Nica Cornell

SICKNESS IN STYLE

A Memoir of Distress and Dislocation through Dress

Fashion and Personal Style Studies

Collection Editor
JOSEPH H. HANCOCK II

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

SICKNESS IN STYLE

Nica Cornell

SICKNESS IN STYLE

A Memoir of Distress and Dislocation through Dress

Fashion and Personal Style Studies

Collection Editor

Joseph H. Hancock II

LPP

First published in 2025 by Lived Places Publishing

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781916985186 (pbk)
ISBN: 9781916985209 (ePDF)
ISBN: 9781916985193 (ePUB)

Cover design by Fiachra McCarthy
Book design by Rachel Trolove of Twin Trail Design
Typeset by Newgen Publishing, UK

Lived Places Publishing
P.O. Box 1845
47 Echo Avenue
Miller Place, NY 11764

www.livedplacespublishing.com

To David, *vir alles*

Abstract

Navigating the development of her disabling mental illness from her home in South Africa to university in Oxford and recovery in London, author Nica Cornell uses the garments she travelled with to reflect on her experience. Cornell explores the effect of garments such as her Ankara sheath dress, sub fusc, and second-hand clothing, and how they influenced her experience of alienation, exclusion, and realisation.

Sickness in Style explores the challenges of dressing and how it can become an obstacle to accessing the external world, as well as how beauty can be rediscovered through second-hand outfits. This book is ideal reading for students of Fashion Studies, Disability Studies, Psychology, and Migration Studies.

Key words

Fashion, lived experience, disability, recovery, PTSD, panic attacks, relationships, immigration, accessibility, second-hand fashion, dress

Contents

Content warning

This book contains explicit references to, and descriptions of, situations which may cause distress. This includes references to and descriptions of:

- Suicidal thoughts and intentions
- Complex post-traumatic stress disorder
- Ableism, discrimination, and microaggressions
- Medical negligence
- Immigration trauma

Please be aware that references to potentially distressing topics occur **frequently** and **throughout** the book.

Introduction

A floor length sequined white evening gown, worn with a silk, hot pink shirt & feather boa.

A rented evening gown from Sue Farmer – the costume hire place down the road in Pinelands, a suburb of Cape Town, South Africa. One of my favourite places in the world. I wanted to be Sue – to have access to that array of selves. For we are transformed by dress. I remember the titillation of picking out the outfit, as much as I remember the party – and not only because I had far too much tequila. I couldn't help it. The others couldn't be left to do shots alone, and I'd made two house rules for my farewell party at the colourful house on Riverside Drive.

1. Be nice to my cats

2. Take a shot if you mention Oxford.

I hadn't even been there yet, but I was already *gatvol* (the Afrikaans word for fed up which translates directly as 'full of holes') of the glassy-eyed look people got when they spoke about it. It was just another university to me.

You'd think I'd have learned my lesson from four years at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, now Makhanda. How we fought for a name change, among many other things. To no longer be educated in the name of a white supremacist who epitomised colonialism and imperialism. Because symbols matter – especially when they are on fucking everything. The Black Student Movement, of which I was a member, saw many vital victories and many painful losses. I was hospitalised with major depressive disorder and intermittent anxiety within six months of completing my Honours degree in Political and International Studies at Rhodes. Maybe it's like labour, some surge of hormones makes you forget the pain? So, it's an achievement to be alive two years later, in my sparkly dress at my Mamma Mia themed farewell party, about to leave for a master's in another country. It seems too simple to claim ignorance now. But I wanted to study again and was too traumatised to return to the South African university landscape at that point. My boyfriend lived in London, and I wanted to give us a shot. I needed distance from my parents. I didn't understand the collegiate system – I didn't even know the word.

Now, I wonder how I could not have done more research. Perhaps because I knew that if I did, I wouldn't have the courage to get

on the plane. I already had my doubts. I wanted to go to SOAS, or Goldsmiths, where I'd gotten in but not received funding. It was the notoriously conservative Oxford that offered a scholarship. I hoped that by studying African Studies, I'd be surrounded by students with common interests, at least. I'd remain connected to my continent – because place matters too. We live in our bodies, then in that with which we adorn them, then in a place.

