. My delight at being in Lomé during mango season, and indulging in five different varieties of mango in a single sitting. Gratefulness for the quiet reprieve and familiar trappings of a small restaurant opened near the Grand Marché by a friendly Togolese couple recently repatriated from France. Frustration at the mosquitoes and at the unreliable Internet connection in my cousin’s neighborhood that made checking email, let alone watching YouTube videos, the ultimate (futile) test of patience. Gratitude for the forced weaning off of compulsive Facebooking.

***

I was sitting in the conference room on the top floor of the VAC-Togo writing notes when I noticed activity from the corner of my eye out by the ocean. The conference room, located on the third floor of the VAC’s beachfront locales, overlooks the Atlantic Ocean. In the early 20th century this area of Lomé’s narrow coast (just 56km and a few kilometers from the Ghanaian border), had been the site of colonial administration buildings, such as the governor’s mansion and European trading houses like John Holt, CFAO (Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Occidentale), UAC (United Africa Company), and SGGG (Société Générale du Golfe de Guinée). The faded structures with peeling paint on their moldy, imposing walls are today shadows of their former selves, reminders of both Togo’s colonial past and Lomé’s former glory as a key transit point for trade throughout West Africa. The renovated VAC-Togo building stands in the original site of the UAC, its former parent company. What is today the company parking lot is the

26 Vlisco Africa Company-Togo, Vlisco’s subsidiary in Lomé.
court yard where for decades Togolese wholesalers (or rather, their workers) came to collect their cloth orders, shipped from the Netherlands.

Just outside the compound stands one of Vlisco’s extra-large billboards, high above the corrugated tin roofs of the motorcycle repair and other market shops that sell all manner of wares. The billboard stands high above the boulevard, taller than the lampposts and the palm trees that line the road and the beach, taller than all nearby buildings. On it, a chocolate-skinned Gulliver-sized woman clad in a long-sleeved and caped brown, pink, and yellow frock stands against a baby pink background. She is wearing pearl earrings and stands amidst flying pink rose petals, tall pink grass at her feet. Her hair is smoothed back, demurely held in place with a thin headband. She seems to be mid-stride, with one arm softly bent, her left wrist dangling delicately. Lips slightly parted into the suggestion of a smile, she gazes softly over her shoulder, towards the Benin border. ‘Le Vrai, l’Original’ reads the crisp serif print above her head.

A scaffold has been erected behind this billboard, and the activity that has caught my attention is that of three men climbing the scaffolding. In coordinated, sequenced motion, they are doing something to the poster on the side of the billboard that I can’t see from where I am sitting. They are tiny in the distance, each of them barely the height of the Gulliver-woman’s head. One of the men sits on a scaffolding rod, a pulley and ropes hanging at his side, while another stands directly behind him, leaning over him. This second man is holding on to the side of the billboard with one hand, the other reaching into the frame; his head has disappeared into it. A third man is making his way down the scaffolding. I’m of the superstitious ilk who believe that watching your favorite sports team play will cause them to lose, and so I try not to worry about these men as I watch them casually balance several stories above ground level on these flimsy-looking metal rods, with no safety harnesses in sight. They must do this all the time, I try to reassure myself; I keep watching.

They are moving quickly, and soon, their work on that side complete, they make their way down. The scaffolding disappears, and re-appears minutes later on the side of the billboard in my line of sight. One of the men makes his way to the top, alone this time, and starts to unbind the image from its frame. Panel by panel, the Gulliver-woman crumples upon herself, finally collapsing unceremoniously at the foot of the scaffolding in a heap of white and pink, pixelated tarp (by now, I have moved to the foot of the billboard myself). Soon, she will be recycled into backpacks as part of a recent partnership between Vlisco and a local social entrepreneur running environmental and educational projects for women and children in Kpalimé, a city inland from Lomé.

Now, able to see the scaffolding up close, I see that the metal rods rest on smooth cement blocks and that the rods fit into one another. Two, then three men, then four, than five men are on the top rungs on the scaffold, each holding onto the rolled up poster. They shout at each other occasionally, as they coordinate the stretching and affixing and progressive unrolling of the new poster. Standing against the backdrop of the new image, it looks like they are resting on the new Gulliver-woman’s fingertips, on the back of her arm, on the tip of her nose. Her body is checkered by the frame of the scaffolding, but you can still make out her form. Her face is angled towards the ocean, chin and nose jutting up. Her arms are bent at sharp right angles. One of her knees is raised and she looks like she’s mid-jump. Where her predecessor was all baby pinks

27 ‘The true/real, the original’
and yellows, she's a burst of bright, crisp yellows and blues and purples and oranges, red-lined geometric shapes, and dramatic white triangle-shaped earrings, yellow-painted finger and toenails, with stilettos draped in the yellow-dotted black print of her sleeves. The yellow-spotted and bright orange blue and yellow shapes behind her look like butterfly wings. They add to the impression that she is in mid-flight. She looks like a dragonfly. ‘LE VRAI, L’ORIGINAL’ reads in sans serif black block letters, staggered, slightly jagged, across her legs; on a third line, ‘wax hollandais,’ in a smaller font.

Fantasia, Vlisco’s new collection, has arrived.
Interlude

Vlisco Billboard installation, Lomé, Togo (Source: Photograph by author)
CHAPTER FOUR.
Selling (& Buying)

Vlisco’s flagship store stands out against the landscape of Lomé’s *Grand Marché*, from the outside in. Outside, the *Grand Marché*, the heart of economic activity in Lomé, bustles with thick crowds, sellers carrying wares on their heads, motorcycle taxis with passengers in the back seat, private cars, taxis, people pushing wheelbarrows full of merchandise — all jostling through the same narrow paths. People move fast, sellers sitting behind their stands call out *Tata chérie, tata chérie* [Aunty darling, aunty darling] for shoppers to come take a look at their wares, from mangoes to bras to fake gold jewelry to flip-flops, to the ubiquitous wax prints.

The fast pace of activity outside stands in sharp contrast to the lull inside Vlisco’s air-conditioned and spotless flagship store. The space is immaculate, with bright lights and dark wooden paneling. A light floral scent wafts through the air and music plays softly in the background at all times. Fabric displays are organized by color, headless mannequins are sumptuously draped in the latest collection’s designs. The walls are painted a striking dark grey, and the shelves behind the cash register are framed by a wall tiled with small square gold-colored ceramic tiles like those used for mosaics; they match the gold-colored racks from which fabric is draped in the store, and the gold-colored stand of the vintage lamps set out on some of the display tables. Columns punctuate the space throughout the store, dramatically linking the beige floor tiles and ceiling. Small spotlights and circular lights built into the ceiling project a bright white light onto the cloth displays.
The space is beautiful and flawless. And empty. Visitors are far and few between. The two
salesladies, wearing form-fitting dresses cut from a recent Voilà for you textile, Vlisco's
latest lower-priced textile venture, alternate between waiting behind the cash register,
straightening up the neatly folded or fanned out pieces of fabric, and looking out the
window at the market activity. The security guard, in a black suit too wide for his frame,
stands by the window, gazing out onto the street. He stands by a tall black book case, from
which he exchanges the occasional visitor's parcel for a numbered slip.

Outside, a new banner featuring well-known Vlisco designs has been installed on the top
floor of the VAC's building: Fleurs de mariage, in classical red gold and white colors, Si tu
sors je sors, in a recent collection's pastel-hued color palette, and newer, unnamed collection
designs, one featuring bow-adorned gift boxes, and the other a swirl of hot air balloons. In
between the image panels, a white panel onto which details from the classical designs—
flowers and birds—drift towards the brand's tagline, printed in capital letters: Le Vrai,
L'Original [The true, the original], Vlisco since 1846 and the brand's logo. Directly in front of
the Vlisco store's sleek window display, women sit on rocks or empty crates behind stacks
of batik-stamped textiles that look hand-printed. In fact they are machine-manufactured
imitations of local hand-printed batiks, made in China, like the copies of Dutch Wax cloth
sold in the dark and unadorned shops adjacent to Vlisco's flagship store.
Chapter 4. Selling (& Buying)

Storefront of Vlisco's flagship store in Lomé (Source: Photograph by author)
Introduction

At the outset of my dissertation research, the purpose of my fieldwork in Lomé had been to examine how Dutch Wax cloth prints designed in Helmond were received in this historically significant Dutch Wax cloth market. How sellers went about making them desirable to buyers and how buyers reworked them into new forms through their consumption work (Miller 1997; Foster 2005, 2007). I had intended to accomplish this by observing transactions in a range of selling sites, from Vlisco’s flagship store (FSS) in Lomé, to boutiques held by Vlisco partner retailers, to market stalls owned by the current generation of the legendary Nanas Benz. I would observe transactions, and try to recruit customers as informants that I would follow as they engaged with their newly purchased Dutch Wax cloth. Through these observations and conversations, my aim was to examine the ongoing “qualification” (Callon et al 2002) of Dutch Wax cloth once it arrived in the market: how Dutch Wax cloth sellers and users stabilized qualities of the cloth (and which qualities) to make it valuable for their respective ends. As my research in the Netherlands made visible changes in Vlisco’s business strategy, namely the company’s rebranding, my questions in Lomé came to be framed specifically in the context of the company’s attempts to remake itself (and Dutch Wax cloth) into a new kind of thing. How did Vlisco’s efforts to remake itself from a manufacturer of African textiles to a global luxury fashion and design brand play out with Dutch Wax cloth sellers and buyers/users in Lomé?

Communications of the company’s new brand identity were clearly visible in Lomé: the billboards along key thoroughfares in the city and the luxurious space of the company’s flagship store itself stood conspicuously in the Lomé landscape. But I was struck by how quiet Vlisco’s FSS in Lomé was during my first observations there in December 2013. For

28 See Part 1 below for more on the Nanas.
some time I wondered if the lack of activity was related to the company’s rebranding: perhaps it signaled the brand’s communications’ failure to connect with Togolese Dutch Wax cloth consumers? But this proposition did not seem to capture the reality of the phenomenon I was witnessing, as even though there was little activity in the store, visitors cut across the socio-economic spectrum (as opposed to only being of the élite or tourists), and the size of transactions also ranged widely: from customers who browsed and left without making a purchase, to others who deliberated extensively before finally purchasing one piece of cloth, to others who spent the equivalent of several hundreds of US dollars in a few minutes. I came to realize through observations in other Dutch Wax cloth selling sites and conversations with VAC-Togo employees and partner wholesale and retail sellers that the lack of activity I observed at the Vlisco FSS was not limited or specific to this site. Rather, it reflected challenges facing the Dutch Wax cloth trade in Lomé more broadly, the result of the city’s depressed economy, itself the outcome of a complicated confluence of circumstances unfolding over the last two and a half decades.

Understanding what plays out in the space of Vlisco’s FSS requires an explanation of not only the level of activity, but also of the type of activity that takes place in the store. In other words, it requires examining the transactions in the Vlisco FSS as an example of Dutch Wax cloth selling and buying more broadly, as well as an examination of the intricacies of the practices of selling and buying. To that end, Part 1 provides a historical discussion of the Dutch Wax cloth trade in Lomé, explaining how Lomé went from being the hub of the cloth’s trade throughout West and Central Africa from the 1950s to the early 1990s, to today slipping into irrelevance in the cloth’s regional trade. The section explains the role that Dutch Wax cloth sellers and selling played historically in the cloth’s appropriation into Togolese culture, and how the country’s current economic realities pose a challenge to this
process, as many Togolese are increasingly priced out of Dutch Wax cloth and Lomé loses its status as a hub for the trade. This historical backdrop sets up the context in which the Dutch Wax cloth trade unfolds today and in which Vlisco's new flagship store operates.

In Part 2, I turn to wax cloth selling-buying transactions, focusing primarily on the transactions unfolding in the space of Vlisco's FSS, but putting these in conversation with wax cloth (Dutch wax and copies) transactions as I observed them in other selling sites. I argue that through a kind of craft work that engages them in a reflexive, instrumented interaction with customers, sellers mediate the uptake of wax prints in Lomé. In the space of Vlisco's FSS specifically, sales staff mediate the uptake of not only Dutch Wax prints, but also of Vlisco's new brand identity, through this same craft work applied in a new setting.

Where Chapters 2 and 3 looked at the manufacturer's efforts to reimagine itself and its products for a new "global" market, this chapter examines the conditions of African participation in this particular instantiation of the global economy. The chapter demonstrates how Togolese actors have not only been implicated in, but central to the transnational Dutch Wax cloth trade since the trade's early days. They took up Dutch Wax cloth and integrated it into meaning-making practices that predated the cloth's introduction, namely, the performance of social status and distinction. I show that Togolese actors—buyers and sellers—are eager to keep participating in the Dutch Wax cloth economy and to continue to enlist it in both material and signifying practices. But a key impediment to this participation at the moment appears to be the economic realities facing majority of Togolese consumers; plummeting purchasing power is increasingly shutting them out of an economy to which they previously had greater access.
This analysis highlights the importance of financial access in conceptualizing the conditions of participation in the trappings of the new global economy. Where the “New Africa” discourse suggests greater African participation in the global economy and enjoyment of the goods it has to offer, this discussion suggests that exclusion, being shut out from participation, is just as much a part of the “New Africa” story. This might be seen as the “shadows” of not just the global (Ferguson 2006), but of the “New Africa,” as discourses about rising African consumer class stays silent on enduring or increasing disparities in African countries. This finding amplifies that of Chapters 2 and 3, where African participation and inclusion in the global also articulated itself in a simultaneous presence-absence/visibility-invisibility.

