The articles gathered here explore the garments that are produced at the intersection of two subjects that have only recently been addressed together: Africa and fashion. The authors address multiple aspects of Africa’s production of and engagement with fashion, documenting local markets and transnational influences, encompassing garments designed by Africans as well as African styles created by non-Africans. Taken as a whole, these articles offer rich insights into local identities and global markets, creativity and tradition, the movement of styles, and the reshaping of meanings.

A small but growing literature is beginning to address the work of Africa’s haute couture fashion designers, including van der Plas and
Willemsen (1998), *Revue Noire* (1997–8), Mendy-Ongoundou (2002), Mustafa (2002), Geoffroy-Schneiter (2005), and Rovine (2004). Other recent work has explored specific local markets for clothing design in Africa, revealing the degree to which these practices reflect creative change over time—the hallmark of fashion. This analysis of local design practices is exemplified by Rabine (2002), Bastian (1996), Gondola (1999), Hansen (2000), Picton (1995), Renne (1995), Rovine (2008), and Perani and Wolf (1999), and several pieces in the edited volume Allman (2004). All demonstrate the complexity of local fashion production, many explore the diverse aesthetic, economic, social, and political forces at work in the production and marketing of changing styles.

African fashion appears in the global, Western-dominated realm of *haute couture* as well as in indigenous fashion economies, where designers may draw from international styles yet remain distinctly local. Fashion is difficult to define in a global context, requiring a negotiation of the slippery territory between practices classified as “African” and categories associated with the Western cultures. Fashion is usually associated with a particular market for modern, Western garments, beginning in mid-nineteenth-century Paris and since then centered in that city, in Milan, and in New York. Africa, and other non-Western sites, has no place in this conception of fashion, except as an occasional source of inspiration. As Niessen has asserted, a reassessment of this conception of fashion is long overdue: “A great divide between the studies of Western fashion/clothing processes and the universal phenomenon of dress/adornment still obtains. As a result, global dress events of profound implication for fashion theory are kept either hidden or barred from scrutiny” (Niessen 2003: 250).

Temporality is central in this division between Western and non-Western dress practices, epitomized by the all too prevalent discussion of non-Western dress in terms of an “ethnographic present” as opposed to the “perpetual future” associated with Western fashion’s continual rush to the next season. In but one example of this tendency, a reporter for the *New York Times* breezily noted the absence of changing dress styles in one rural Kenyan community, where British scouts for a modeling agency were looking for likely prospects: “Orma girls grow up wearing flip-flops, not heels. Their fashion is the same every season: colorful robes that billow with the breeze and shield virtually every bit of flesh” (Lacey 2003: 2). By declaring their dress to be unchanging, this reporter implicitly excludes Orma attire from the realm of fashion. Yet Joanne Eicher, whose research on African dress practices has been in the forefront of non-Western fashion studies, notes: “Fashion is, after all, about change, and change happens in every culture because human beings are creative and flexible” (Eicher 2001: 17). Recognizing the histories and networks out of which change emerges is key to the analyses presented here, placing these garments within the contexts that transform them from clothing into fashion.
That African dress has changed over time is clearly evident, even if those changes have never been explored in terms of fashion. The Western influence on African clothing has been well documented, and often characterized as a “loss” of Africa’s traditional cultures in the face of overpowering Westernization or Globalization (the two terms are often used interchangeably). A clear example of this rhetoric of loss can be found in Angela Fisher’s immensely popular and lavishly illustrated book, *Africa Adorned*. Over the course of her many visits to Africa, she noted the disappearance of “some outstanding styles of jewelry and dress,” and she found that groups whose “cultural and moral framework is still strong” were able to resist transformation from traditional to Western dress (Fisher 1984: 9-10). While certainly the drive to colonize and convert Africans led to coerced or forced adoption of Western clothing, it is important to recognize that the presence of Western styles in Africa today often constitutes a creative adaptation rather than a capitulation.

By exploring the movement of clothing forms between African and Western cultures—exchanges that flow in both directions—the articles in this special issue demonstrate the inadequacy of the “change as loss” model. Many of the styles of clothing that are produced in Africa’s highly internationalized urban centers draw from diverse sources, enriching rather than impoverishing their distinctly African styles. As is the case everywhere, African designers and consumers draw forms and styles from outside their immediate orbit, making these forms their own. As Hendrickson notes, the identities associated with clothing may shift as garments and styles travel: “When we see Africans using our products to create their identities—and vice versa—we learn that the meaning of body or commodity is not inherent but is in fact symbolically created and contested by both producers and consumers” (Hendrickson 1986: 1-16).

