

Lifestyles | Fashion Culture Podcast

CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT Transcript

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[DR. VALERIE STEELE]

Hi, I'm Valerie Steele, Director and Chief Curator of The Museum at FIT, the most fashionable museum in New York City. Welcome to our Fashion Culture Podcast Series, featuring lectures and conversations about fashion.

[UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

I just encourage people to find what makes them feel strong. Like these clothes... this clothing makes me feel strong and like I can do almost anything in it. In fact, I initially started dressing like this because I wanted to protect myself at historic sites, because I wanted to communicate to people, "Hands off. I'm a human being," and break the fantasy world that some historic sites build.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES IN]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

I'm Tamsen Young, digital media manager at The Museum at FIT, and this is our special podcast series, Lifestyles. In this series of interviews, I am speaking with people whose distinct expression of style is outside conventional fashion trends.

We have images of our guests on our website. Follow the link in the show notes.

[GROOVY MUSIC FADES OUT]

[ORCHESTRAL, CINEMATIC STRING MUSIC FADES IN]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Today I am speaking with Cheyney McNight, an historical interpreter and artist. Cheyney is founder of Not Your Momma's History, a platform which helps museums and historical sites develop programming about slavery and the African experience. Her YouTube channel of the same name brings to life the day to day lives of Black people throughout American history in fun and interesting ways. Her video channel currently has over 250,000 subscribers and 9 million views.

As an artist, Cheyney envisions a future in which Black descendants shape the interpretation of former sites of mass enslavement. She uses clothing designs that meld 18th- and 19th- century silhouettes with modern textiles that speak to the Black experience in America. In 2021 Cheyney was chosen to be an African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund Fellow for the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Her project, titled “The Ancestor’s Future: An Afrofuturist Journey Through History,” was both a piece of performance art and a conversation inspired by Afrofuturism about the future of historic preservation on former sites of enslavement.

Welcome and thank you for joining me, Cheyney!

[ORCHESTRAL, CINEMATIC STRING MUSIC FADES OUT]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Thank you for having me.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Would you kindly describe the outfit you're wearing today?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

So today I'm wearing a long dress that has long sleeves. There's buttons down the front from my neck to about mid-thigh, and I am wearing a yellow leather and silver and porcelain necklace. It's very hard... A little bit hard to describe. It's a little bit big. It's a chunky piece. And my collar is a short collar. And the fabric is blue and black and white and grey wax print. And it is a Dutch wax print. So it was made in the Netherlands specifically for a West African audience or for purchasers throughout West Africa. And I saw this is a pretty popular print among Senegalese women. I really like this. So that's what I'm wearing today.

So my headwrap is a rust color. It's made out of a cotton material, and it is tied up and knotted up because I really like the volume at the top of my head rather than sitting lower. So I also like the drama of things higher. The higher the head, the closer to the heavens.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

People must stop you on the street. I must imagine they're just like, “You look fabulous.” The dress is...

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

I first got it done in a shirt, a top. And so I shop a lot at the African market in Harlem on 116th Street. Please, you all. They have moved! They are now inside. Please go support them, amazing! And I purchased the fabric, and I held on to it for a few years and I made a top from it. And then later on the dress. I was like, “Do I need another thing out of this print? Why yes I do. Mhmm! Mhmm!”

[TAMSEN AND CHEYNEY LAUGH]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So it's raining today. Is your look similar to what you would wear on other days?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

No. So this is more so when I am interpreting to the public. So I was interpreting earlier to a school group. So, this is something I would wear in the museum or a historic site. My style is usually more of a capsule collection other times. So I have a... it will look similar to the top part of my gown. I love large volume on my shoulders. I believe in taking up space. My shoulders, I think, are one of my best features because I carry mid-19th century clothing quite well. And so usually I have a skirt or a petticoat, a mid-19th century petticoat, from an 1860's pattern in a variety of colors purple, yellow, pink, sometimes black, brown. But I really like the obnoxious colors on my petticoats. And the top is usually a wax print, and that's usually through the winter, what I'm wearing every day. Sometimes I am corseted, other times I'm not. Sometimes it's a full corset. Sometimes it's a half corset. It really depends on what I'm feeling in the mornings.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

How did you come to dress in this historical vein?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

There's a few reasons why I came to dressing like this. Number one is I started living history. So I started around 2013 and I started getting custom clothing made for me, made for my body. And it was like an "aha!" moment.

