

From the Editor

BLACK FASHION ART. PLEASURE. POLITICS.

Fashion matters. It provides and pulls tight the threads of identity that tell others how to locate one within a culture, in relationship to a society, or inside the realms of one's imaginings. Such has long, if not always, been the case. For example, during the early modern period in Europe, when members of the white elite sat for portraits, they understood fashion choice to be an important means by which to construct a public image that could lead, perhaps, to their securing a spouse, or provide a way to memorialize the dead, or even to emphasize their political and dynastic relationships. At the other end of the class spectrum and in a more modern period, despite the fact that they were possibly struggling financially, many African Americans who migrated from the rural South to the urban North in the United States during the 1920s took themselves to the local portrait studio for images of themselves dressed in the latest, usually borrowed, fashions to send back south to relatives as proof they were prospering. Which is to say, across race and time, for those who are elite and those who are not, fashion has the ability to speak, or communicate, in a widely understood language that makes collective and individual identities real, legible, and possible.

The significance and meaning of fashion are nowhere more visible than in how it manifests and functions at the site of the collision between identity and race in the African diaspora. There, black fashion has identified and continues to identify wearers as part of political, cultural, or social groups or movements. It has provided and continues to provide both an economic opportunity for individual designers and the opportunity for a larger diasporan fashion industry to flourish. It is a platform that allows artists to critique larger social and economic systems and can also challenge viewers who disagree with, do not understand, or are made uncomfortable by the "soul-satisfying" choices some black people make about how they wish to adorn them-

selves in public. Indeed, many will remember the ways in which Florida teenager Trayvon Martin's choice to wear a hoodie, given some people's understanding of the relationship between that particular article of clothing and a menacing, violent, urban, male identity, became justification for his murder at the hands of George Zimmerman. For these reasons and more, it is crucial to explore the function of fashion as an underexplored facet of African diasporan identity formation.

With contributions from a mix of academics, artists, journalists and writers, and a filmmaker, this special issue of *Nka* is at its core an interdisciplinary opportunity to "think" fashion and race globally and temporally. While it is not an encyclopedic compilation of thinking about race, art, politics, or fashion, each contribution functions as an individual lens, so to speak, capturing crucial snapshots of particular moments, figures, and events that are central to understanding the whole. Taken together, the texts in this volume explore various definitions and meanings of black fashion as a launching point for thinking about race, gender, politics, power, and class.

Toward that end, some essays probe fashion's various roles at the intersections of ethnicity and gender, while others explore fashion's ways of showing how fragile claims to racial authenticity often are, as well as the many ways in which difference gets commodified. Some pieces explore how women and men construct identities or craft selves through body modification in order to negotiate relationships to and with their bodies, families, and nations, while others examine how fashion is democratized by consumers at the same time that it is impacted by self-narratives about personal relationships with cultural standards of beauty, whether vexed or not. In short, this volume makes clear how and why black fashion means and matters.

The "meaning" and "mattering" are constantly evolving. Black fashion simultaneously reaches back into the past as it defines our present and future. Indeed, an article from the online media site CP Africa describes how a multimillion-dollar Dutch company, Visco Group, came to dominate the manufacturing of what many in Africa and elsewhere take to be "traditional" African wax fabrics. Though many in West and central Africa wear the fabric today, its provenance is actually Indonesian, and the relationship of

the company to the fabric goes back as far as 1846, when the Dutch, while expanding their presence, brought the fabric back to Europe. Though there was no market for it there, they quickly discovered that Africans on the continent couldn't get enough of it. The African appetite for this fabric continues today and is so strong that the company's president has said: "There are 400 million people living in West and central Africa, and we are world famous there. You see people wearing us everywhere."¹ He went on to add that for West Africans, their products were about much more than fashion or design but had become "part of the culture."

In other words, a colonial invention for Africans and Westerners became a misleading symbol of African identity. Consequently, one of the artists whose work appears in this volume, Yinka Shonibare, takes up this conundrum in his work in order to illustrate an African misunderstanding of the continent's traditional clothes and symbols. He uses the Dutch wax fabric in many of his works. Today, around the world, that same fabric is considered an iconic marker for African identity, history, and culture and is also central to the rise of a newly thriving fashion industry on the continent. From the nineteenth century to today, from Indonesia through Europe and then Africa, this is but one example of the tightly woven relationships between fashion, race, economics, and identity.

Black fashion is a key, though underexplored, facet of black history, culture, and identity in the African diaspora. As Stuart Hall wrote in his seminal essay "Cultural Identity and the Diaspora": "Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past."² The specifics of how and why this is the case are the subject of this special issue.

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Notes

1 CPAfrica, "Visco Group: The Making of a Multimillion Dollar African Fashion Empire," www.cp-africa.com/2014/06/30/vlisco-africa/ (accessed May 14, 2014).

2 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and the Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 222–37. Available at www.readbag.com/rlwclarke-theory-primarysources-hallculturalidentityanddiaspora (accessed May 14, 2014).

