

Victoria Rovine, *African Fashion, Global Style: histories, innovations, and ideas you can wear*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press (pb US\$40 – 978 0 253 01409 2). 2015, 315 pp.

Victoria Rovine analyses a breath-taking number of ‘African fashion’s many manifestations’ across the continent and the diaspora. Rather than just glossing over this abundance as in a ‘survey format’ (p. 50), *African Fashion, Global Style* presents an awe-inspiring intricacy of detail without being overwhelming to the reader (well, maybe a bit overwhelming – but in a good way). Rovine delves into the way that each designer transforms their own traditions, navigates the global market, and gives ‘their garments [a] capacity to evoke emotions and events as well as cultures and places’ (p. 156). Yet with all this immensity of scope and detail, Rovine still manages to weave her richly researched case studies into a coherent theoretical whole.

In an encyclopaedic review of the tradition/modernity, the West/the rest debates, Rovine encompasses and goes beyond Western fashion discourses. Situating fashion as the epitome of modernity and placing it exclusively in the West, these discourses ‘reinforc[e] conceptions of Africa as distant, tradition-bound, and wholly separate from the high fashion cultures of Europe’ (p. 245).

Rovine redefines fashion, structuring her book so as to restructure this vision. In story after story, she demonstrates that ‘fashion is not defined by the proximity of clothing innovations to the global, European-centered fashion design and marketing system’ (p. 13). But she strategically agrees to the ‘universally accepted’ notion that ‘the defining feature of fashion is change’ (p. 13). Then she argues that ‘recognizing change requires an appreciation of the historical and cultural context within which dress innovations occur’ (p. 13). Providing the reader with ample opportunity to share this historical awareness, Rovine also criticizes its lack in ‘French fashion designers’ construction of an imagined Africa’ (p. 2). She begins with early twentieth-century designer Paul Poiret. His exoticizing ‘African-esque’ fashions epitomize the ‘intersection’ between ‘the height of [France’s] colonial era’ and ‘the development of the French fashion industry’ (pp. 69–70). Poiret gives his fashions names like Timbuctu, ‘not to refer specifically to the city and its history but rather ... to create a sense of distant, almost mythical exoticism’ (p. 90). Tracing this practice along its genealogy, through Yves Saint Laurent to Jean Paul Gaultier, Rovine concludes: ‘This construction of an imagined Africa through dress continues into the present, maintaining surprising consistency across decades of political and cultural change’ (p. 69).

Ironically, it is Western fashion that remains in stasis, while African designers use both their own local sartorial traditions and Western dress to innovate. Rovine remarks that ‘for many contemporary designers like Jean Paul Gaultier, as for Paul Poiret, Africa is a brand rather than an actual location’, and ‘Africa-the-brand has changed little’ (p. 98). As she thus turns the tables, Rovine brings together her two key points about recognizing change and appreciating the specificities of context. African designers innovate by using African or Western dress to create a ‘sense of place’, in contrast to the no-place of African-esque French fashion (p. 114, 139, 184, 209, 218). She explores her examples by contrasting two categories of African design: ‘classical’ and ‘conceptual’. For ‘“classical” African fashion’, Rovine delves, for example, into Ben Nonterah’s ‘extensive use of adinkra ... steeped in [the] local history’ of ‘the Asante kingdom and Ghanaian national culture’ (p. 130), or Laduma Ngxokolo’s transformation of Xhosa beadwork into ‘computer aided knitwear designs’ (p. 151). For each indigenous motif, Rovine explores the local histories of imagery and meaning that the

designer ‘absorb[s] ... into the medium of fashion’, all the while ‘using the methods of the global fashion industry’ (p. 108).

Although ‘conceptual’ designers make ‘abstract or indirect references to African locations and histories’, many of them – Lamine Kouyaté, Themba Mngomezulu, Sakina M’Sa, Strangelove – working with recycled Western clothing, also ‘evoke cultures and places’ (p. 156, 133). In fact, for Rovine, their ‘recycled clothing as fashion goes a step further, employing the products of the West itself to dramatically challeng[e] ... the “flow of fashion time”’ (p. 203).

Throughout *African Fashion, Global Style*, Rovine demonstrates that African designers can innovate and ‘create localities’ because they use their garments for ‘storytelling’ (p. 209). While her own book reciprocates this act by telling the story of African fashion, the almost forty pages of endnotes tell a parallel and equally fascinating story of Rovine’s research journey. Through these notes, we can trace the outpouring of energy with which she ‘followed African fashion design from Bamako to Timbuktu, from Accra to Cape Town, and on to Paris, New York, Niamey, and elsewhere, interviewing designers from Kenya, Cameroon, Tunisia, and other countries’ (p. 23). The notes log visits to out-of-the-way archives and an intense engagement with art history and fashion studies.

Topping all this, Rovine includes dozens of high-quality photographs – some by herself, many others involving permissions from a dizzying array of archives and photographers. *African Fashion, Global Style* tells a double story: one about how to recognize the innovations of African fashion, the other about the epic journey of an intrepid scholar. Having woven this vast, disparate experience into a meaningful whole, Rovine achieves two advances for fashion writing. While convincing readers to share an ‘appreciation’ of all the ways in which African designers innovate, the book never falls into the promotional discourse of generalities about Africa Rising. Despite its immensity of scope and detail, the book never fragments into anecdote. Having successfully redefined fashion innovation, Rovine sets a new standard for fashion studies, whether Western or African.

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Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison, *African Dress: fashion, agency, performance*. London: Bloomsbury Academic Press (hb £60 – 978 0 85785 380 6; pb £25.99 – 978 0 85785 381 3). 2013, 224 pp.

This book presents original and empirically rich research on clothing with a strong focus on West Africa. The book combines contributions by younger scholars and by more established anthropologists, and all contributions are well written and offer vivid images of dressing practices. In her introduction, Karen Tranberg Hansen sets out the key reasons why dress studies are so important in anthropology. First, clothing is a means of mediation between the individual and society. Second, dress has a double function: it changes the body and supplements it. And third, clothing can be found in an endless number of different contexts.

The book is divided into four sections, shifting from a focus on the individual experience to more general meanings of clothing in the public sphere. Parts I and II deal exclusively with female dress in Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, Senegal and Mauritania, whereas Part III describes male costumes from Senegal, Mali, Niger and Kenya. Part IV does not address actual practices of clothing but