**Part 1. History of the Dutch Wax cloth trade in Lomé**

*Beginnings of the Togolese Dutch Wax cloth trade and the heyday of the Nana Benz*

I went all the way to Japan

They asked me, where are you from

I said I am a child of Togo

They said, ‘Togo is the country of the Nana Benz’

--“Nana Benz,” King Mensah

These lyrics by Togolese world music performer King Mensah capture the status that Togo’s Nana Benz enjoy in the country’s lore. There is great pride in Lomé in the story of these women with little formal education who made themselves into powerful business figures, gatekeepers of an extremely profitable trade that one almost always had to be born into. The women’s title encapsulates their story: “Nana” is a term of respect in Gen-Mina (the language of trade throughout Togo and in the Aneho region of southern Togo, from which
many of these women originated) for a grandmother or older woman of status. And “Benz” refers to the fact that these women, as a result of the fortunes they amassed through their trade bought the first Mercedes Benz in Togo, imported from Germany. The Nanas became mythological figures between the 1950s and 1980s, both admired—on account of the financial and political success they achieved, and reviled—for their exclusionary practices, which placed control over the highly profitable Dutch Wax cloth trade in Togo in the hands of a closed group of families.

In addition to its local textile production, which has been dated to as far back as 1000AD, the West Coast of Africa has been implicated in textile trade networks linking it India, Europe, and the Americas since the 17th century (Kriger 2006; 2009). Treated as both currency and dress, textiles were mainstays of West African economies. Dutch Wax cloth was introduced to the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) in the 1890s, as a result of trade relations between the Dutch and Ashanti kingdoms along the coast. The Gold Coast remained the center of the trade throughout the colonial era (Steiner 1985; Cordonnier 1988; Kroese 1976; Sylvanus 2016), with female labor that had previously ensured the trade of agricultural products becoming involved in the trade of these imported goods through European trading counters (Cordonnier 1982). The main European trading companies distributing the cloth were the UAC (United Africa Company), and, to a lesser extent, SGGG (Société Générale du Golfe de Guinée), SCOA (Société Commerciale d’Afrique de l’Ouest), and CFAO (Compagnie Française de l’Afrique Occidentale). Until the 1950s, Togolese traders travelled to Ghana to purchase textiles, often smuggling them back into Togo. The trade moved to Togo following the country’s independence in 1963, when Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah imposed high tariffs on imports in an effort to develop local industry, and adopted a socialist model, whereas Togo’s Olympio, who had been Director General of the United
Africa Company in Togo, embraced a capitalist model. Lomé’s port, with its deep harbor, could accommodate larger ships than its neighbors’, the city’s central location was advantageous for further distribution into West Africa, and the comparatively lower price of goods sold there due to the low import tariffs attracted customers from far afield (Cordonnier 1986; Toulabor 2013; Sylvanus 2016).

Anthropologist Nina Sylvanus has written extensively about Togo’s Nana Benz and their complex relationship to state power in Togo (2013a; 2016). Sylvanus explains how in 1968, the traders established themselves into an “oligopolistic market association [that was] de facto representative of the dictator, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, himself. Eyadéma provided the Nana-Benzes with import licenses, low turnover taxes, and the region’s lowest re-exportation taxes during a period when most of Togo’s neighbors faced political instability. In return, the Nana-Benzes expressed public support for Eyadéma and became involved in the women’s wing of the ruling Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais (RPT)” (Sylvanus 2013a, 69). This is when the traders became collectively known as the Nana Benz. The Togolese wax cloth trade boomed until the late 1980s, surpassing the phosphate industry in the mid-1970s, Togo’s primary industry at the time (Sylvanus 2013a). The Nanas consolidated their status through marriage alliances, often with men employed by European trading counters, and by training their daughters to participate in the trade as well. They were distributed across multiple tiers, depending on the scale of their enterprise, and how many designs they had exclusive rights to with the different European trading companies that imported wax cloth from the UK and the Netherlands. Through both their entrepreneurial acumen and political savvy, the traders achieved great financial success during this period.
DaCharlotte, today in her 60s, is a second-generation Nana, and third-generation cloth trader; her path to the Dutch Wax cloth trade follows the standard trajectory of many Nanas. Both her mother and grandmother sold fabric. She remembers that her grandmother used to travel to Pointe Noire in Gabon to buy goods, including fabric, that had arrived by boat from Europe. Her mother, after her, traded between Togo and Congo-Brazzaville, even as she worked as a teacher in Lomé. “The courage she had to do the two at the same time...” DaCharlotte mused, remembering the long hours her mother worked. “She followed her accounting closely, did the inventory every month, which wasn’t common practice at the time. That’s how she managed to not have any debts at the bank, like the rest of us.” DaCharlotte remembers that her mother started by selling tchivi that came from Japan, occasionally traveling to Ghana to purchase tchigan from Ghana, before finally being granted exclusive rights to three Dutch Wax designs by the UAC.

DaCharlotte’s mother remained a teacher until 1963, before turning completely to her cloth trade. “She created her own drawings, made improvements, changes on the tchivi designs. And every year, she travelled to Lourdes to pray to the Virgin Mary, and to Germany for mud treatments and for the hot springs. Every year. It’s the money from those designs that fed us in Europe.” DaCharlotte is referring to her siblings and her, who were all able to pursue their studies in France thanks to their mother’s lucrative cloth trade. DaCharlotte hadn’t wanted to join the trade herself, satisfied with the good living she was making as a nurse in France:

29 “Da” is a term of respect and endearment in Mina for adult women that might be translated as a cross between “mother,” “auntie,” and “madam.”

30 Tchivi and tchigan are words in Mina, translating as “small cost/value” and “big cost/value.” They are the generic names in Lomé for roller print wax cloth and Dutch Wax cloth respectively.
How Maman got me: I was saying that, me, I couldn’t stay here, go to the market, shouting all day [for customers]... But she gave me a shipping container’s full of designs like this. She told me, I give you two weeks to sell them. 1000 francs for 12 yards? I made 9 million francs in a few days. She told me: How much do you earn at the hospital? That’s how I stayed.

Business boomed, for many years. As she became established in her own business, DaCharlotte would purchase both Dutch Wax and tchivi versions of designs, the tchivi printed in Togo, at the now defunct Imprimerie Textile du Togo (ITT)/TogoTex in Datcha, about three hours’ drive from Lomé. At the business’s peak, she remembers, she would make up to 10 billion francs per year. Like other Nanas, DaCharlotte invested in her children’s education and in real estate in Lomé and abroad. “You sell 50,000 pieces of the tchivi, at 1000F, the [6-yard] piece, that’s 50 million. Eh! Those numbers, you don’t get them anymore! That’s finished!” DaCharlotte recalls, bitterly. “That Nana story, it’s over.”

The downturn: Lomé, from Dutch Wax cloth hub to standstill

The Nanas’ financial success ground to a sudden halt in the early 1990s, amidst political upheaval in Lomé in protest of Eyadéma’s dictatorial regime and the crushing weight of structural adjustment programs on the Togolese households. Many of the Nanas (and many Togolese besides them) moved to Cotonou in neighboring Benin during this period to weather the turmoil. By the time they returned to Lomé, circumstances had shifted significantly: for one, the Nanas had reportedly fallen out of favor with Eyadéma for supporting opposition forces during the protests (Eyadéma was fraudulently re-elected), and no longer enjoyed preferential terms. The economy had been liberalized, leading to an

31 In the 1950s/1960s, 6 yards of Dutch Wax cost 5,000F vs. 1,000F for the same length of tchivi. Today the ratio between Dutch Wax and roller print copies can be as much as 10:1.
influx of Chinese-manufactured products (Piot 2010; Labarthe 1999; Sylvanus 2013a), including copies of Dutch Wax cloth, and the organization of the Dutch Wax trade from the manufacturer’s end had also changed:

Togo’s Nana-Benzes found themselves in a profoundly restructured trade setting: Unilever’s United Africa Company, the chief distributor of wax prints in West Africa, had sold its trading houses to the Dutch wax-print manufacturer Vlisco. When Vlisco took over Unilever’s West African distribution units, it broke with Unilever’s policies, including those arrangements the Nana-Benzes had negotiated during the late colonial period. With the demise of Togo’s reputation of political and economic stability, and Cotonou’s rise as a new trade hub for textiles, Lomé’s trading elite thus entered a phase of reconfiguration that would permanently change the order of trade in Togo. (Sylvanus 2013a, 69-70)

To make matters worse, while economic activity in Lomé had stopped, Dutch Wax cloth traders in neighboring Cotonou had picked up theirs. And then the CFA franc, the currency used across francophone West Africa, including Togo, was devalued by 50% in 1994.

“Everything was turned upside down [after 1994],” DaCharlotte explains. “There was the devaluation, and then competition from the Chinese.” Indeed, the liberalization of the Togolese economy in the 1990s and the flooding of the market by Chinese-produced goods further compromised the Nana Benz’s status: “At the port, for every 12 shipping containers of Dutch Wax, there are 500 Chinese containers arriving. What we sell for 35,000, they sell for 6,000.” Though there is a significant differential in the quality of the Dutch Wax DaCharlotte and other Nanas sold and these new Chinese imports, given how income levels in Togo had plummeted, these new products proved appealing to consumers, despite their unstable (and unknown) value (see Sylvanus 2012).
Chapter 4. Selling (& Buying)

The political and economic troubles that Togo has endured since the early 1990s have had disastrous effects for the Dutch Wax cloth trade in Lomé. Between tumbling income levels, which have slashed demand, increased competition from lower priced Chinese-made wax cloth on the supply side, and the increasing price of Vlisco’s Dutch Wax prints, many Dutch Wax cloth traders have found themselves deeply indebted, unable to liquidate their stocks. On the day of the arrival of a new collection that I observed in July 2014 at the VAC-Togo, Vlisco’s subsidiary in Lomé, the activity was efficient, quiet, somewhat tense, as wholesalers’ workers came to collect their stocks. What I witnessed was a far cry from the scene longtime VAC employees described of Lomé’s heyday as the hub of Dutch Wax cloth trade in West and Central Africa. “You had to see what it was like here in the old days,” a 40-year veteran of the VAC-Togo told me, “when the bales [of Dutch Wax cloth] arrived. There was so much noise, so much activity, everybody wanted to get some. But today, there’s no market.”

As a result of this shifting landscape, DaCharlotte has left the Dutch Wax cloth trade. She still maintains investments in the VAC-Togo, though. “I used to get 2-3 million back per year on a 3 million investment, but now, I’m lucky if I get 800,000.” DaCharlotte now sells Chinese-made wax and other textiles, no Dutch Wax cloth. And still, business is slow.

*The Grand Marché fire*

The *Grand Marché* fire in January 2013 was the latest plague to befall Lomé’s Dutch Wax cloth traders. The market building, erected in 1968, had drawn traders in all manner of goods from throughout West and Central Africa for decades. French sociologist, Rita
Cordonnier, conducting a study of textile traders in Lomé’s Grand Marché in 1977, describes the space that housed the trade in the following terms:

The density inside the Grand Marché matches that of the streets leading to the structure. Its two floors, in fortified concrete, dark, with low ceilings, were built in 1967 to shelter traders who had previously sold fruits, vegetables, flours, textiles, hardware, and various other goods in a single location. (...) To the left of the entrance are the fruit, vegetable, and cereal sellers; to the right, fish sellers. The traders are grouped around a single product. They face each other and attract clients with their commentary. Combined with the darkness, the brouhaha adds to the hectic feel of the place. One must look high to find her way in the midst of buckets of rice and cassava, go past the lemons, pineapples, papayas, and green vegetables, arrive by the shrimp, and there, take the stairs to the floor above, where the fabrics are.

The space on this floor is both less odorous and less dense. The stalls consist of stone counters where fabrics folded in 16 are stacked one on top of the other, like small, multi-colored bricks. Others, expensive and high-quality cloths, are laid out with their “Real Dutch Wax” label visible. Behind the counter, helpers busy themselves, overseen by their bosses, who from their seat on a wooden bench, indicate with a long stick which cloth to show a client. The little apprentices, well dressed, and with quick movements, exhibit both seriousness and childlike charm. They unfold, refold, display, or put away the fabric all day. Often housed and fed by their employer, they arrive in the morning and return home at night. (...) As they work, the sellers keep an eye on things, talk business and other things with their colleagues, receive friends and clients, lay down on the benches or eat food purchased on the first floor.

The back and forth on the floor is only occasionally interrupted to let through a single file of [female] porters, carrying on their heads the cloth that a reseller has just purchased or that a client intends to re-export into her own boutique or her country. (Cordonnier 1982, 109-110, my translation)
The second floor of the *Grand Marché* had continued to house the stalls of wax cloth traders from the time of Cordonnier’s observations. Many of the traders not only stored their wares there, but also cash earnings, under the guard of watchmen. Though some of the traders from the *Association des Revendeuses de Tissu* [fabric resellers’ association] had suggested purchasing insurance to protect their stocks, many of their peers were reportedly wary of fully disclosing the value of their stocks, due to the taxes they would be obligated to pay on them. And so when a blaze engulfed the Grand Marché on 11 January, 2013, it wiped out fortunes. It took firefighters hours to put out the fire; among the reasons for such a lengthy process was that they ran out of water. Many in Lomé believe that the arson was politically motivated; some say it was punishment doled out on the Dutch Wax cloth traders, similar to the looting many had endured in 1992 (see Sylvanus 2016), for having shifted allegiances, and withdrawn their support from the ruling party (the second Gnassingbé regime headed by Eyadema’s son, Faure Gnassingbé) in favor of the opposition. DaCharlotte lost the equivalent of USD80,000 in the fire.