I was raised by anti-apartheid activist parents. I understood I was South African before I was anything else. I had a responsibility to my country – more so, because I am white. People who looked like me had plundered and damaged this place that birthed me. I had a responsibility to try, in some small way, to be better than the history I carried in my body. For better or for worse. And things were about to get worse.

Learning objectives

- How can immigration impact physical and mental health?
- How does disability affect one's relationship with dress?
- How can dress be a source of comfort and resilience when grappling with trauma?

Part I

1
International student orientation: Oxford, England

An off the shoulder black cotton top I'd owned for a decade. Cerulean blue jeans. A sling bag in a red, yellow & black Ankara fabric.

I dress for the orientation day for international students at the University of Oxford – in the dark of early autumn, in an Airbnb that is a kind lady's second bedroom in the next town over. My scholarship money hasn't come in yet, and we can't afford the accommodation in the town itself. It has taken everything I've earned just to get here, what with application, travel and visa fees (which included a lung scan to prove I don't have tuberculosis and an English test – my two degrees from an

English-medium university, and a decade long publication record were insufficient).

I notice a hole in the elastic of my white cotton panties, and this ordinary detail looms large in my mind – such a stark contrast to the grandeur and scale of the buildings I spied from the bus the afternoon before. I feel extraordinarily small in comparison, and that is before I arrive at the Examination Schools building on High Street and see the plaque to Cecil John Rhodes on the wall. I already know about the statue they'd refused to take down when the Rhodes Must Fall movement reached Oxford. But nobody has mentioned the plaque.

I have already written my poem *CJR*[1], to process the traumas I experienced during my time in the Rhodes Must Fall movement.

They say Cecil John Rhodes didn't like women.
He dogs me.
I've known his name longer than I've known it was
one.
Before they put the wires in, whenever I close my
mouth (often)
my bottom teeth dig small troughs in His gums
my father drives me
on His avenue
to the house
where he left me behind
(he remembers the plants/not his seed.)
When I am listening to my history teacher
tell me I deserve to be someone's mother/
someone's wife, thinking I should write this
down before I forget I'm worthy

He is ripping my skirt to show my thighs aren't
as smooth as my prose.
After I fled to the closest border town,
tried to love a man who needs a mother and a
wife (but not me)
tried to love a cause who needs a writer and a
student (but not me)
He claps as the Vice Chancellor calls my
name/the dogs.

That line…"I've known his name longer than I've known it was one," is not poetic licence. I grew up off Rhodes Avenue in University Estate, Cape Town. We walked in the forest and climbed on the lion statues at Rhodes Memorial. At high school, we were taught about him as some kind of hero and I remember writing an essay and being vaguely impressed. My mom, on the other hand, was decidedly not impressed with what we were being taught. We visited the cottage where he died the peaceful death he denied others. My aunt is an oral historian, who has interviewed people who are employed as domestic workers, farm labourers, gardeners, nuns, and priests. She argues with the people at Rhodes Cottage, which is just around the corner from where she lives, disputing the narrative they are peddling. Studying a year of art history in my undergraduate degree at Rhodes University, I was set the task of how we would transform the space of what in Cape Town was affectionately known as 'Rhodes Mem'.

I am of the post-colony. Our symbolic landscape is contradictory. There's such a preoccupation with the notion that taking down statues is 'erasing history.' I wish that history could be erased. But whether we prop up these towers of stone, or tear them down,

that history is alive in the everyday life of South Africans and Zimbabweans.

I last half a day in Oxford that first day, then cannot take it anymore and flee back to my boyfriend's student flat in Ealing, London.

2
Sub fusc: Oxford, England

I learn the term 'sub fusc,' short for sub fuscus meaning dark brown in Latin. This mandatory outfit entails black skirt or trousers; plain white collared shirts with sleeves; black academic gown and mortar board; black ribbon tie, and black stockings or socks.