The other thing was I started to study West African fashion, specifically Nigerian, Yoruba fashion; Senegalese fashion; and Ghanaian and from Mali as well. But Senegalese is the thing that I'm very obsessed with. I think the women from Senegal just... they dress so amazing. And when I first saw a Senegalese woman walking down a sidewalk in Harlem, I didn't know that she was Senegalese, but I knew that I was like, "Who are you? You just look so majestic." And she looked powerful, and I wanted to look like her.

But I wanted to not imitate her. But I wanted to find my own thing. And also I wanted to kind of, in a broader sense, bring that to Black Americans. So, Americans who are descended from enslaved persons. One thing I noticed is that we don't have our own cultural dress, and I really wanted to develop a cultural dress for African Americans, Black Americans. And this dress is how it began. But it started around 2015, 2016.

I started to go to the African market in Harlem, and first I would purchase dresses, longer dresses and then modify them. So I would cut off the bottom and take a mid-19th century dress and chop off...

[CHEYNEY CHUCKLES]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

...chop off the skirt off that dress and modify it in certain... and everyone, these are all repros!

[CHEYNEY CHUCKLES]

And so that's how it began. And then I started sketching. And then I brought an 18... I think it was like 1859, around then, repro gown to a Senegalese tailor. And I said that I wanted him to make this in wax print, and he made it. And there was just something soulless about it. And I realized that I was still very much solidly... I don't know if this is the right word for it but... working in a colonized framework. I was still not fully moving from my experiences and who I am. And so I went away. I wore the dress a few times, and then I started to sketch. And I started to look more at Senegalese fashion, including Yoruba fashion as well from Nigeria. And I came up with this silhouette. But I still didn't have it quite right. But I handed it over to Falou.

I picked out the fabrics and I said, "Here's my drawing, but I want you to bring a little bit of you into it as well, because I really want it to look from a Senegalese perspective," and he dropped the back. And if you'll notice, the waist is angled. And he made it a lot looser because I was trying to shape it over a corset. And he was like, "A Senegalese woman, yes, they do have corsetry." And I don't know if you've seen a lot of the recent [inaudible] fashions, they have been out in Harlem and it is a fashion show. So Senegalese women do come out in a corset. However, when we're looking every day, he was like, "No, that's not the thing to do." And so this is what we landed on. And I thought that it was very solidly through my experiences as a Black American woman interacting with West Africans. And so this is what we came up with.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Do you have dressmaking skills?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

I do, I do. So I've made a few... So my earlier prototypes that I brought to Falou were very interesting. So I do a lot of hand sewing. So a lot of my 18th-century gowns, I've made some of those. And I also have a... so I have a Mantua maker, Brooke Wellborn. And so she makes a lot of my 18th-century gowns. And Falou makes a lot of my everyday clothing and my interpretive clothing. But then I will for... I'm not going to pay someone when I could do some of the more basic things, like some of the petticoats and bed gowns for 18th century. So I try to handle a lot of that. But I have ADHD, so I will cut out the pattern and then I will quit halfway through.

[CHEYNEY LAUGHS]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

So that's why I hand over a lot of sewing to Falou. And then 18th-century clothing is just way too... at least the nicer pieces, they're just way too much complicated.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Very complicated.

[CHEYNEY LAUGHS]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Right, right. Once you get beyond work clothing, it's just... I can do math decently, but I hate it. So even though Brooke will say "No," it's all math.

[TAMSEN CHUCKLES]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So the fabrics that you purchase for the dresses, like the one you're wearing today, is it new fabric or is it thrifted fabric? Or do you sometimes have a combination of the two?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Oh my goodness. That's a great question. Um, all of it! So I do wear a lot of wax prints, but I'm also known for my denim. And as we know, denim uses a lot of energy and a lot of waste. So I do a lot of scavenging for denim scraps. And sometimes I may hold onto maybe two yards of denim for two years looking for a closer match so that I can then make something from it. Because as you can see, it's a lot of fabric involved in my dresses. And so denim, I tried to do found, but early on I did purchase a lot of denim new. It wasn't until the past five years that I switched over and actually, which leads me to the fact that during the... during 2020, I sold all of my modern clothes and restarted fully with my wardrobe. And so there was years and years of accumulating fabric. As we know, people who sew, you have your fabric stash, and I was really surprised that I could create a wardrobe from what I had. And then a lot of tops. I do Poshmark. So at this point I don't buy a lot new. There are some fabrics, obviously, that I do purchase new that I can't find anywhere else. But primarily it's thrifting, trading. So I do a lot of trading.