Like DaCharlotte, Madame Attigbo’s mother had also sold Dutch Wax cloth, but she specialized in “fends”: slightly defective—misprinted, or patched together 2-yard pieces of Dutch Wax cloth designs, sold at a significant discount from the regular prints. The price, which can be about thirty percent cheaper than the non-defective Dutch Wax prints, offer customers a cheaper alternative that is of more reliable quality than copies. Unlike DaCharlotte, who entered the trade as an adult, Mme Attigbo started helping her mother in her cloth business when she was in the 4th grade, aged 9-10 years old.

It became a habit. When Maman would receive a bale, everyone helped out with the fends; boys and girls alike. She had it in her blood. Maman, she wouldn’t hit us for anything else, but for that, ah, she would hit. In the morning, when you get up,
everyone does their chores, then you had to do a bit of sewing [to assemble the pieces into the standard 6-yard length]. You go to school, you come back, you sew. Everyday. There were at least 15 of us at home. All her cousins, nieces, everyone. If you don’t do it, you’ll get the stick. She would say, “There is food in the pot for you to eat, but this, you have to do it.” But today, we’re grateful, because it’s thanks to her that I am here today. If she had said, you, you have to go to school [complete advanced studies], I wouldn’t be here today.

Mme Attigbo’s mother was a full-time wax cloth trader, her husband a government worker. “She did nothing but pagne. That’s how she sent us to France [to study]. Rent, electricity, everything. There were three of us.” Mme Attigbo’s mother kept her stall until she passed away in 2008. “In her last days, Maman would always talk to me, she would say, ‘No matter what, do not abandon my stand in the market.’ When you have it in your blood, that’s how it goes.”

Mme Attigbo herself started selling at the Grand Marché since 1987. “Customers used to come from Congo, Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, even Angola to buy,” Mme Attigbo remembers. “Our mothers would make a profit of 5,000 to 10,000F on 6 yards bought from the UAC. Today, we barely make 1,000 to 2,000F. Back in the day, there was tchivi, but you did not always have the same drawings in tchivi as for tchigan. “And someone who is employed, who earns a salary, would not want to be seen wearing tchivi. But today... ”

Mme Attigbo lost 22 million francs (USD 44,000) in the fire; she received 700,000 francs (USD1,400) in compensation from the state. She recalled how the gendarmes could not believe the amounts she and her fellow traders reported when they filed their loss claims,
poignantly speaking to the gap between the socio-economic status of the Nanas occupy and that of government workers like the gendarmes:

For some, it was, how can a woman have so much money? For others, it was “Oh these women from the south...” They notified me one day that they had pulled a [6-yard] piece from the rubble of my stand. I went to pick it up at the police station. The police officer asked me: “This here, how much can it cost?” I told him, 30,000F. He jumped! He said “30,000F! That’s my monthly salary! I just looked at him, I didn’t say anything. Someone like that, how do you want him to understand when you tell him you’ve lost millions?

Some traders got sick over the fire, Mme Attigbo observes. They just haven’t been the same since; they had a breakdown. “It was an entire lifetime’s worth of work, and entire fortunes that went up in smoke that night. It’s unthinkable, you can’t imagine what it’s like.” It took her some time, and now she just doesn’t like thinking about it, she just has to keep going, she says. After the fire, it took her some time before she could return to trading. She had planned to go visit her daughter and grandchildren in the US and delegate care of the store to her workers, but now she has to stay close to home to look after the business. She reopened a small store in a building on the periphery of the now fenced-off rubble of the Grand Marché, and keeps a stall in the deserted “new market.” Business is very quiet in both places, “People don’t come to Lomé anymore, they just go to Cotonou,” Mme Attigbo observes.

---

32 Both the wax cloth trade and the Nana Benz’s oligopoly and the political apparatus in Lomé are undergirded by ethnic tensions between “the North” (where Gnassingbe Eyadema hailed from) and “the South” (where majority of the traders came from). See Piot (1999, 2010) and Labarthe (1999) for how these tensions were the product of colonial machinations.
Madame Attigbo takes me to the site of the new market, where the city has set up market traders since the *Grand Marché* was set ablaze. The new site is a brisk 10-minute walk from the Grand Marché and Mme Attigbo is adept at dodging the *zemidjan* [motorcycle taxis] and weaving through the crowd. As we make our way through the market, sellers call out to her: "Maman, bonjour." She responds with a smile and wave, at times a "Bonjour na-mi lo [Bonjour to you]." We come across an ambulant trader with fabric stacked high on her head and stop for brief greetings. As we part ways, Mme Attigbo wishes her a good selling day: "A-ssanu." May you sell.

The alleys between the neatly aligned rows of refurbished shipping containers that make up the site of the new market are completely deserted. As we walk into the one where Mme Attigbo’s stand is located, other women in the row chide her gently for having disappeared for a little while. Mme Attigbo acquiesces: "Yes, I have disappeared from you a little bit, I was just on the other side." She means her other shop. "But I’m coming back."

Almost half of the stalls in Mme Attigbo’s alley are closed. Three women sit outside their containers, fanning themselves, chatting. There are no customers, no electricity, no airflow, even though we are less than 5 minutes from the ocean. Mme Attigbo and I sit on stools in front of her container, also fanning ourselves. A few ambulant sellers, wares on their heads or draped over an arm walk through occasionally. My goal in visiting Mme Attigbo’s market stand had been to observe the selling of Dutch Wax cloth; but there is no selling happening.

A fellow trader stops by for a chat: "Assimé-a fa [the market is cold] these days."

The trader across the way is fanning herself, her feet elevated on a small bench: "Assimé* begna-ya, e difu akpa* [this market story, it’s too difficult]. At least, if you come and see each
other, that's how you'll feel a bit better. But otherwise... Especially this time of year—
[normally] you would sell and sell and sell... Now..." The women’s exchanges are
punctuated by long silences. When one speaks, the others shake their heads or cluck in
shared desolation, turn their palms upward, gesturing helplessness.

“Looking at the market now will make you sad,” Mme Attigbo’s visitor remarks. “You’ll
think, oh, am I going to come sit here at the market by myself? Is this a market? It’s like
sitting in front of your house to sell things.”

“At least if you’re sitting in front of your house, someone will come buy some okrah or
something else from you,” Mme Attigbo adds. “And how can you put people in shipping
containers? At the old market, at least you had room, you could lie down... You could relax a
little, even if you’re not selling much. But here, you go inside, and you come out straight
away. You can’t. It’s too hot.”

As she walks me through the new market, Mme Attigbo greets those she encounters, asking
them how they are doing. An older trader with short, completely white hair who only sells
Dutch Wax cloth assures her: “It will go. Things will work out.” Mme Attigbo listens, nods:
“Fine, things will go.” A few stalls over, when another trader laments, “We are struggling,” it
is Mme Attigbo’s turn to offer comfort. “We’ll be OK,” she says quietly.

***

The Nanas (or at least their memory) remains a point of pride in Lomé today, even as the
women’s lot has taken a visible turn for the worst over the past two decades. During the
course of my research in Lomé, I met a woman, herself the granddaughter of a Nana, who
was collecting life stories about the core generation of Nana Benz, those who had founded
the textile traders trade group, for a coffeetable book project. Her aim, she explained, was to
put real names, faces, and life stories behind what has become a generic label, “The Nanas Benz.” For her this project was not only a tribute to her grandmother and the other women around whose market stalls she grew up, but also a way to preserve the memory of an era of prosperity that many young Togolese today know all too little about.

With this discussion of the historical role of sellers in the uptake of Dutch Wax cloth on the Togolese market and of the current conditions of the market, I now turn to the practices of selling and buying Dutch Wax cloth at the time of my research in Lomé. The How to buy wax cloth transition that follows is an effort to concisely convey the many strands of Dutch Wax cloth selling-buying in order to provide the context that I deemed necessary for understanding what unfolds at the Vlisco FSS. The narrative is based on observations and interviews I conducted in six selling spaces in Lomé, as well as my own experiences as a Dutch Wax cloth buyer in Lomé. Readers might recognize echoes of dialogues or some of the informants I discuss throughout the chapter. The piece is an experimental means of conveying ethnographic data, where creative writing offers an effective medium for communicating complexity and multi-layered nature of the story.
How to buy wax cloth

How to buy wax cloth. Well, first, you have to know how much you are willing (or able) to spend. That will determine where you go for your fabric—whether you’re going to look for real Dutch wax, or instead for some Hitarget or Phoenix, or perhaps something cheaper still. Then you have to make plans with the person you’ll be shopping with, because buying wax cloth is a group activity, always. Maybe the two of you will be sharing the cloth, but maybe you won’t. You go with someone else because they help you choose, because you know how overwhelming things get once you get into these shops. You go in thinking you know what you might like, but soon, it’s a whirl of patterns and colors, and things you would have never considered before start to look strangely appealing. And you start asking the shopkeeper to pull out this print and that print, and he or she is getting annoyed with you because somehow you always like the prints that are buried deep in the stack, and it’s heavy to keep lifting all these pieces of fabric! So when you point to the print you like with that yardstick with the dulled edges that they keep on the counter, the shopkeeper first looks at the pieces hanging on the wall to make sure there’s not a more easily accessible piece of it on hand...

But I digress. As I was saying, to get ready to buy wax cloth, you need to make plans with whomever will be going with you because you’re going to need someone else’s opinion as you try to choose among the many, many possibilities. You’ll want them all! If only money were not an issue. But rest assured, even if you, for whatever reason, need to go on your own, the shopkeepers will be plenty capable of guiding you towards the perfect print for you.

You see, when you walk in, they’ll ask you (after you’ve exchanged greetings, of course): What are you buying it for? Well, that’s assuming you didn’t start out by simply asking, ‘What do you have that’s new?’ That’s also a perfectly acceptable way to go about it. If that’s how you start, then they’ll point towards the newest waxes and superwaxes. As you look over the possibilities, they might ask you what you’re looking for. Hollande or Super? Now that’s going to depend on the size of your pocketbook, isn’t it? Because Hollandes are around 37,000, whereas Supers go for around 50. But maybe you’re a purist and you never got into Supers—you like the gbedegbe ba-voh, the cloth from way back when. Yes, even as you’re looking over the selection of new prints, you might catch an old print out the corner of your eye that takes you back to your grandmother or your mother’s auntie—you know, the one with the wide gap between her two front teeth who never wore the same print twice—ewona glo, de! How she liked to show off! – or it might take you back to some moment of your childhood. Oh, they’re still making this print? This is the cloth from way back when! Your trusted shopkeeper will then explain to you that yes, they are making it again, but in new colors. If she’s particularly slick, she might have an example on hand to show you, or point to it in the glass case under the counter. Hmm, you came in wanting something new, but all of a sudden, something old, with a little bit of atchan, a little fanciness, put into it could do the trick. After all, this isn’t your grandmother’s Hollande anymore. It’s no longer those dark browns and greens and maroons and indigos, those funeral colors. This is bright pink! Yellow! Green! Purple! This, you can do.

Wasn’t I supposed to be telling you about how to buy wax cloth? Where was I again? Oh yes, you walk into the store (that’s assuming you decide to go to a store, of course. Because you know, you could also go to the market. Well...that depends. If you want Dutch wax, you can’t go

Approximately USD70 and USD100 respectively.
to the market anymore. Not since it burned down, taking with it the women’s stocks of fabric. And their cash. Yes, can you believe they used to keep it in their market stalls, in tin boxes guarded by the young men who looked over their stalls at night? And, some say, by gri-gri also, but the women don’t like it when you say that about them. But they used to keep their money there, you see. When their daughters returned from yovode, they tried to tell them, ‘Mother, open a bank account. Don’t keep the money here.’ Or some of the younger sellers tried to organize them, ‘Let’s regularize our situation,’ they said, ‘let’s get everything on the books, we’ll have to pay taxes, but we’ll be stronger and more protected that way.’ But the elders would have none of it: the Nanas had their way of doing things, and it’s not these little kids who have come back from Europe who will come teach us how to do this thing they have done our whole lives. Don’t they know, nyemunyi devide be ha-o-o? So they kept their money in the stalls, among the fabric stacks. And on that fateful night in 2013, when the Grand Marché de Lomé caught fire --- was set on fire --- their fabric, and their money, went up in smoke. Des millions de CFA.

They say some women have not been right since, never recovered. A lifetime of work, their mothers’ legacies, their fortunes --- not only the cash, but the cloth they would have sold --- all of it, up in smoke. L’État promised to compensate them. They went to the commissariat, they said, to make their claims. When the gendarmes asked, ‘So how much money did you lose?’ they did not believe the women when they counted in millions. ‘This little fabric business, how can it get you so much money? The women rolled their eyes: ‘Comment celui-là, qui gagne à peine 30,000F par mois, comment lui il peut comprendre?’ They had no idea, these people, who they were dealing with. Needless to say l’État’s promised compensation proved paltry next to what the women lost. Some of them haven’t been right since, I tell you. But some came back to the business. What else can I do? they said.)