'Socks, tights and stockings ***must*** *be worn and must cover the ankle entirely. There should be no gap between the bottom of the trouser leg or skirt and the top of the socks or stockings' (University of Oxford, 2022).*

Whole adults are sent to change their socks on the day.

New students stand in spindling queues in the rain, waiting to be admitted, to wind up a scruffy narrow wooden staircase and cram in beneath the grand, ornately decorated dome of the Sheldonian Theatre. The brief minutes of the ensuing matriculation ceremony feel like being initiated into a cult. I am utterly saturated by the scale of the space and its overwhelming grandeur; the ancient language of Latin hanging in the air as alchemy and the mass constituted by the audience's uniform dress. I am reminded of nothing so much as attending Mass as a child with my Catholic granny, and not understanding the priest. But this

is an institution of education, of critical thinking, or so it has proclaimed. Not this mass performance of uniformity and alienation. By the time the Vice-Chancellor speaks in English to say that we are all now members of Oxford for life, I am already wondering if I want to be.

3
Dinner with the Provost: Oxford, England

A maroon sheath dress in Ankara fabric, with a pattern of mielies, or corncobs. I had it made in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), when I visited with my Congolese-South African best friend after finishing my Honours degree. This was the dress I had worn beneath my academic gown to my postgraduate graduation ceremony in South Africa.

My College, I quickly discover, is notoriously conservative – even for Oxford. As part of my pre-arrival pack, they send me a notice saying there are embroidery classes available if I am bringing a partner from South Africa. The implied assumption that the student would be a man was not so far out of line with what I was told when I got there – that 1985 was when my College first let women in. Well, my boyfriend lives in London, is a six-foot man, and probably would enjoy an embroidery class or two. The pack also told me that there would be various formal occasions. I packed all my most formal clothing, most of which are cocktail dresses I'd had made in Ghana and the DRC in Ankara fabric. That and a ballgown I'd worn to my matriculation dance, among other events – a raw silk gown with a boned bodice and sweetheart neckline, and a tiered skirt with layers of patterned organza. For us, matriculation was the end of high school.

There are no other African Studies students in my College, and only one or two of colour – including a Ugandan student who tells me I am the first person he'd met who knew what (not where, what) Uganda was.

I make a friend from Luxembourg studying Migration Studies while queuing for the most patronising presentation on mental health I can imagine. I've lived with major depressive disorder, and anxiety, since I was a child – I am only two years out of the hospital where they found the medication that saved my life.

Thankfully I am not living on the main site of the College, where I stray onto the grass once and am shouted at by a man actually wearing a three-piece tweed suit that, "We do not walk on the grass." Somehow the weight of being a walking caricature has

yet to wear him down. I am living, along with many postgraduates, at James Mellon Hall on Rectory Road in Cowley. This part of town feels more normal to me, and I breathe easier when I get over the bridge into it. I meet people who look at me askance when I tell them I live in Cowley.

I am invited to my first College dinner, wearing my academic gown over formal dress. I purposefully wear my maroon Ankara dress printed with *mielies* (Afrikaans for corncobs), to assert – mostly for myself – that it is possible to bring my politics and identity into the strained halls of Oriel. It is already becoming apparent that this is not the case. On coming into the formally dressed hall, which I notice has a stained-glass window dedicated to Rhodes, I am directed to the head table that sits at a perpendicular angle to the long tables of students and staff. I thought I'd be sitting with my new friend from Luxembourg. But I seem to have been allocated a seat right next to the Provost, who – no kidding – has a gavel in reach. I sit down at the table, and he asks me where I am from. I say South Africa. His response with a wag of his finger is, "None of that Rhodes nonsense from you." Any hope I had left that this place would be different, that maybe I could be myself here, is swiftly pulverised.

It is an excruciating dinner, lukewarm pigeon and popcorn sauce aside. I try to explain, while acutely conscious that my visa depends on my scholarship which comes from the College, why this is not ancient history for us. The weight of it. To say enough that I don't feel a total traitor for sitting here at all. He quite clearly finds it entertaining.

After, I strip the dress off in my new friend's room on the main site like it is on fire. I won't wear it again. Its vibrant colours vibrate