

**ERIC DARNELL PRITCHARD**

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, United States

# Black supernovas: Black gay designers as critical resource for contemporary black fashion studies

If you take the Paris Métro line 2 to Philippe Auguste Station, make the brief walk onto Boulevard de Ménilmontant, enter the famous Père Lachaise Cemetery, and walk toward a section at the cemetery's centre called Division 50, you will find him. Not Oscar Wilde. Not Richard Wright. Not Jim Morrison. Amidst now ancient appearing crypts with broken, dusted stained glass windows that retain the solemnity, if not the grandeur, of the day they were erected, and among debris – broken branches, maps from the cemetery's general office, dried flowers blown from one burial plot to another – lies Patrick Kelly's tomb. Even with the name etched in stone now fading from clear visibility, this is his place. Staring back at you from the top of the tomb is a golliwog<sup>1</sup> – wide eyes, red lips, gold earrings and jet black face – above a large red heart fashioned as a button, all signatures of Kelly's fashion house, *Patrick Kelly Paris*. And if you, like I do, believe that our dear ancestors have something to teach us, and that they are invested in the lives of their descendants, then you also know that this tomb is where a story begins, not ends.

My argument here is for what ancestorship, as a research and writing methodology and/or ritual of personal and collective historical recovery and sustenance, can offer us as a critical intellectual resource for the emergence of

1. A golliwog is a character depicted in British children's literature, and was reviled for the racism in the depiction of its physical features. It was the logo of Patrick Kelly Paris, which featured a golliwog with the company's name circling it.

this exponentially growing field of black fashion studies. Within black fashion studies, as there is with fashion studies generally, we have many great historical studies or works that display a historical sensibility and employ historical research and writing practice. What I am advocating for is turning to ancestors and the details of their lives and works as a discursive edifice for exploring historic moments beyond the surface understanding of particular figures and critical events, and broadening the epistemological and pedagogical scope of black fashion studies beyond the limits of what is seemingly possible. Consider, for example, the ways in which the life and works of black queer writer ancestors such as Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam were excavated or amplified by scholars across multiple disciplines to form the now established field of black queer studies and the theory and praxis of black queer theory. Through this work, disciplines like English, history, sociology and anthropology, and interdisciplines like performance studies, gender and sexuality studies, and ethnic studies, have been informed, productively challenged by, and intellectually and ethically reinvigorated by the development of black queer studies and its accountability to and foundation upon black queer ancestors.

As a fashion studies scholar and teacher who always begins with black queer-feminist theory and praxis as my approach to texts and contexts, I am especially interested in what can grow from a substantive, intentional and purposed recuperation of black queer life and culture within the trinity of fashion, style and beauty history. Elsewhere I have discussed the pervasiveness of 'historical erasure' of black LGBTQ life and culture as an epistemological violence wherein the lives and contributions of black LGBTQ people to US and global history, culture and politics are omitted or have not been thoroughly examined and engaged (Pritchard 2014). Conversely, I have documented how the pursuit of 'rootedness', to borrow a phrase from Toni Morrison (1984), has some individuals turn to ancestors as a critical intellectual resource to identify historical erasure, challenge and survive its negative effects, and establish visible connections to cultural and political genealogies that will provide inspiration and sustenance for generations to follow. When I consider contemporary black fashion studies, I am drawn to the presence of black queerness in black sartoriality – historically and contemporarily – and think of what engaging meaningfully, consistently and complexly with our ancestors' lives and works offers as a research methodology, pedagogical innovation and personal ritual for achieving rootedness individually and as a field of study.

A historical flashpoint is the 1980s and the black gay fashion superstars that ruled the day, and in that time, seemed that they would rule the world. Among them was Philadelphia native Willi Smith, known for easy breezy garments created from Indian cottons and traditional colour schemes that he turned into chic, practical and accessible American sportswear that generated US \$25 million dollars in revenue at the height of its success; Fabrice Simon, a Haitian native who employed Haitian embroiderers to create a signature style of a beaded, body-hugging gown made of lightweight fabrics that were worn by pop stars, socialites and supermodels; and Patrick Kelly, the subject of a biography I am writing, who was the first American and first person of colour admitted into the prestigious *Chambre Syndicale du Prêt-à-Porter des Couturiers et des Créateurs de Mode*. Further seizing the moment to build a global fashion brand, he signed a multimillion-dollar deal with American conglomerate Warnaco (see Martin n.d.; Schiro 1998; Capace 2000).

What Smith, Simon and Kelly share are not just that they are three of a cadre of black gay designers who, in the 1980s, achieved star status. These three, and many more black queer men inside and outside of the fashion industry, all died due to AIDS-related illnesses within only a few years of achieving massive success. And when they died there was, and still is now, a mourning of not all that they were but also of what many saw as their infinite potential – the kind that black people in fashion had not seen with such abundance in the industry before or since. I turn to these three designers, and a too brief biographical sketch here, as an example of ancestors whose lives and contributions could be touchstones for a larger number of individuals whose lives are lost to us, but whose contributions endure with great theoretical, pedagogical, creative and of course historic potential for contemporary black fashion studies. Indeed, the implications for a deeper engagement with the history of black people in fashion today are also vast.

Through this focus some provocations emerge: who are the black queer forebears of fashion studies? Who are the ones who complicate our sense of fashion, style, aesthetics and how we understand fashion studies and the fashion industry today? Who are these black supernovas, individuals who too briefly illuminate and give light to so many around them, and may continue to do so long after their physical lives have faded? If the fashion industry cannot find a way to celebrate and seriously engage these individuals who had legitimate, empirical and sustained success, how will they ever do it for their descendants who are in their midst? Given this problematic, what accountability do fashion studies scholars have and what role might we play in answering the call of our ancestors to employ their lives and works as useable bases on which to forge interventions in the history, theory and pedagogy of fashion studies? These ancestors – brilliant, beautiful, black queer geniuses who loved, dreamed, dared, worked, employed, laughed, danced, were inspired and inspiring – may be black supernovas exploding onto a black fashion studies that is flourishing, but may further do so through additional light.

## REFERENCES

- Capace, N. (2000), 'Patrick Kelly', in *Encyclopedia of Mississippi*, St. Clair Shores, MI: Somerset Publishers, pp. 259–62.
- Martin, R. (n.d.), 'Willi Smith', in *Encyclopedia of Fashion*, <https://goo.gl/FxCMg7>. Accessed 17 May 2016.
- Morrison, T. (1984), 'Rootedness: Ancestor as foundation', in M. Evans (ed.), *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Garden City: Anchor P/Doubleday, pp. 339–45.
- Pritchard, E. D. (2014), "'Like signposts on the road": The function of literacy in constructing black queer ancestors', *Literacy in Composition Studies*, 2: 1, pp. 29–53.
- Schiro, A.-M. (1998), 'Fabrice Simone, 47, designer of glittery evening clothes', *New York Times*, N.Y./Region, 5 August.

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Eric Darnell Pritchard is an assistant professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is the author of the book *Fashioning Lives: Black Queers and the Politics of Literacy*. Currently, he is at work on the biography, *Nothing Is Impossible: The Life and Work of Patrick Kelly*.

Contact: English Department, 608 South Wright Street, Urbana, IL 61801, USA.

E-mail: [ericdpritchard@gmail.com](mailto:ericdpritchard@gmail.com)

Eric Darnell Pritchard has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

---