That was a long tangent. But you see why it’s important. You can’t go to the Grand Marché for your Hollande anymore, because there is no longer a Grand Marché per se. Just a fenced-off vacant lot with rubble inside, the activity that once filled it, spilled out around it, despite city ordinances, overtaking even more than usual the surrounding streets and alleys. They’ve set up a new, temporary market, did you know? Well, ‘market’ might be overstating it. Really, it’s a deserted parking lot for refurbished shipping containers. The women have been set up in these tiny windowless boxes—they’ve tried to do them up a bit, you know, tried to set up a tiny counter and arrange the cloth as they would in a stall, maybe put a picture frame or a calendar up. But no one’s falling for it. Yes, no one comes to this new market. It’s not far from the old one, maybe just 10 or 15 minutes walking if you have a long stride and you’re really good at dodging the zemidjan and weaving through the crowds. But it’s outside of the Grand Marché, and sellers have lost touch with their regular customers, you see? How to tell them where they can find them now? Those they had phone numbers for, they tried calling, coordinating with them. They would even sometimes send workers to go meet them somewhere to bring them to the new location so they would know the way. But many of those women come from outside Lomé, from Cotonou or Abidjan, and they have other business around the Grand Marché. They don’t have time to go wandering around the city trying to find the new shop! So they just make

---

34 Charms
35 ‘I am not some kid’s age mate’—name of a famous wax print design.
36 ‘How can that one, who barely makes 30,000F a month, understand?’
37 Motorcycle taxis
other arrangements. And so the Hollande sellers wile the hours away on benches outside their little boxes in the new market (it’s too hot to stay inside, you see, and the authorities haven’t yet brought electricity to the market, so you can’t even plug in a fan), sitting, stretching, waiting. Every so often, they might take a little walk around the new ‘market,’ to visit friends. ‘Assimé eya?’ Is this a market, one asks the other. Even when you sell l’agbodji, in front of your house, at least you can sell different things, maybe tomatoes, maybe ice, maybe okrah. At least you can get something that way. And you see people. But here... is this a market?

This certainly has taken a depressing turn. To think I was just trying to tell you how to buy wax cloth! OK, let’s get back to it. Let’s say you want Hollande and you’ve decided to go to one of the boutiques that only sells Hollande and that is still standing because it was never in the market (because these women were always retailers or semi-wholesalers, as opposed to the sellers in the market, who were mostly wholesalers). Let’s say you go to this boutique and you walk in and you greet the shopkeeper and you ask what’s new and she shows you and you also see something old that both reminds you of your childhood and looks...refreshed in some kind of way. Now you have many possibilities in front of you, don’t you? How will you decide? Because as we’ve established already, money is, unfortunately, an issue. It’s not like you’re the President’s mother who can just send a driver to a boutique whenever a new collection is released to pick up a pre-assembled assortment of the latest designs! No, alas, you’re not. You’ve got to make choices. And this is why I really hope you came with someone. But if not, the shopkeeper is there for you. What are you buying it for? Etcho-a? A funeral? Or just to du-azan vide, to celebrate a bit? Oh, it’s for a gift? Is it for a man or a woman? Is it for ameganho-a, a grown person (well, that’s sort of a figure of speech, isn’t it? We know that by grown person, she really means an old person, not a so-called ‘young adult,’ but a real, full-grown mother of adults kind of grown person)? What skin color is that person? (Isn’t it funny how everyone is light-skinned these days? Everybody! Remember when that was more the exception than the rule? But I guess it’s as desirable as ever, to look like a métisse38.)

Anyhow, so you’ve told the shopkeeper what skin color the person you’re buying this fabric for is. Or, if you’re buying it for you, by now, you’ve draped the fabric on your shoulder (did you tell the shopkeeper you were buying for a funeral? That’s not unusual. She’ll pull out the fion-fion colors, the burned colors. Don’t be confused if there are some dark indigo-heavy prints alongside yellow-dominant ones; the ones who know, know what to see. They know that these particular versions of indigo and yellow share the right tone that a somber occasion like a funeral calls for). Or perhaps the shopkeeper has draped two of the options you’re considering on her shoulders, one on each side? She stands behind the counter and you take a step back, taking it all in. What would it look like, crafted into dress? Do you already know what you want to make of it, perhaps? Maybe you’re a decisive type, maybe you know what you want in life. And so when you see it draped like that, it doesn’t take you long to decide. Or maybe it’s just that this one design on the right that you thought looked so pretty folded up turns out to have some crazy animal-looking thing in the middle of it. Brrr, no thank you, you can put that one away, quickly! But maybe you just don’t know (I told you, you should have brought someone with you). And so you take the fabrics, you drape them on your shoulders. You’re in the mirror, you turn a little to the left to imagine just this one, crafted into...something. And then to the right, to imagine that one. You might stand there for a good while, doing this little dance, while

38 Mixed-race.
the shopkeeper looks on, bored. In fact, she might not be looking on at all, she might be 
watching the TV that’s sitting on top of a shelf in the corner of the room.

After some time, you sense that you’re getting close to a decision, and so you ask, ‘How much 
are you doing them for?’ It’s time to start negotiating the price.

Now: you know there isn’t that much room for negotiating Hollande’s price. The price is more or 
less set, because, think about it: so many sellers selling the same fabric in this same small Lomé. 
If one dared price it significantly lower than the others, the whole system would collapse! In 
fact, you know what? Vlisco at some point started having ‘Sales,’ where they sold the cloth in 
their shop at a reduced price. The other sellers --- and some customers, even --- were up in 
arms! Imagine that, customers complaining about reduced prices! What will our fabric become? 
Tchigan is supposed to be a valeur sûre, they said. If you start reducing the price, our cloth will 
become worthless!

So yes, there’s not much room for negotiating. But you’ve got to do it anyway, that’s the way it’s 
done. But the shopkeepers are no fools! They know that too! That’s why the first price they 
quote you is always 2 or 3,000F higher than what they actually intend to sell it to you for. And 
that price is probably a good 5,000 higher than what they paid for the fabric themselves. So 
when they quote you a price, whatever it is, you have to act affected: Oh, 40,000 for this thing 
that I just bought at this other place for just 25,000? 25,000! The shopkeeper will laugh. Yes, 
25,000. And the lady had traveled to Holland to bring it back herself! Nobody else in Lomé has 
that fabric! The shopkeeper is still laughing. She traveled all the way to Holland and brought it 
back here, and she’s selling for 25,000? Then it’s not Hollande, she says. You know you’ve 
overstepped the line because now she’s starting to roll the fabric back up. 25,000 is far too low, 
clearly you’re not really looking for Hollande, she’s thinking to herself. Because everyone knows 
that you don’t pay less than 37,000 (OK maybe 35,000 if you’re really lucky—or the seller is 
really desperate) for one Hollande.

Egnon, egnon, you say as she folds. It’s fine. Won’t you give it to me for 35,000? 37,000, she 
says, that’s the lowest she can go. You stay quiet for a moment (you can’t come across as too 
eager), looking at the fabric. She’s also looking away, maybe back at the TV or at the counter, or 
answering another visitor’s questions, your rolled up fabric loosely held in one hand. Then 
finally, slowly, you reach into your purse (or maybe the corner of your pagne, if you’re so clad 
and you’re an old lady --- you know how old ladies sometimes like to roll their cash into tight 
little balls they tie into the corners of their wrappers. Are you an old lady? We didn’t establish 
that at the outset. Let’s assume you’re not). You count out the money in your bag first, then you 
hand it to the shopkeeper. Next time you must give me a good price, you hear? She counts out 
the money again, in plain view. She acquiesces, ahan, I have heard. She rolls up the fabric for 
you, slips it into a black plastic bag, hands it to you. Egnon, mia-dogo, you say as you gather 
yourself to leave. May we meet again.

Congratulations, you have successfully purchased Dutch Wax cloth.

---

39 Local name for wax cloth; literally means ‘high price/value’ in Mina.
40 French word, derived from the Portuguese paño, for wax print cloth.
But wait --- on the way out, something pretty catches your eye. Your fingers linger on it as you trace the design on the cloth’s glossy surface. How much do you do this one for, you shoot back at the shopkeeper, all the while still looking at and touching the fabric. That one is 45,000, she responds casually. You keep looking, for a moment, then slowly pull away... Maybe next time.
Part 2. The craft of Dutch Wax cloth selling

Sellers’ practice mediates the uptake of Dutch Wax cloth by Togolese consumers. The work of Dutch Wax cloth sellers is a form of qualification (Callon et al 2002), a process through which a product’s qualities are momentarily stabilized along its path between production and consumption to suit the requirements of each category of actor. This is a contingent, reflexive process, where the seller must continually adapt to the customer and to the product at hand. Seen from that perspective, selling can be understood as a form of craftwork. A sale is the outcome of feedback loops between seller, buyer, and the toolkit of salesmanship, a process thoroughly mediated by the body. If the final outcome of this craft practice is a successful sale, then the seller’s toolkit includes her mastery of codes of Dutch Wax cloth use, her ability to enchant (through humor, flirtation, bargaining skills), as well as the cloth’s material and visual attributes, and the material she “works” is the buyer.

Using craft as a conceptual frame for sellers’ practice makes visible the fundamentally interactive nature of this practice, which involves the seller, the cloth, skills deployed to enchant customers, and the customer herself, who is being acted upon. It also highlights the importance of sensory experience in the selling of Dutch Wax cloth. The interaction between sellers and customers can be understood as a “tasting together” (Hennion 2007), where “taste [is] a pragmatic activity involving amateurs turned towards their object in a perplexed mode. By ‘perplexed’ we mean them being on the lookout for what it does to them, attentive to traces of what it does to others; a sharing out among the direct sensations to be experienced (or whose experience is being sought), and the indirect relays that permit one to change one’s own judgement a bit, while relying in part on the advice of others” (104). I argue in this section that it is through this “tasting together” by sellers and buyers that Dutch Wax cloth continues to be appropriated by Togolese users.
**Lamentations: Wax cloth selling in the age of economic crisis**

DaCharlotte’s store sits on a tightly packed street on the periphery of Lomé’s *Grand Marché*. Outside, motorcycle taxis carrying female traders and shoppers holding up the wares on their head with a single hand ride past. Female traders on foot deftly weave through the crowd, calling out the goods they have on offer. They carry massive aluminum platters on their heads, loaded with shoes wrapped in plastic, coconuts, folded table cloths, toilet paper stacks, 2-yard pieces of wax cloth wrapped in clear plastic, water in plastic bags. Slender male hawkers take long, rapid strides through the crowd, the shopping bags they are selling in hand. Female shoppers, holding their purses firmly, jostle with the rest of the crowd.

The mood in DaCharlotte’s market shop is heavy. The store is neat but the room feels desolate, with open, empty space and little activity. Workers are milling about, alternating between standing, leaning against a wall, and standing in the back, sometimes pulling out a low stool to crouch on. Thick, folded lengths of fabric wrapped in plastic are stacked against the wall by the entrance, and on the wall at the back of the room; mostly the same designs are displayed on the two racks: wax imitations (roller prints), black funeral cloth, kente imitation roller prints, red cotton cloth, white cotton cloth, and seersucker fabric, for the most part in wholesale lengths, 12 yards.

Even in the midst of its economic crisis, Lomé remains a hub for traders throughout West Africa. DaCharlotte explains that it is women from Ghana who come buy black cloth for funerals—they come here because the cloth remains cheaper in Togo due to the elevated
Chapter 4. Selling (& Buying)

import taxes in Ghana\textsuperscript{41}. The red cotton cloth is commonly used in Côte d'Ivoire for dowries, DaCharlotte continues, pointing to that cloth on the rack. It used to be worn by “our grandmothers here in Togo as well,” as menstrual rags. Now in Côte d’Ivoire, the cloth is customarily included as part of a woman’s dowry, for her grandmother and aunts. Demand is high for these cloths and DaCharlotte has samples she’s ready to order from China, she says, if only she had the USD50,000 required to place the order. She is confident she could sell off those stocks within a couple of weeks, but the bank will not give her any credit. Ideally, she would also like to sell Dutch Wax in her store, “that way, you have something for everyone,” she says. But she doesn’t have the money required for purchasing the stocks upfront.

Customers trickle into DaCharlotte’s store. Two young women arrive. They are looking for fabric to share.

“For a funeral?” DaCharlotte inquires.

“No, just to celebrate a bit” [\textit{du-azan vide}].

The women cannot seem to agree on a fabric they both like. One girl explains, annoyed, that they have been walking around the market and haven’t been able to agree on anything. Pointing to the designs on the rack at the front of the store, DaCharlotte comments on different prints: “That’s a nice design.” But the women don’t like that one. “This one is a grown person’s cloth [\textit{ameganhobavoh}].” They remain indifferent. About another, “This is a man’s cloth, it’s called “\textit{Le sperme.”} The women remain impassive as DaCharlotte suggests yet another: “This one, you’ll find its Superwax [Dutch Wax, Vlisco-made] on the market. You’ll find it for 35,000F. But this one is even brighter than the Super.” Here DaCharlotte operates a deft reversal of the original-copy dynamic, positing the copy as the original of

\textsuperscript{41} Lomé’s Grand Marché is less than a 15-minute motorcycle taxi ride from the border with Ghana.
which another version exists. She appropriates and manipulates the Vlisco brand to her own ends, creating opportunities to derive value from the brand, even as she subverts it (see Luvaas 2013 and Nakassis 2013).

But the customers are stalling. They are both sitting on the plastic garden chairs near the entrance, looking up at the fabric on display and deliberating half-heartedly. The shopkeepers wait quietly to the side; DaCharlottte has returned to her office in the back of the store. Finally, the women stand up—they still can’t agree on a design they both like—and they leave the store. I find myself wondering if they had ever really intended on buying fabric, or instead had wandered into the store to enjoy the respite the chairs offered from the bustle and heat of the market outside.

In the transaction, DaCharlotte inquired about the intended use of the cloth. She made suggestions, advancing different aspects of the cloth: “this is a nice design,” “grown person’s cloth,” “man’s cloth,” “it has a name,” “there’s a Vlisco version of it.” Any of these attributes could have been qualities that the women were seeking out in their purchase and DaCharlotte was trying to figure out what would work, which of these qualities could sway the customers. But none of them took, and no sale happened. If we take the customers at their word, there was no sale because they did not see anything that they both liked—the cloth did not speak to them. There was no enchantment produced in the transaction and the qualities that DaCharlotte put forward could not bridge that gap. Indeed, the seller’s craft is effective only within the bounds of the cloth’s own capacity for enchantment; if the cloth does not speak to the prospective buyer, there is not much that the seller can do to draw the customer in. This observation takes us back to the historical importance of “collaborative
design" between traders and designers in the Dutch Wax trade (Sylvanus 2016) in recognition of customers' discriminating tastes.