**African Fashion/Africa as Fashion**

Our examination of Africa’s role in fashion production is particularly timely, for with the new millennium the continent is remarkably prominent in the realms of fashion design and marketing. As I write this introduction, Suzy Menkes—arguably fashion’s most widely read journalist—has published a piece in the *New York Times Style Magazine* entitled “Next Stop, Africa.” In it, she predicts that global fashion markets are on the verge of creating “a fashion first: a popular movement that sees the beauty and craft in sub-Saharan Africa” (Menkes 2005: 60). Since 2002, the year of the conference in Iowa City that inspired this special issue, references to Africa have appeared in *haute couture* collections on major European and North American runways. Africa seems to be the muse *du jour* for a wide array of designers, including Jean Paul Gaultier, Donna Karan, Kenzo, and Dolce and Gabbana.
While Africa's profile in international fashion circles has been heightened by its appearance as a source of inspiration for Western designers, the many African designers who are themselves engaged in innovative transformations of African style receive little attention in the international fashion press. Their work emerges out of a long history of fashion in Africa, a continent whose styles of dress provide insights into both ancient cultures and the latest global fashion trends. Many African designers today create garments that make reference to or borrow from local clothing practices, often melding these forms with international influences. Their work spans diverse markets, from the seasonal runways of international haute couture to local markets, where garments reflect swiftly changing local styles.

Three of the articles presented here are focused on local fashion practices, yet all reveal the degree to which local and international fashion systems are intertwined, so that while designations such as “African” and “Western” can provide insights into the intentions of designers and marketers, they often obscure rich histories of exchange. Gott analyzes the dramatic fashions of an Ashanti women's subculture, placing their swiftly changing styles in the context of a long history of competitive displays of wealth. In her exploration of Dakar's fashion scene, Grabski describes how this cosmopolitan city provides fuel for the work of designers in diverse markets. Green's work in Madagascar documents the surprising intersection of fashion and funerary practice in a culture that accords cloth great spiritual power. In addition, Loughran provides a survey of Africa's long history as a source of inspiration for Western fashion design, and an overview of the work of one African designer whose career straddles Africa and Europe. Taken as a whole, these articles describe the complexity of African dress practices, which draw from both deep local roots and from contemporary, international trends, shifting constantly to absorb new influences and adapt changing elements of indigenous garments.

**Fashion: Indigenous Everywhere**

As numerous past articles in this journal have demonstrated, the study of non-Western fashion as fashion, not as garb, costume, or dress, is a growing field of inquiry (see, for example: Sun 1997, El Guindi 1999, Dogbe 2003, and Nagrath 2003). In her 2004 survey of current anthropological analysis of dress, Karen Hansen noted that recent scholarship in a variety of academic venues “demonstrates that fashion no longer is an exclusive property of the West” (Hansen 2004: 370). Much of the attention to non-Western fashion in academic circles has been centered on Asia, which has been a source of “exotic” inspiration for Westerners (much like Africa) as well as a producer of internationally renowned fashion designers (unlike Africa). As Lisa Skov notes, Japan
in particular was the first non-Western player in the rarified realm of *haute couture*: “... the 1980s was the first period when non-Western fashion designers came to influence mainstream fashion, when Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo, along with a series of other Japanese designers, proved themselves to be the leading fashion innovators of the world” (Skov 2003: 216).

Two publications that provided rich insights into the intersections of traditional and contemporary impulses in Asian fashion cultures are important precedents, and sources of inspiration, for the analyses of non-Western fashion presented here. *China Chic: East Meets West* (Steele and Major 1999) focused on multiple dimensions of Chinese fashion—historical styles, the absorption of new influences, revivals of historical styles, and the internationalization of those styles. *Re-Orienting Fashion: The Globalization of Asian Dress* (Niessen et al. 2003) explores contemporary Asian garments as symbols of local identities, diaspora communities, and international chic. While African and Asian fashion systems have in common only their mutual “otherness” for the Western-dominated international fashion industry, our hope is that this special issue will continue to demonstrate that fashion is not “indigenous” only to Western cultures.

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**Notes**

1. The same tendency is evident in Fisher’s work with her collaborator Carol Beckwith. Fisher and Beckwith have produced several lush publications, featuring their photographic work in Africa. These include *African Ark* (Fisher et al. 1990), *Nomads of Niger* (Fisher and Beckwith 1983), and the two-volume *African Ceremonies* (Fisher and Beckwith 1999).

2. The conference, which I co-organized along with Dr Sarah Adams, was entitled “The Cultured Body: African Fashion and Body Arts.” It was held at the University of Iowa Museum of Art on October 17–20,
and received significant support from the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, International Programs, and the Project for the Advanced Study of Art and Life in Africa, all based at the University of Iowa. The articles collected here were selected from two of the conference’s five panels.

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