

Wrapped in cloth

Sharon Peoples
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia
sharon.peoples@anu.edu.au

Abstract

In Canberra on 13th February 2008 Ngunnawal Elder, Matilda House, regaled in a possum skin cloak, welcomed all assembled on Ngunnawal land to witness the Apology to the Stolen Generation at the opening of the 42nd sitting of the Australian Parliament. Such hope was invested in the day and the full repercussions are perhaps yet to be felt. One of the stylistic consequences of postcolonialism has been the global invigoration of ethnic/traditional dress and, in Australia, recognising that Indigenous culture is both innovative and is a continuing tradition, this has arguably opened the potential for a dynamic challenge to Western ceremonial dress practices through the wearing of possum skin cloaks at such a traditional event. While ceremonial dress may seem removed from the day to day fashion industry, what has spawned is a slow growing Indigenous fashion industry that now runs an Indigenous Fashion Week. It has the usual key actors, such as the (Indigenous) supermodel, the (Indigenous) star designers and (Indigenous) celebrities that promote (Indigenous) fashion. This paper focuses on the 'traditional' versus 'tradition' and West versus non- West. More particularly by using case studies such as, Ernabella Designs and Tiwi designs, the paper explores how the printed fabric cottage-industry that has been the bedrock of contemporary Indigenous fashion and has been the springboard for the industry. Balancing between using traditional motifs ascribed to individual Indigenous people and the demands of commercial ventures has been fraught with complexities.

Key words: possum skin cloaks, Indigenous dress practices, postcolonial