Some time later, a small group of women come into DaCharlotte's store. They are looking for colors "that one would recommend for women." Again, DaCharlotte references the Vlisco Superwax design in extolling the qualities of one of the prints she has on display. "These are nice for matching," she says of another.

"How much?"

"12,000," DaCharlotte responds. "But I'll reduce it a bit for you."

The price is still too high for them.

"Cloth of how much you were looking for?"

"10,000"

"Oh, that's tchivi of tchivi—the copies of copies, that's what we're calling it!" DaCharlotte exclaims, starting to turn away from the women.

But she waits. The women, too, wait—for a moment. But there is no room for negotiation. They walk out soon thereafter. The fact that DaCharlotte was unwilling to reduce the price to 10,000F or even 11,000F gives a measure of how small her margin of profit is on the 12 yard length of cloth (at most 2000F), a far cry from the margins she described from her early days in the trade.

In this transaction, the qualities that DaCharlotte put forward to the customers were effective, but the price was the breaking point in the transaction; though she tried to adjust, DaCharlotte was unable to accommodate her customers' bottom line. Here then is another constraint within which sellers' practice happens: the realities of customers' purchasing

42 About USD24, for 12 yards.
power. And as we will see with another trader below, the extent to which the seller is able to adjust to this constraint has a great deal to do with her own financial security. In both of these transactions, DaCharlotte’s practice as a seller comes across as a “workmanship of uncertainty” (Pye 1968); she tries different tricks to enchant her customers, not knowing which will work for each situation, and adjusting as she obtains information back from the customer about her preferences and constraints.

I sit by the door, writing notes. DaCharlotte offers to take me to a retail boutique across the street that carries both stocks of Dutch Wax cloth and Chinese-made copies. The store belongs to one of her friends. After the customary greetings, the women share news of the market, commiserating about how difficult business is. “It used to be that by this time [in the day], you’d sold so much, you were tired.” DaCharlotte’s friend laments. “But now, if you’ve sold 3 or 6 pieces, you’ve sold a lot. Most days, at most you’ll sell 4, sometimes nothing.” Their conversation is punctuated by silences.

“Avin kpo mu lefan [all I’m doing now is crying], I don’t sleep at night,” the woman continues. “Togo, we have gotten into real trouble here. Will [business] come back? Will it come back?” Silence. The woman’s eyes fill with tears. It’s not her own store, the real owner doesn’t come anymore. “We just have to leave it to God.”

Back in DaCharlotte’s store, inspectors from the social security office have just stopped by, to register employees, and DaCharlotte is concerned. “My business here, things are not going well, I’m almost bankrupt. Once we do this [register workers], if the business closes down, what will I do? Abroad,” she complains, “if you approach a bank, they will ask you for a business plan, ask you how you are planning to get out of the situation. But here, there isn’t any of that. You put down a warranty when you make a loan, and if you can’t pay the
loan, they just seize the warranty. That bank already took one of my houses.” DaCharlotte is blunt: “One thing is sure, I regret coming back. If it wasn’t that Maman had convinced me to come back...” And emphatically, turning to me, she adds: “No matter what you do, don’t even think about coming back au pays [home, to the homeland]. Don’t even let that thought cross your mind.”

We are now back at the front of the store. Outside, a pregnant woman is cutting a coconut open for a customer who just purchased some plain twill fabric in DaCharlotte’s store. Once the seller is done, she arranges the coconuts in the metal basin, places her padding—a tightly coiled rag—on her head, and asks a young man walking past to help her lift it. He bends, smiling; she bends across from him, and together, they hoist the basin up on her head. The coconut seller fastens her pagne under her armpits, and walks away, a single hand on her load. As she watches the scene unfold, DaCharlotte quietly remarks to me on how thin the woman is. “Oh, and she’s pregnant, too. Eh! Ça c’est la souffrance de l’afrique. La misère. [That is the African woman’s suffering. Misery.]”

**Enduring success in the Dutch Wax cloth trade**

But if financial success is no longer guaranteed for Dutch Wax cloth traders like DaCharlotte and Mme Attigbo, and the trade has become riskier financially than it was for previous generations, some traders are thriving even in the current climate. Among them is Mme Yassa. Mme Yassa came to the trade in the 1990s, at a time when the state put pressure on the Dutch Wax cloth traders’ union to open up to women from the north of the country (see Sylvanus 2016). From one of the smallest traders at the time, Mme Yassa has now become one of the highest grossers in the trade. Indeed her trade exhibits many of what might be
considered the classical features of the heyday of the Dutch Wax cloth trade, which elude many of her peers today: design exclusivity, naming, and trade across regional networks.

I was in Lomé in December 2013, when Nelson Mandela died. Everywhere media reports buzzed with news of the icon’s passing. Vlisco’s flagship store displayed a commemorative print with Mandela’s portrait that had been printed 19 years prior, on the occasion of his release from Robben Island. A wholesaler had held onto her unsold stocks of the print since then and she could now put them up for sale again. Mandela’s passing presented an opportunity for Mme Yassa also. She had been planning on introducing a reprint of an old Dutch Wax cloth design to the market that week, and with Mandela’s passing, she decided to name the print Madiba, Mandela’s Xhosa clan name.

I walked the short distance from Vlisco’s flagship store to Mme Yassa’s market store with a Togolese blogger who would be writing a piece on Mme Yassa’s business, as part of VAC-Togo efforts to support their partner wholesalers with promotional assistance. A few steps away from the boutique, my travel companion pulled me out of the way as an imposing black SUV rolled up, its width filling the characteristically cramped Grand Marché street. “Here she comes,” our guide observed. In the backseat, behind the tinted windows, we could make out two silhouettes. A worker walked out of the shop and opened the car door. Mme Yassa and her daughter stepped out slowly, strolled past us, into the boutique, expensive-looking purses hanging from their forearms. A string of pearls around her neck with a matching bracelet and earrings, the bespectacled Mme Yassa was wearing the customary jupe-pagne cut [long skirt with matching blouse and wrapper] in a leafy Dutch Wax print set against a white background. Her daughter was not wearing wax cloth, but rather a tight black miniskirt and plain blouse.
After dropping off her purse in her office in the back of the shop, workers demurely delivering messages and making reports as she walked through the store, Mme Yassa returned to the shop floor to greet her visitors. Besides us, there was a group of women who had been haggling with shop workers as they waited for Mme Yassa to arrive. They were young, dressed in simple jupe-pagnes, wearing few accessories.

Unlike DaCharlotte and Mme Attigbo's sparse stores, the space in Mme Yassa's store was tightly packed, bordered on all sides by tall stacks of folded cloth. Mme Yassa stood behind a counter, facing the women, whom she addressed in French. This struck me as odd, since Mina is almost uniformly spoken in interactions at the Grand Marché. I later learned that the women were traders from Côte d'Ivoire.

“This cloth, do you like it?” Mme Yassa called out to the traders.

“What's the name?” the women ask.

“Madiba.”

Madiba (Source: Design by Vlisco, photograph by author)
Madiba was a Dutch Wax cloth reissue—a design that had been retired due to insufficient sales and/or damaged rollers (the insufficient sales not making it cost-efficient to replace the roller). Wholesalers of Vlisco fabrics can place a special order for a re-issue, if they are able to order the full 12,000 yards required for a special order. It represents a significant financial risk, but it also offers these wholesalers the opportunity to be the exclusive carriers of a design on the market, a practice that was historically key to the Nana Benz’s financial success. This exclusivity not only grants them a privileged status on Lomé’s market, but in the region more broadly. Moreover, naming the print after an important historical moment is a strategy for making it punctual, exclusive, and particularly valuable (Domowitz 1992; Sylvanus 2016). Mme Yassa had initially intended on naming the design Longévité [Longevity], but saw the opportunity that Mandela’s death presented for her new product offering.

Pointing to the top of the stack, Mme Yassa asked the group of traders: “What do you see here?” The women hesitated, they seemed unsure of what she was referring to.

“Here, what does this look like?” Mme Yassa prodded, pointing insistently to the design.

“...Stars?” One of the traders ventured tentatively.

“Yes! There are stars, hearts, and leaves. He’s the president of everyone. Madiba, he fought for everyone.”

With this brief exchange, Mme Yassa created a story around the print, attaching its visual components to the persona of the much loved icon for which she had named the design. By prodding consumers to look at particular elements of the design, Mme Yassa engaged them in a “reflexive, collective, and instrumented” process of tasting, of evaluating and reaching a decision about this print, the process Hennion denotes “tasting together” (2007).
Mme Yassa leveraged the premium placed on old designs and on exclusivity to set prices and make her product desirable: “This design, it was created more than fifty years ago. Today, it’s 35,000F. But tomorrow it will be 40,000. It’s also here that I launched Obama,” Mme Yassa continued, not addressing anyone in particular. The Ivorian traders were trying to negotiate, to reduce the cloth’s asking price to 33,000. The blogger and I stood to the side, observing the interaction. “If you don’t want it, leave it,” Mme Yassa continued, annoyance and impatience in her demeanor. “Anyway, I know you will regret it. If for 2,000F, you don’t want to take it, leave it. It was like that for Obama. People came to see, they said, ‘Eh...’ and two weeks later, everyone was shouting, ‘I want Obama, I want Obama.’” Mme Yassa walked off, disappearing into her office in the back of the store and leaving the traders by the stacks of fabric. Ten minutes later, the three Ivorian women were walking out, each with a black plastic bag in hand, 6 yards of Madiba tightly rolled inside.

Back in her office, Mme Yassa explained her rationale for naming the cloth to two older women, about the same age as her, who sat on a bench adjoining her desk. They were wholesalers from Côte d’Ivoire, who, judging by their deference towards Mme Yassa, ran businesses of smaller stature than hers. (When the blogger asked them what they thought of this new design, their reaction, directed towards Mme Yassa, was “Eh, tell us what to say, deh...”). In this interaction too, Mme Yassa guided the women in looking at the design, and tied the design to current events as part of her enchantment process.

“You see how it’s made? There’s a flower, and then inside the flower, what’s there?”

“Like a heart...,” one of the women replied.

“Exactly, like a heart. I was going to call it Longévité, but with this latest event, I thought to call it Madiba, to pay homage to this great man.”

“Why didn’t you make the purple also?” One of the Ivorian traders asked.
“It will come. Around Easter, that’s when people will be wanting lighter colors, I will bring it then.”

The somewhat patronizing attitude that Mme Yassa had displayed towards the smaller traders was toned down in her interaction with these more established sellers, though the hierarchy between them was still evident in the deference that the Ivorian women showed Mme Yassa.

Mme Yassa was able to make a sale happen through a mix of threat, convincing (“What do you see here?”), boasting, and naming of the cloth. She benefited from having exclusive rights to the design, which granted her the freedom to set the cloth’s price. Like DaCharlotte, Mme Yassa’s practice engaged the materiality of the cloth. She drew buyers’ attention to particular aspects of the cloth, showing them what to “see” as part of how she worked to convince or enchant them. Mme Yassa’s selling craft is also a workmanship of uncertainty, as she leverages different tools for different customers (threats and patronizing vs. a calm explanation in the privileged space of the back office), but she operates from a position of greater financial security than DaCharlotte, and, as such, is able to take greater risks in her dealings, such as daring the younger traders to not buy the cloth.

Dormer (1997, cited in Paxson 2012: 141) defines “craftspeople” as “people engaged in a practical activity where they are seen to be in control of their work. They are in control by virtue of possessing personal know-how that allows them to be masters or mistresses of the available technology ... [what] defines contemporary craftsmanship (...) is craft as knowledge that empowers a maker to take charge of technology.” Both Mme Yassa and DaCharlotte might be seen as “mistresses of the available technology,” but their own position of power or vulnerability in the trade can impede the exercise of their craft—how
much risk they can take on in interactions with buyers. This extends the relevance of “risk” in craft practice beyond the interaction between craft person and materials, to the amount of the risk that the craft person incurs in the context within which practice unfolds.

I now turn to selling in Vlisco’s flagship store.

**Mediation and appropriations: Selling in Vlisco’s flagship store**

Vlisco’s flagship store (FSS) in Lomé is a recent addition to the Dutch Wax cloth selling landscape in the city. Opened in 2008, the store was—like the company’s other flagship stores in Cotonou, Accra, Kinshasa, and Lagos—designed by a renowned brand image consultancy firm (WIPO 2012). Besides the fabric that is sold in the store (and also sold by Mme Yassa and other Vlisco distributors), the function of the store is to communicate the company’s new brand identity as a luxury brand. As “market-things,” defined by Cochoy (2007) as the “commercial objects, frames and tools,” or again, the “spatial/material properties of market operations,” the trappings of the store work to create the aura of exclusivity. In the Vlisco FSS, these market-things include both the physical infrastructure of the space and the norms of selling in the space, namely the set prices, and the cash-only transactions (no payments in installments, which sellers in the market sometimes offer to loyal customers).

But whereas sellers are not an active part of the market action in the supermarkets Cochoy (2007) analyzes, in Vlisco’s FSS, sellers play a central role in customers’ experience of the store, in their interaction with products, and, I posit, in their experience of Vlisco’s new brand identity. The setup of the Vlisco FSS, I argue, represents a move toward a version of selling that is a workmanship of *certainty*, one that limits or suppresses the unexpected in
the unfolding of the transaction. But because of the multiplicity of the cloth (color-design combinations) and its elaborate codes of usage, sellers’ craft is essential to the enchantment of customers and successful sales transactions. Here too, sellers engage in a craft practice aimed at extending the cloth’s enchantment in order to coax customers into making a purchase. Like sellers in other Dutch Wax cloth selling sites, sales staff in Vlisco’s FSS engage customers in “tasting together,” in articulating their tastes through a collective and reflexive process mediated by the sellers’ tools: mastery of codes of Dutch Wax cloth usage, humor, and flirtation, among others. I argue that it is through this “tasting together” led by the sellers that new Vlisco designs and brand—in the physical form of the FSS—are integrated into the existing Dutch Wax cloth economy.