Other living historians may have some what we refer to as "Negro cloth," or what was marketed in the 18th century as Negro cloth. So I recently traded my work as an interpreter for eight yards of wool. So I also do that.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Fantastic.

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

I keep so... so many ways of accumulating fabrics, but also I don't just want to wear wax prints, because the experiences of Black Americans is just very complex. And the stories of Africans, and the only African fabric isn't just mud cloth and wax print. So I hope that through my clothing, I can help people expand their knowledge of African and West African textiles.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

You mentioned that you made a commitment to this style of dressing during COVID or at the beginning of COVID. Is there a reason for that?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

I think it was just such a wild life... a life changing time during COVID or the time. It's still COVID.

[CHEYNEY LAUGHS]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

But like during the time when we were locked down and it was a bit traumatic, you remember we were, you know, bringing in groceries with yellow cleaning gloves and wiping them down 'cause we just did not know how it was spread or what tomorrow would bring. And so I realized that from that day, I was going to wear exactly what I wanted to wear every day.

And, one thing that I've always been quite enamored with of West African tribes is that your clothing, your hair, your scarification marks are a zip code. People see you. And just by—especially 100 years ago, just 100 years ago, just 60 years ago—you could look at someone and know exactly who they are, where they are in society. And it was... you were in conversation with people. And it may not be for everyone, but I want, when people look at me, they know who I am, what I'm about. They know that I'm honoring my ancestors and that I'm hoping to reintroduce people to Black women who were enslaved.

Because I think a lot of times when people see a large Black woman in 19th century-ish clothing, they have this knee jerk reaction of “Mammy” and it's offensive. And my ancestors are not offensive. Now, minstrel show caricatures of my ancestors are offensive. So I'm not Aunt Jemima 'cause Aunt Jemima was not my ancestor. But I do want to represent and introduce people to my actual ancestors.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

You must get an array of responses to your dress style on the street. Can you talk about some of those?

[CHEYNEY LAUGHS]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Oh, so it's interesting. Over the years I've figured out through trial and error what garments are appropriate for what times. So something like this, me walking down the street here, I get a lot of people mostly positive saying how much they like it. People will look, but that's not necessarily what I want to be presenting every day, even though I'm very proud of my personal style. So that's when I developed the capsule closet. So with exchangeable skirts. Also, it's going up and down stairs. I had to figure out the perfect length where I didn't need to pick up my dress. So all of my under petticoats are...

[FABRIC RUSTLES AS CHEYNEY LIFTS HER SKIRT TO REVEAL HER PETTICOATS]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Yeah, yeah, this is one of them.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Look at underneath!

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Yeah.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

For the listener, Cheney's picked up her dress. And underneath she has various layers of petticoat skirts, beautiful white linen with an eyelet, edged in orange thread. It's lovely.

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

I learned through trial and error.

[CHEYNEY CHUCKLES]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

I just need to be able to get up the perfect length to get up subway stairs without having to like... 'cause if I'm carrying something...

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Or have your dress touch the ground in the subway. Thank you very much.

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Exactly! So something like this I've learned also, like going up subway stairs, I'll just put it in the crook of my arm and... but also, cooking! Hearth cooking in these garments. So this is an example of something I regularly wear cooking over a fire. It's all natural materials. So my garments have caught on fire before. Because it's not synthetic, I do have time to take off my... it's usually my apron. I'm a little bit absent minded sometimes.

[CHEYNEY LAUGHS]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

You just take off the apron and stomp it out. It's usually why my apron is wool, 'cause it smolders. But just living in it, you just kind of figure out what you like... Also, how people interact with you. That was one of the reasons why I switched to this style, because in my interpretation, the way in which people were treating me was... Some people were treating me like a slave. And I am a modern person, proud of my enslaved ancestors, and I know that I could never be them. So I do not want to interact with the world as an enslaved person. And legally, I am a free woman.

[CHEYNEY LAUGHS]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Indeed!

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

So, how people interact with me in historically accurate reproductions is quite different from how people interact with me. You can kinda get an idea that I am talking about the mid-19th century, but you know, I... we are not in that time.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

But I imagine from the way that you picked up your skirt and held it in your arm, that maybe you glean some historical gestures from wearing historically inspired dress.

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Mmmm.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Do you think that might be true?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

I'm sure, I'm absolutely sure. It's kind of the thing about experiential archaeology, I guess, is that you can dig up an item from 200 years ago and you know logically how it was used, but because no one has it on video, or we may have vague descriptions about how things are used, people don't know the kind of quirks to using things. And so, it's usually through living history that you start to realize how people would sit and how people would move. And it kind of helps.