Space of the store

The space of Vlisco’s FSS is a medium for communicating the company’s brand identity as a global luxury brand. The layout of the store across all of its locations is conceived centrally in the company’s Amstelveen office by an installation designer on the Marketing and Communications team. For the first few years after the launch of Vlisco’s rebranding efforts, the installation designer would travel to each store to oversee the setup of the displays and ensure uniformity across the stores. But the trips were largely eliminated due to budgetary constraints. Today, he oversees the setup remotely from the Netherlands, designing and sending detailed diagrams of the store’s installation for each new collection. In each store location, the installations are carried out by the local sales staff.

The store space is brightly lit, with spotlights drawing attention to fabric displays on tables, shelves, or countertops, as well as to the mirrors where customers can assess their choices. The fabric’s layout in the store is designed to offer customers multiple autonomous ways
into the prints. The concept designer had explained to me in Helmond that displays are meant to guide the customer through strategies like the arrangement of "color stories," for instance. These color-coordinated displays are changed several times over the three-month duration of a collection to create the impression of newness, even as the fabric selection stays the same. Furthermore, the fabric is laid out in multiple ways in the store: it is folded on top of tables, draped on mannequins, rolled up and organized on shelf racks, staggered on countertops—offering customers multiple ways into the store's selection. This arrangement contrasts somewhat with the uniform stacks of fabric in the average wax cloth selling space. Although there too, sellers unfold and hang some pieces of fabric behind the counter to give customers a better vantage point as they consider their options, the display techniques in Vlisco's FSS are significantly more varied.

Upon entering Vlisco's FSS in Lomé, customers are met by six black and bald mannequins clad in garments cut from the most recent collection's prints. At the time of my research, some of the styles that the mannequins wore were those that Elise, the model for the Fantasia collection's ad campaign, wore for the collection's magazine. The mannequins stand along the perimeter of a circle, near the top of which stands a white cube supporting a vase with a tall bouquet of tropical flowers. The space delimited by the circle is accentuated by the contrasting color of the floor—dark brown wood, next to the surrounding beige tiling that covers the rest of the store's floor. In the center of the circle stands a black lacquered table on which are displayed, under a sheet of glass, folded pieces of limited edition prints from the current collection. For the Fantasia collection, these included both classics and collection prints whose designs had been enhanced with silver and gold linings.
Chapter 4. Selling (& Buying)

To the left of the store are the packing table and counter with the cash register, and all the way against the back wall is a rack with one-off pieces of ready-to-wear garments cut from recent collections’ prints. These garments are primarily intended as teasers for Vlisco’s plans for ready-to-wear stores and on-demand tailoring services. The styles are those featured in the collections’ lookbook and are created by Vlisco’s in-house styling team in Helmond. They include dresses, blazers, skirts, and trousers, cut from Vlisco textiles in a random assortment of sizes and at exorbitant prices; one blazer that caught my eye cost the equivalent of USD400. Two large mirrors, spotlights shining on them, adorn the back wall where the clothing rack stands. Visitors thumb through these garments, occasionally picking up a hanger and holding it up against their body as they look in the mirror.

A room in the back of the store dubbed the “VIP Room” features only Superwaxes, the most expensive prints (outside of limited editions). The dark paneling, leather sofa, and large
mirrors create an intimate and secluded setting that feels something like the back room of an exclusive club. A counter in the VIP Room is adorned with fashion magazines and the walls are decorated with floor-length posters from the current collection's ad campaign, along with smaller framed images of past campaigns.

Vlisco communicates its brand identity through the setup of its FSS store and exclusive events like invitation-only cocktail parties or other promotional events to mark the launch of new collections. These features communicate an aura of exclusivity compounding the high price of Dutch Wax cloth and arguably reifying the cloth's status as the exclusive domain of the élite.

**Transactions**

Customers come in pairs or in a small group, usually. Two young women in matching bank teller uniforms; a woman with her young adult daughter, the mother in a jupe-pagne cut from a “classic” design, her daughter wearing a dress with wax cloth accents. Two women who appear to be in their sixties, friends who playfully swipe cloth from each other. A group of three: a woman in a tailored green dress and expensive-looking black purse with gold link chain handles, a man in a fitted shirt, and a second woman wearing an embroidered boubou in a light non-wax fabric. The woman in the boubou is trying on pieces from the prêt-à-porter rack on the far wall of the store.

When they come, customers ask for designs by name: “I am looking for....” Miss, Collier de Madame Thérèse, Dollar. Or they ask: “Has something new come?” And so begins the work of the seller. The salesladies indicate the latest collection’s designs, on display on the table at the entrance of the store, or hanging behind the register. They point to the re-editions of
classic designs in the collection’s colorway. The customers, women primarily, move through the space of the store slowly, tracing their fingers along the folded fabric laid flat on a table display. Or they walk around the large column towards the back of the store on which the latest collection’s designs are organized like so many color-coded book bindings on a tubular bookshelf. They call out to each other to come take a look at this or that design. They look, they touch. The saleslady approaches slowly. She might be smiling and visibly engaged, or she might drag as she makes her way to the customers, as if tending to them were taking her away from something else she would rather be doing.

"Market-things" in Vlisco’s flagship store, Lomé (Source: Photograph by author)
Mastery of conventions of usage

A key element of the seller/shopkeeper’s toolkit is her mastery of the conventions of Dutch Wax cloth usage. A middle-aged woman comes into the store, wearing a Dutch Wax print in the customary 3-piece complet style. After browsing the new collection’s designs, she holds up two against her as she looks in the mirror; one with a large centered key chain design, and the other a geometric print.

“I want to make a nago [particular style of outfit],” she explains to Wassevi, one of the salesladies, “but this one looks good on me.” The customer is torn between the suitability of the design for the dress style she envisions, and the look of the design on her body, and she looks to the seller for guidance. Wassevi agrees with the client’s assessment that the keys design would be best suited for the nago style. The client sits on the white leather couch facing the register, pondering her decision. Wassevi holds out the two prints, one in each hand, and the woman looks on from the couch. After a few moments, Wassevi asks her: “Will you take it?” raising the hand holding the key design. The client sighs, then, as she hoists herself from the couch, answers: “Yes, I’ll take it.” Under her breath she adds: “These things are too expensive.”

Another day, two women visit the store. The women are sisters. They just finished paying for a refreshment of a classic design in the new collection’s colors. Where the most common colorway for that design is black-gold-orange, the version the women purchased is in shades of pink and purple. As the women walk toward the exit, the Superwaxes behind the packing table by the door catch their eye.

“Are these the new ones?” they ask.

“Yes,” the saleslady, Angélique, answers, as she pulls down one of the folded pieces of fabric for them. The women stand side by side, contemplating the fabric from the other side of the
table. “It’s for a gift,” one of them explains. “The people want to do enco [have outfits made out of the same fabric]. People will like this for enco, no?”

The store manager, who was standing near the cash register jumps in. “Oh, yes. And it’s Benin, you said, right? Mm, they love enco over there. You can give them the same fabric, or maybe this color for the woman, and this one for the man.”

On cue, Angélique unrolls a different colorway of the same print. Where purples and oranges were dominant in the one she had first shown the women, greens and browns lead here. One of the women drapes the pieces on her shoulders, one on each side. She slowly walks toward the mirror on the other side of the cash register, looks at herself, turns to her sister who is now sitting down on one of the white leather couches facing the register, looking on. The woman returns to the packing table, sets the fabric down on the counter, looks at it some more. Finally, she sighs and explains: “We have to go pay a debt at a Nana’s. Depending on what’s left after that, we’ll come back.”

Angélique responds teasingly, good-naturedly, as she places the fabric back on the rack: “You’ll find a way! You’re grown women, you’ll find a way!”

In both of these transactions, the sellers support customers in their decision-making by translating designs that have already drawn them in into the codified logics of Dutch Wax cloth use—appropriate colors for men and women, regional preferences, suitability of different designs for particular dress styles. This is qualification work that builds on customers’ enchantment with the design under consideration. In both cases, however, even though the customers are evidently charmed by the cloth and amenable to the sellers’ recommendations, money is a recurring constraint, as it was in wax cloth transactions in other selling sites I observed.
Humor

Observing the salesladies at their task, I was struck by the extent to which humor and playfulness pervaded their interactions with customers. Far from reproducing here the trope of the always happy, always smiling African, I interpret the use of humor in the space of the Vlisco FSS as a strategy for managing or producing desire for the cloth by acknowledging customer complaints about the product’s high and increasing cost and translating it into a purchase when possible.

One morning, an older woman wearing a light boubou comes in looking to buy a Superwax. A saleslady takes her into the VIP room, and they emerge several minutes later with the same design in two different colors. The salesladies drape the fabric on the client’s body, one on each shoulder. Together, all three examine the client’s reflection in the mirror. They all agree that the first one the client had draped is the best – it’s also the color in the campaign ads. Angélique takes the fabric, folds it for the client, and together they walk back towards the register. The woman is smiling, visibly pleased with her purchase. As they walk, the woman mentions that she wishes she could buy both. Angélique replies with a joke: “You should just keep buying for yourself like this, and you’ll see, fabric will just start coming to you. Like if every month, or every two months, you come buy one or two for yourself, you’ll see, by the end of 2014, you’ll just be getting fabric, just like that.” The woman acquiesces, chuckling, “Yes, yes.”

Angélique places the fabric in one of Vlisco’s new glossy white shopping bags with gold lettering. The customer has almost walked through the door when she turns back and asks: “Don’t you have a plastic bag in which you can put the fabric before putting it in the bag?”
Chapter 4. Selling (& Buying)

She does not want people to see what she just bought: “The thing I want to sting people with [te], they’ll already see it, ahead of time??” They laugh.

“But they won’t see the thing you’ll sting in,” comes Angélique’s repartee. “Even if they see this now, when they see you wear it, they won’t even recognize it! Normally, this fabric, you shouldn’t even put it in a bag, you should just carry it out of the store, on your arm, so everyone can see!”

The women laugh as Angélique wraps the fabric in a glossy white gift box before putting it in the shopping bag. “Now your necklace is what you should add on and I’ll be all set,” the customer remarks, pointing to Angélique’s neck.

“Let’s go and I’ll show you the fabric you can get that will match this necklace! What, you don’t want the necklace? Then let’s go, I’ll show you!”

The customer laughs, exchanges salutations with the salesladies, then leaves the store.

Another occasion: The client has just paid for 6 yards of the classic Angelina design in blue, a new coloring. As her purchase is getting wrapped, she asks Angélique: “How much are you doing the Superwaxes?”

At Angélique’s response—50,000FCFA (USD100), the customer exclaims: “Oh, 50,000 – can we keep buying it?”

“Oh, you can!” Angélique replies, without missing a beat.

The customer pushes back. “Half of 100,000? No, we can’t buy it anymore…”

Yet she lingers at the register, looking at the display of fabrics against the wall. A few moments later, she picks up the conversation, as she asks to see another piece hanging on the display: “For me, it’s the old designs I like… That’s why I saw this Angelina and I thought
‘Eh, Gbedegbe bavo eya [this is the cloth from way back in the day], let me get it and see how it goes.”

“Oh, it will go well,” Angélique assures her, with a coy smile. The woman lays the fabric on the counter, indicating that she will buy it. Angélique adds it to the shopping bag.

For Angélique, humor was an essential tool in interactions with consumers. Joking enabled her to both acknowledge her customers’ concerns about the cost of the cloth, even as she egged them on to buy more. She deployed the absurd, promising customers that by purchasing more cloth, they would receive more gifts of cloth, for instance (not unlike the promises of the “prosperity gospel” typical of the Pentecostal churches that have become ubiquitous in the post-postcolonial African landscape (see Piot 2010)), or by urging them to display their expensive purchase on their arm as they walk out of the store. Achille Mbembe (2001) analyses the use of humor by the “subjects” in postcolonial regimes of domination as constitutive of the “banality of power” in the postcolony (102). The use of these forms, he argues, makes visible the fact that “the postcolonial relationship is not primarily a relationship of resistance or of collaboration but can best be characterized as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the commandement [the dictatorial state] and its ‘subjects’ having to share the same living space (104).” I see humor as serving parallel functions in sellers’ use in Vlisco’s store. By joking with customers about money, the sellers acknowledge the broader economic context in which they find themselves and the absurdity of the cost of the very goods they are peddling, even as they are implicated in the transaction. The sellers’ use of humor as part of their toolkit can be understood as a manifestation of their “conviviality” with Togo’s seemingly intractable economic crisis.
Flirtation is yet another device frequently used by sellers. A Nigerian customer walks in. Straddling humor and flirtation, Angélique walks over to him, smiling suggestively: “Hello sweetheart,” she says in English, “Let’s go to the Supers” she continues, before he has even said a word. He follows. Another time, as two Nigerian men consider different fabric options, the shopkeeper drapes the fabric on herself, and saunters from where the men are standing to the fabric displays and back, switching her hips exaggeratedly as if she were on a catwalk. Their eyes follow her body’s movements. Each man buys approximately USD300 worth of fabric. A driver comes in behind them later and picks up the shopping bags.

The Vlico FSS seller’s strategy might be understood as an upscale version of how market women call out “Tata chérie [Aunty darling]” to passers-by, but it is also a way that Angélique works to translate their desire for her body into desire for the cloth. The humor and over-the-top nature of her flirtation are what makes the interaction acceptable in the space of the store. The use of humor enables Angélique to at once leverage the effects of flirtation and to mobilize her sexuality without being transgressive. Her use of flirtation in this setting might be understood as what the historian Peter Bailey denotes “parasexuality”: “a commodified form of sexuality that bridges public and private, [and] is commercialized in its expression. (...) [S]exuality that is deployed but contained, carefully channeled rather than fully discharged” (Bailey 1990 cited in Brown 2011, 204).

But the charm is not always effective, as in a transaction where three men visited the store accompanied by a young woman. They had come to look at the new arrivals, informed by a text message notification from Vlisco. The men were impatient as they looked over the suggestions the shopkeepers brought over, brusquely rejecting them before finally selecting
one. Sensing an opening, the saleslady asked with a little smile and suggestive glance:

“Won’t you buy a second?”

The man making the purchase replied sternly: “No.”

Undaunted, the saleslady tried once more, looking down at the fabric demurely and stroking it softly as she smiled at the customer: “The second is very nice…”

The customer responded sharply, definitively: “Madame, I am only buying one today.”

Conclusions: The craft of selling, tasting together, and the appropriation of brand

The work of sellers has long mediated the uptake of Dutch Wax cloth by Togolese and West African consumers more broadly. Across Dutch Wax cloth selling sites, the seller’s task is to deploy a range of strategies to coax customers into making a purchase. Mastery of codes of usage, humor, flirtation, deception—all are “technologies of enchantment” (Gell 1999), deployed by the seller to convince buyers to spend money on the fabric. “Casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form” is exactly what the saleslady does when she jokes with customers who complain about the price of the cloth that “if you keep buying, you’ll keep getting more money to buy more.” It’s an absurdist type of humor that remakes the world in the shape of the desire buyers feel.

In the case of the Vlisco FSS specifically, the craft of selling mediates the continuity of Vlisco’s designs and of the space of the store. The space of the store (as part of branding) is pushing for a certain degree of not just standardization, but formalization—both in terms of the physical infrastructure and of the selling practice that unfolds therein, through the organization of the fabric in the space, and the fact that prices are non-negotiable and must be paid in full at the time of purchase. It is moving towards a version of selling that is a workmanship of certainty. But because the use of wax cloth follows such a sophisticated,
elaborate, and multiple set of rules, sellers must engage substantively with customers in order to help them to make their choices. These demands that cloth and its situated uses makes on its sellers and the infrastructure of the store could be conceptualized as a “surfeit” of brand, the “more-than of brand” (Nakassis 2013).

I read this as the commodity pushing back against branding. What would not pushing back look like? It would look like a customer coming into Vlisco’s FSS and choosing on her own from the selection of textiles because the range of quality-uses combinations of the textiles on offer would be fully and clearly spelled out. This is the vision that the setup of the space of the store is aiming for. But the process of buying Dutch Wax cloth demands a process of “tasting together” (Hennion 2007), a tasting together that in the case of Dutch Wax cloth involves the body—seeing, touching, draping—but also joking and flirting and advising: a collective, reflexive, instrumented process. It is through this “tasting together” that new designs can be brought into the same logics as old, established designs.

And so, this is how the brand can be appropriated: the commodity pushes back against the brand, requiring the seller’s intervention. And the seller, through her intervention, mediates the uptake of the brand, ironically, ensuring its continuity. Dutch Wax cloth sellers serve as intermediaries in the appropriation of brand, in the work of linking brand to (old and new) fabrics. Their work can be understood as part of the way that Vlisco’s vision of itself as a “luxury” brand is “adapted” to African markets. The brand might manifest in a centrally articulated form across sites, but even within this singular form, there is adaptation and appropriation going on, in a way that might both be a “surfeit” of the brand and benefit it.

***

Late morning one day, a group of market women—about seven of them—enter Vlisco’s FSS. They smell strongly of fish, they must be fish-sellers in the Grand...
Marché. They are wearing faded wax cloth wrappers and T-shirts, thinned flip-flops, and simple scarves tied on their heads in the manner of market sellers. They look shy, out of place. The saleslady approaches them with a kind and deferential greeting. One of the women speaks up and asks to see pieces from the new collection. The saleslady guides the group to the table with the new collection’s prints; the women follow her, moving as one. The group leader then inquires about the price, and whether it is negotiable. The saleslady gently answers that it was not.

As the women make their way out of the store a few minutes later, the saleslady asks them what they have decided. The leader responds, humbly: “It’s the money, the money we have... Otherwise, we liked it. But it’s the money.” And they leave.

The salesladies walk through the store, spraying air freshener in the women’s wake. But the smell of fish lingers.

I have suggested how the appropriation of Vlisco’s new brand identity plays out in the space of the store, but there is a price of entry; purchasing power is the condition for participation in this process and we cannot lose sight of the fact that this is a process that the large majority of Togolese do not have access to. Indeed, the cost of Dutch Wax cloth remained an issue across the majority of transactions at Vlisco’s FSS, the occasional USD1,000 transaction notwithstanding. Current economic conditions in Togo put the cloth out of the reach of most users and, moreover, also compromise the livelihoods of sellers like DaCharlotte and Mme Attigbo, as customers’ purchasing power constrains the efficacy of sellers’ practice, even when the cloth was enchanting. This was the case for the numerous minutes-long visits to Vlisco’s FSS that ended abruptly once a customer learned what the prices were and that they were non-negotiable. And so the store remained largely empty.

The discussion in this chapter speaks to the disparities that characterize the “New Africa”: for those who have the means (both buyers and sellers), this echelon of “the world of goods” is available. But in a place like Lomé today, those who have access to this stratum represent a very small minority. In this context, all that the enchanting space of Vlisco’s flagship store
provides to those excluded from its offerings is a closer vantage point from which to witness exactly that from which they are locked out (Appadurai 1996). But, I would like to suggest that material interventions, such as tailoring supported by a regime of caring for the cloth, can serve as a (somewhat) equalizing or remediating force against this exclusion, by offering a range of ways to derive meaning from wax cloth. This is what I turn to in the next, concluding chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE.
Loving

"She told me: 'If you can't get the real one, just buy a copy, have it made into quelque chose de bien [something good, proper], and take good care of it; don't wash it too often. After you wear it, you clean it well and gently, and then you put it away.'"

This dissertation has examined different forms of material engagement with Dutch Wax cloth along the cloth's trajectory between design and market: designing, advertising, selling, and buying. I posited that in each site of practice, the "doing" of Dutch Wax cloth made visible a range of negotiations around the relationship between Africa and the global in this moment. Grounded in the doing of design, advertising, and selling-buying, each chapter's analysis showed how Africa-in-the-world, "Africa as a structuring category" (Ferguson 2006), was being articulated materially in and across the Netherlands, Togo, and "the global market." Chapters 2 and 3 made visible tensions around what it means to make an "African" thing "global" (at both the level of the object itself and of the story built around it for advertising purposes), while Chapter 4 revealed tensions playing out around Togolese sellers' and buyers' access to the Dutch Wax cloth economy—a global trade relationship dating back to the late 19th century—in Lomé's current economic context.

Together, these chapters make visible the irony of Dutch Wax cloth's recent forays beyond African markets and bodies: even as this cloth, which has become a signifier of African-ness, gains visibility beyond Africa, the object itself changes; the images of African-ness put forth in its promotion are at best ambiguous—at once challenging ideas of African otherness in some ways and reinforcing them in others; and many, if not most, of the (African) actors on
whose labor (consumption and selling labor) the brand’s value depends are shut out of participating in the cloth’s economy in the new regime. The view of Africa-in-the-world emerging along Dutch Wax cloth’s path in the time of the New Africa is a decidedly mixed one. Rather than the paradigm shift suggested by terms like the “African Renaissance,” “Africa Rising,” and “The New Africa,” seductive others to the “hopeless,” “crisis-ridden,” “old” Africa, I have argued that Africa-in-the-world—the relationship between Africa, African bodies, and African forms, and “the global”—in this moment is characterized by a tenuous play between absence and presence, visibility and invisibility/erasure, inclusion and exclusion.

I have chosen to anchor this concluding chapter in the “loving” of Dutch Wax cloth for two reasons. First, because I wanted to close with reflections on the future of Togolese consumers’ attachment to—love for—Dutch Wax cloth in the face of the dynamics described above. If the work of branding amounts to brands’ appropriation of consumer love, and the premium that brands, leveraging this appropriation (Foster 2007), charge for their products shuts out many of these consumers from engaging with their products, what then is the future of Togolese consumers’ love for a product like Dutch Wax cloth? In what follows, I suggest that “material interventions” (Luvaas 2013), specifically tailoring interventions, are key to the future of Togolese consumers’ love of Dutch Wax cloth.

Indeed, the varied array of tailoring techniques practiced in Lomé offers a range of modalities for participating in the Dutch Wax cloth economy. For instance, in the face of economic duress, more affordable copies of Dutch Wax cloth designs can be tailored into dress styles customarily reserved for Dutch Wax cloth, or owners of “kept” or inherited Dutch Wax garments can have these pieces reworked by tailors into new dress forms. At the
same time, for those with the means to purchase Dutch Wax cloth, tailoring makes possible the ongoing performance of status through forms of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899). As such tailoring interventions present opportunities to both derive value from and circumvent branding. In what follows, I present “preliminary cuts” of lines of inquiry to be pursued in the next phases of this project.

I also chose “loving” as the frame for this concluding chapter because loving unexpectedly emerged as a recurring theme at all stages of this research, from the project’s inception to each of my field sites; as such, it seemed fitting to return to it in closing.

**Tailoring interventions**

The quote above is from DaMireille, a retired physician in Lomé. Now in her sixties, DaMireille had a successful career in private practice in Lomé, her adult children were educated and now lived abroad, and she has retreated into a quiet retirement. She was intrigued—and perhaps somewhat amused—by my interest in Dutch Wax cloth. As part of the country’s educated and professional élite active from the 1970s to the 1990s, she knew the significance that *tchigan* held in Togolese culture, but she didn’t actively participate in it; *tchigan* culture, if we might call it that—the accumulation of the cloth, the codified wearing of designs—had felt somewhat old-fashioned to her already in the 1990s. How curious that I, who had left Togo as a child in the early 1990s, and now lived in the United States, had come back to study this cloth.

Though she owned some Dutch Wax cloth and vaguely knew the names of some of the "classic" designs, DaMireille could hardly be called a Dutch Wax aficionado—and certainly not today, at the cloth’s going price. “Have you seen how expensive it is nowadays? Who can pay that?” DaMireille exclaimed as she walked me back from her home to the shared taxi
stand on the main road late one afternoon. And that’s when she shared the advice a friend had given her, about an alternative means of participating in tchigan culture if cost poses a constraint. The alternative her friend suggested centered on the availability of lower-priced copies of Dutch Wax cloth designs on the market (“just buy a copy”); local tailoring expertise (“have it made into “quelque chose de bien” [something good, proper]); and a regime of care for the cloth (“and take good care of it”).

“Just buy a copy”

Sylvanus (2013a; 2016) has written on the influx of Chinese-manufactured wax cloth on Lomé’s market and its effects on the wax cloth trade in the city. She has discussed how Togolese wax cloth traders, including some long-time traders of Dutch Wax cloth, have started working with Chinese manufacturers to produce their own designs, revised versions of Dutch Wax designs, or simply straightforward copies of Dutch Wax designs. The traders’ activities in and of themselves constitute one form of material intervention making it possible for Togolese sellers like them, as well as users, to continue to derive value from the Dutch Wax cloth aesthetic, the Vlisco brand, and the historical significance of Dutch Wax cloth in Togolese culture, even in the face of Togo’s current economic context. Tailoring practice represents another such form of material intervention.

“Make something proper with it”

The protective logics of Dutch Wax cloth tailoring

“Our mothers’ mentality was that the quality of Dutch Wax cloth is such that the cloth must be pampered.” Mme Johnson, seated behind the desk in the office at the front of her tailoring shop, explains the logics of Dutch Wax cloth crafting. She uses the garment she’s wearing as a reference as she speaks: "In a not so distant past, I would have never dared
make this out of this cloth.” She is wearing a romper made out of the very expensive Superwax (where Dutch Wax cloth costs about the equivalent of 70USD for 6 yards, Superwax, also produced by Vlisco, costs about USD100 for the same length). “I would have never dared make this,” Mme Johnson continues, “because how does cloth get transmitted?” As a form of wealth transmitted from mother to daughter or in the context of other social or filial bonds, Mme Johnson explains, Dutch Wax cloth or tchigan’s structural integrity is essential. “To give your pagne to your daughter is like a transfer of love. As the saying goes, ‘it’s at the end of the old rope that the new one is woven’43. The cloth is meant to be treasured,” Mme Johnson explains, “You don’t want to hurt it, you don’t want to put scissors in it any which way.”

Mme Johnson’s words point to Dutch Wax cloth’s special value; indeed, tchigan, Dutch Wax cloth’s appellation in Mina, translates as “high value/price.” The cloth’s function as a form of currency or stored value and a repository of affection is reflected and mediated in the tailoring practice referred to by tailors and wearers in Lomé as “not cutting.” Historically, the more expensive the cloth, the more conservative the dress style it was crafted into needed to be, because the cloth’s value needed to be preserved: tailoring a garment presented as much of a risk of ruining the cloth as it offered the possibility of adding value to it.