For example, we are very much used to knees closed because of the garments we wear. Sometimes we're more likely to have pants or shorts or skirts. And so just we've been taught to keep our knees closed and we can debate over if that's appropriate to be training young ladies like that. But that's how we sit now. But with your legs always covered usually all the way to your shin or to your ankles, you're not as conscious. Looking at even images of women sitting, you realize, "Ah, she's not sitting perfectly with her feet together." And maybe there are some variations. So yes, through just wearing the garments.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

What do your 18th-century garments look like and from what period are they and from where?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

It really all depends. Um, I also wasn't specific on where I was drawing my 19th century garments from. So it's kind of like with 19th century, there's like this generalized Western dress. We have usually from the East Coast where everyone were settled there. And so for 18th-century clothing, it's actually a little bit more expansive. I've drawn a lot from Dutch... 18th-century Dutch clothing. So we're looking at like the 1760s and 1770s. And I did that because I wanted to talk about Dutch culture in New York at the time, because there's a lot of interaction specifically between enslaved and their Dutch enslavers.

And so, for example, Sojourner Truth, we know that one of her first languages was Dutch. And so fully understanding you could tell a fuller story. And then also who does not like 18th-century French clothing? I mean, it's just so... Some of them, it's just so beautifully outrageous. At least the fashion plates. Of course, I do have a lot of English. Most of my work clothing is a lot of English inspired, but I love my 18th-century clothing because I have this amazing relationship with my mantua maker.

So Brooke Wellborn was trained in an apprenticeship at Colonial Williamsburg, and so she knows how... she's actually trained in the trade of mantua making. And she cuts the fabric directly on my body. And it's, it's just really... also the way in which our back and forth. So usually I pick out the prints and I do a drawing and I say, "This is what I want." And then sometimes we'll look at extant examples of 18th-century gowns. And then she usually makes it how they would have made it in the 18th century.

So we have these very interesting fabrics. These modern fabrics mixed with traditional garment construction, and we recently did a program where I designed a garment for this year's Pinkster Stroll. I'll talk a little bit about the Pinkster Stroll. I wanted panniers. So a little bit, again, I love taking up space. I think many people want me to shrink myself. I take a lot of pride in just being like, "Watch out world."

[CHEYNEY LAUGHS]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

And so the petticoat was from Burkina Faso, from the Mossi people. And it's... it looks like denim. It's not. But it's indigo dyed, wax-resist, and it's hand-woven. So the petticoat and then the top is actually a Negro cloth or slave cloth, which again was fabric marketed to enslavers. It's not one type of fabric. So this one is Virginia cloth. So it was wool and cotton, which was quite rare in the 18th century because cotton was quite expensive, as it was before the cotton gin. But there was some local cloth manufacturer which made it cheap enough to be marketed as slave cloth.

And then my landlady, Ms. Megan McLaughlin, she went to Ghana in the '70s and she brought back some printed fabric, hand-printed fabric, and she gave it to me about a couple years ago. I held on to it 'cause I wanted it to be made into something special. And that's the stomacher. We made it into the stomacher. But we come up with many different options. But I would say my favourite... I can't pick favorites among dressmakers, but I would say my relationship with Brooke is really amazing 'cause it kind of mirrors what a relationship like that would have looked like. She also can tell me if I've lost weight or gained weight or muscle, like when I started lifting she was quite peeved with me because she had to readjust the arm size. So, I think that's pretty cool.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Can you explain what a stomacher is?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

So a stomacher is a piece that is not quite attached to an 18th-century gown, but it's a piece that gets first pinned on the stays, or the 18th-century version of a corset, and it has a lot of bone... stays have a lot of boning. And you can pin things directly onto the stays. And one of those is the stomacher. And usually you can see the stomacher and it's usually not attached to the rest of the garment. Sometimes it is, but we'll just say it's not.

[CHEYNEY CHUCKLES]

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

So your look, your lifestyle, has a strong relationship to your work as a historical interpreter. But does it also relate to other aspects of your life?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Mhm. I think my clothing connects to all parts of me and all parts of my life. So the activism I do, it is my clothing. It kind of lets people know what tone are we setting at this point. And I'm constantly going to parks and setting up tables and engaging with people and talking to them about slavery. The Let's Talk About Slavery table. And I just talk for a few hours with people, chunks of time. Now, I have a lot of volunteers helping me as spotters 'cause you can never be too careful. But I also think we're in a time where every second counts. And every moment I have with the children of my community, the youth of my community, I try to make every piece tell a story visually and sound and feel so that even if I have just five minutes with a child around the block from me, they will remember me and they'll also... that will plant a seed.