In what tailors in Lomé referred to as a “traditional” tailoring technique, crafting the standard 6-yard length of cloth in the “not cutting” logic centered on only cutting 2 of the 6 yards, for the blouse, crafting another 2 yards into a skirt in a manner that did not require

---

43 “C’est au bout de l’ancienne corde qu’on tisse la nouvelle.”
cutting it\textsuperscript{44}, and leaving the remaining 2 yards uncut (but hemmed) for the headwrap, for carrying a baby on the back, or to drape on the shoulder as a mark of age, status, and respectability carried over from other cloth-wearing practice among the southern Togolese and other ethnic groups in West Africa (see Sylvanus 2013b). The blouse could also be sewn in such a manner that the cloth was minimally cut. Thus assembled, a _jupe-pagne complet_ (the 3-piece ensemble just described) could be undone and given new form, whether by its original owner, or by its inheritor.

_Stored value_

The “not cutting” technique is still practiced today and is favored in particular by older women concerned with preserving their cloth’s value. Indeed, by making it possible to keep the cloth as close to intact as possible, even as it is crafted into dress, the “not cutting” technique supports the storing of the cloth’s value. “Because I know the value of [Dutch Wax], I work for the cloth’s longevity [“la pérénnité du tissu],” Mme Johnson says. She explains that she can accomplish this by not only sewing the skirt in the “traditional” manner, where the 2 yards of cloth are not cut, but also by cutting “classical” rather than trendy styles for the blouse. As a result, she explains, the garment (and thus the cloth) can be worn irrespective of the fashions of the moment.

Tailoring (in the “not cutting” modality) can both help protect the cloth’s value and mediate the extension of value of kept Dutch Wax cloth. Trysha, a Loméan in her early 20s from a middle class background said she hated wax cloth growing up; to her it had always just been what old women wore. But when she started working after high school, she was required to wear wax cloth one day a week to the office (government mandated since the 1980s as part

\textsuperscript{44} The fabric is folded in and seams sewn such that when undone, the full 2 yards of cloth are intact.
of a national “authenticity” campaign (see Sylvanus 2013b). That is when she started buying wax cloth, but only non-Dutch wax, because Dutch Wax still seemed old-fashioned to her at the time, whereas new (and cheaper) types of wax on the market were more brightly colored, and their designs more abstract. “No chickens and eggs or whatever,” she said, laughing, referring to the classic Vlisco design *La famille*, which depicts a hen and her chicks.

Along the way, Trysha learned to appreciate wax print cloth more, and she also learned how unreliable the quality of the offerings on the market could be. 45 One day, her mother took out a Dutch Wax cloth from her suitcase—“This really old thing, I mean, it was older than me! But I saw how the colors were, even after all of these years,” Trysha observed. Now with some experience under her belt in wax cloth buying and caring, she was struck with how new the cloth still looked after all these years. The realization gave her a newfound appreciation for Dutch Wax cloth, without for as much significantly changing her purchasing habits; the cloth remained too expensive, not only for her, but also for her mother, who had amassed a significant collection of Dutch Wax over her lifetime. But current prices were simply unmanageable, and so this time, instead of purchasing a new print, Trysha’s mother carefully undid the old garment she had taken from the suitcase, and sent the cloth, undone, to her tailor to have it crafted into a new outfit.

By helping to maintain the cloth’s structural integrity, the “not cutting” tailoring technique helps to protect Dutch Wax cloth’s value. As indicated by DaMireille’s friend, applied to copies of Dutch Wax cloth designs, this technique also offers cash-strapped users a means to approximate participation in the Dutch Wax cloth economy, to not be fully shut out of it. And the reverse is true: for those with the means to do so, “cutting” Dutch Wax cloth in a

45 See Sylvanus’s (2013a) discussion of the unstable value of goods on Lomé’s market following the liberalization of the Togolese economy.
style that is not aimed to preserve the cloth is a conspicuous display of their means. As Mme
Johnson explained:

Cutting, etc., it’s for clients who have the financial means to do so, for the clients who go
out a lot, who have the means to buy a lot of fabric. For them, you can allow yourself to
craft outfits that are on trend [à la mode]. Wearing Dutch Wax demonstrate the person’s
financial means. [People will think:] ‘A beautiful wax that she cuts any which way? Ah,
she is well-off.’

"Take good care of it"

DaMireille’s friend had advised her to “take good care” of the garment she had made, even if
it wasn’t “the real thing,” Dutch Wax cloth. This regime of care itself might be understood as
a form of material intervention, transferred from Dutch Wax cloth onto its alternatives and
supplementing tailoring in the work of circumventing the constraints of brand. Mme
Attigbo, one of the sellers I discussed in Chapter 4 had said: “Tchigan-a, enugome enona,”
meaning, “Tchigan must stay hidden/put away carefully.” Indeed, the customary way of
storing Dutch Wax cloth in Togo, as in other West African countries (and immigrant
communities), is in a suitcase or chest under the bed, away from light (which fades the
colors over time), dust, and insects. To preserve the longevity of their cloth, informants
described spot cleaning the garment after wear with gentle soap (rather than fully
immersing it in water), and drying it in the shade.

**Material interventions and keeping the love alive**

Brent Luvaas (2013) argues that for Indonesian DIY designers who rework the logos of
global brands and make their reworking of these forms “obvious” in their products, these

---

46 See Bickford 1994.
forms of material intervention are equal parts aesthetic, political, and commercial. They are a means of not only making visible and criticizing the conditions of production of global brands, but also of proposing locally designed and produced alternatives. For the designers who undertake them, these material interventions constitute an effort to make "Indonesia (...) matter too in today's global economy" (129). By situating Indonesian actors as doers of the immaterial labor of branding through a détournement of brand, these material interventions constitute a form of surfeit of brand (Nakassis 2013).

I would like to suggest that tailoring, supplemented by other material interventions, such as sellers’ reworking of existing designs, and users’ regime of caring for the cloth does something similar in the case of Dutch Wax cloth in Lomé. These material interventions offer Togolese actors options for pushing back against the exclusions wrought by branding.

Robert Foster (2002; 2005) has argued that the politics of value (monetary and affective) in branding amounts to a politics of knowledge: what producers and consumers know about one another is what determines how value can be derived by producers and consumers alike from branded commodities. I would like to suggest that in the case of Dutch Wax cloth in this historical moment, the politics of value in branding centers on a politics of making.

Knowledge of Dutch Wax cloth’s commodity chain seemed of little interest to my Togolese informants, whether sellers or buyers of Dutch Wax cloth. When I prodded her about the significance of the cloth’s Dutch origins for her, Mme Attigbo shrugged as she responded: “Our cloth has always come from elsewhere, so it doesn’t really matter where it comes from. What matters is that it is our mothers’ cloth.” Pausing for a moment, she continued: "Maybe for young people, it matters, but for me it doesn’t matter."
The “young people” Mme Attigbo referred to are the ones populating the pages of fashion blogs with the dress styles tailors craft for them out of wax cloth—Dutch and otherwise. As drivers of the movement to rebrand “Africa,” to put forward another image of the continent and its people through the dissemination of these images, they are invested in remaking Africa’s image. They have easier access than ever to global discursive and aesthetic regimes, and (even in Lomé, with its highly spotty and slow internet access), they have access to communications tools for disseminating these images. If indeed, the conditions of Dutch Wax cloth’s trade matters to them, as Mme Attigbo suggest, then this knowledge could create opportunities for pushing back against the deleterious effects of brand (see Foster 2002).

But like Luvaas, I would argue that along with this politics of knowledge, material interventions are at the heart of the politics of affective and monetary value for Dutch Wax cloth lovers who are increasingly shut out of participating in the cloth’s economy today. In a place like Lomé, tailoring may be the key material intervention, as its infrastructure is longstanding and well-established. Moreover, tailoring and Dutch Wax cloth have long gone hand in hand in Lomé. To this day, when Nana Benz receive their latest design, they have their tailors craft a jupe-pagne out of the new print for them; clad in these garments, the Nanas serve as their own advertisements. Implicating Dutch Wax cloth in its various enactments (Mol 2002)—design, brand, cloth, dress, and love object—tailoring practices offer an extremely rich lens onto the ongoing articulations of Africa-in-the-world playing out along (Dutch) Wax cloth’s path. But that is a story for another day.
February 2015. I have been in Paris for a few months, writing my dissertation; Paris, it turns out, is a midpoint of sorts between the Netherlands and Togo: a 3-hour train ride from Amsterdam, and a 25-minute metro ride between my apartment in the ethnically diverse 20th arrondissement to the West and Central African enclaves of the 18th arrondissement. Being here grants me distance from my field sites while keeping immersion within easy reach.

I am working on my Designing chapter at the very cushy Sciences Po library, located in the posh 7th arrondissement. Every day I walk past the Louvre on my way from the metro to the Sciences Po buildings and Karl Lagerfeld and Emporio Armani boutiques are down the street from the library. A pair of pleated pants in the window display of an Italian designer has caught my eye; the price tag in the window states "800€." I find myself wondering if I could take a picture and have a copy of the pants made in Lomé. This is one version of African being in the world.

My chapter is not coming together, I've been stuck all morning; the library is becoming stifling. I decide to escape to Château Rouge, hub of the African 18th, to find wax cloth to "make pretty things" with—my happy place of yore. Given my budget and luggage constraints—and environmental concerns too—I make a compromise with myself as I take leave of my study partner: I will not buy any fabric. Rather, I will look for scraps at the tailor shops, which, like the wax cloth stores, dot the Château Rouge landscape.

When I exit the metro that day, Château Rouge is as hectic as always, even on this weekday afternoon: the Central African women calling out "Caro Lite, Caro Lite 47" from behind their open duffel bags, filled with boxes of the product; the women next to them on the sidewalk selling vegetables out of plastic bags; the West and Central African men selling phone chargers, knockoff brand name watches and purses... All of them shooting darting glances around as they call out to customers, keeping an eye out for the immigration police, who routinely conduct raids that send the hawkers scrambling to gather their wares and running down the street at full speed. This, too, is a version of African being in the world.

The two Senegalese tailors I timidly approach both generously scramble together fabric scraps strewn about their shop floors and stuff them into plastic bags for me. I am delighted, already daydreaming about the shapes these scraps might soon take. The funk of the library and my stagnant chapter has dissipated: J'ai trouvé mon bonheur à Château Rouge. 48

But as I make my way back to the metro with my spoils, I just can't help but linger before the window display of a wax print store. It's the last one in a row of wax cloth shops closer to the Barbès metro than to Château Rouge. The two metro stations, a 5-minute walk apart—when the Château Rouge market isn't at its densest—bookend this postcolonial ghetto of sorts. On the Barbès end, the shops are mostly held by people of North African descent and the fabric boutiques mostly carry Chinese-made wax or Vlisco counterfeits, whereas the wax cloth boutiques closer to the Château Rouge metro are

47 Skin lightening product
48 Literally, “I have found my happiness at Château Rouge.” But the expression trouver son bonheur is also used idiomatically to signify finding something that one likes.
West African-run and prominently display the *Vlisco Partenaire Officiel* insignia. On the Barbès side, the elderly women of North African descent holding out wrinkled, grime-darkened hands as they beg for alms on the street corners are sometimes wrapped in faded wax print cloth, the fabric worn as a chador\(^{49}\) to cover their heads and shoulders. Here, then, is yet another version of African being in the world.

I step into the store, pulled in by a print in the window. The design looks slightly off-kilter, like it was drawn by hand, or in a hurry, the assembly of its pieces eyeballed. Its symmetries are not immediately evident even though I know that, like all wax cloth designs, it’s a repeat pattern. The indigo lines reverberating off the edges of yellow-filled almond-like forms manage to simultaneously feel too thick, uneven, and not differentiated enough. What might be printing defects—uneven, powdery trails of indigo-colored dye—trace unpredictable paths across the design. It is a mess of a print. And I love it. And it only costs €15 for 6 yards, a far more easily justified expense than the €70 6 yards of Vlisco wax cloth would have run me.

Upon reaching home, I cut 2 yards of the fabric into a scarf, and give the remaining 4 yards to a friend when I leave Paris.

***

March 2016. I am back in Cambridge, looking over footage I shot in Lomé during my fieldwork there, and trying to figure out how I might cut it into a companion piece to my dissertation. There’s not much going on in the frame; I had shot it with my film instructor’s voice reverberating in my head: “Make sure to get as much B-roll as possible to situate your story.”

Shooting it had also been an attempt to push through my shyness about filming outdoors, under the curious, questioning, sometimes wary gaze of passers-by. As a compromise with myself, I had shot the street on which the atelier of one of the tailors I interviewed and filmed was located; there was little activity on the sandy neighborhood street, just a woman rinsing a bucket in front of a gate on the left edge of the frame, indifferent to my presence.

I’ve watched this footage at least a half dozen times, but today, I notice something I hardly believe. I rewind the tape to make sure, and sure enough, there it is: I had always focused on the movement on the left side of the frame, where the woman rinsed out her bucket. But there was another woman, on the opposite side of the street—on the right edge of the frame. She was also bent, seemingly cleaning large plastic containers, her backside to the camera. Today I notice the yellow-filled almond shapes on her pagne that draw slightly uneven square forms down the back of her legs: she is wearing the print I bought in Paris on that library breakout trip to Château Rouge a year ago; the print I am wearing around my neck at that very moment, as I watch the footage in Cambridge.

\(^{49}\) Form of Islamic veil.
Bibliography


Cordonnier, Rita. 1982. “Les Revendeuses de Tissus de La Ville de Lomé (Togo).” *Paris, ORSTOM.*


https://www.bcgperspectives.com/content/articles/globalization_growth Winning_africa_from_trading Posts_ecosystems/.


Koert, Robin van, and Jos Moerkamp. n.d. *Dutch Wax Design Technology from Helmond to West Africa: Uniwax and GTP in Post-Colonial Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana*.


— — —. 1993. We Have Never Been Modern. Harvard University Press.