Because I developed a program called the Pinkster Stroll, where we walk from Dyckman Farmhouse to 77th Street, a group of black New Yorkers in 18th-century inspired clothing, which is mainly in wax prints. And we walk. And it's a bonding time. So Pinkster is Pentecost in Dutch, and it was the only time that Black New Yorkers really had off. And so they would travel from miles around to congregate at public spaces, to interact, to connect with their culture, their music, their food ways.

So years and years ago, I was walking down one 125th Street and I saw a group of people in wax prints, but they were in 18th-century silhouettes. And I was like, "What is going on here?" And they said, they screamed out to me, "Happy Pinkster!"

I was like, "What's Pinkster?" But I was just so... up to that point, a lot of representation of Black people in historical clothing... As I grew up in Georgia, like we have a lot of *Gone With the Wind* stuff and it's all... because it's a lot of these portrayals were based off of minstrel shows, not the historical record. And so I was instantly turned off by some of that stuff. But this! It was not performative, and it was just they genuinely seemed to be enjoying it and excited. And it was for a Black gaze. And that was something that I was just so... "Wow!" And so that really planted a seed all the way in 2011. And when I started developing this program in, I think it was like 2018, 2017, it stuck with me. And so that's my hope for children who engage with me, children from

my community. Hopefully I planted a seed and I also want them to be... not to find shame that they're descendants of enslaved persons. But that should be a point of pride to say that we are a people who survived. And, we help in molding the global culture, and it's something we should embrace and be proud of.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

Do you have any insights you'd like to share about the power of personal presentation?

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Yeah. I think that many people with eccentric style or eccentric fashion... wears eccentric fashion, people expect us to say, "Be bold and wear whatever you want." But I just ask that people be authentic to themselves. And there's power in who you are and who your community is, and the authenticity of being yourself.

And I think one thing that is painful to watch is the flattening of style. That people look online. And for example, let me speak to my experience. People will see my garment and the first thing they ask is, "Where can I buy this?" And I wish that people, instead of asking, "Where can I buy this," is, "How can I wear something that I relate to the way that you relate to your garments?" because I don't want to influence people to look like me. Um, that would frustrate me. And I know that a lot of people say, "You put your clothing and things out there." Actually, you'll notice that I don't put a lot of my garments out there. Because I'm hoping that... It's not that I want to be the only person dressed like this. In fact, I want to encourage my community to take up the cultural dress. But I truly want people to be inspired by how I started dressing how I wanted to dress, and go out and find what's authentic to them and what connects what they're connected to.

I don't want people to be walking around in these garments, and the worst yet would be if someone took it and took it to a fast fashion to recreate it. Which unfortunately, one of my pictures did show up on a site. And it was, it was quite awful. But, you know, you can copy a snapshot of something I'm wearing in that moment, but the soul of it and how I relate to it, how people relate to it, it's constantly evolving and changing. So I don't quite mind that. I just think it's sad. And I just encourage people to find what makes them feel strong. Like these clothes... this clothing makes me feel strong and like I can do almost anything in it. In fact, I initially started dressing like this because I wanted to protect myself at historic sites, because I wanted to communicate to people, "Hands off, I'm a human being," and break the fantasy world that some historic sites build. And so here I am. But I really, that's my hope for people in the future.

[TAMSEN YOUNG]

It's a great message. It's been a pleasure to have you join us today. Thank you so much.

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

Thank you for having me. Yay!

[GROOVY, UPBEAT MUSIC FADES IN]

[VALERIE STEELE]

If you like what you hear, please share your thoughts on social media using the hashtag FashionCulture.

[GROOVY, UPBEAT MUSIC FADES OUT]

[CHEYNEY MCKNIGHT]

It may look like I have very complex dressing techniques, but I like it very simple. And so that's kind of how I operate my wardrobe. It just needs to be done fast, simple, and straightforward.

And my goal is to make my garments last as long as possible. I'm not someone who's like... If you see me in something, you are gonna to see me in it 1000 more times. Like my gown that I wore to Italy, the purple and gold? Let me tell you. You are going to see me at every red carpet in that gown, okay? 'Cause that's going to be my dressing up gown for the rest of eternity.

[CHEYNEY CHUCKLES]