

CLOTHING
AND
DIFFERENCE



EDITED BY
HILDI
HENDRICKSON

EMBODIED IDENTITIES IN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

CLOTHING AND DIFFERENCE

BODY, COMMODITY, TEXT

Studies of Objectifying Practice

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Embodied Identities in Colonial and

Post-Colonial Africa

Edited by HILDI HENDRICKSON



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CLOTHING AND DIFFERENCE

INTRODUCTION

Hildi Hendrickson



Fashion has dualities in its formation, a reputation for snobbery and sin. . . . It is obsessive about outward appearances, yet speaks the unconscious and our deepest desires.—J. Ash and E. Wilson (1992, xi)

To be able to blend—that's what realness is. The idea of realness is to look as much as possible like your straight counterpart. . . . It's not a take-off or a satire—no, it's actually being able to *be* this. It's really a case of going back into the closet.—Dorian Corey on transvestism in the film *Paris is Burning*, dir. Jennie Livingston

If you wear the clothes of your enemy, the spirit of the enemy is weakened. You are then wearing the spirit of his brothers and then they are weakened.—Herero cultural commentator in southern Africa (cited in Hendrickson, this volume)

In this volume, we investigate popular, political, economic, and spiritual meanings assigned to treatments of the body surface in a variety of African colonial and post-colonial contexts. We explore the bodily and material engendering of women, spirits, youths, ancestors, and entrepreneurs; we consider fashion, spirit possession, commodity exchange, hygiene, and mourning, among other divergent spheres of action and meaning.

In studying treatments of the body surface in nineteenth- and twentieth-century African history, we sharpen our consciousness of both the constructedness and the interconnectedness of cultural systems. Our essays demonstrate that Africa and the West are mutually engaged in a semiotic web whose implications are not completely controlled by any of us. We illuminate performative processes critical to the creation of “tradition” and “modernity” through which national and international identities are negotiated. We challenge conceptions that divide too cleanly “first” and “third” worlds, colonizer and colonized, producer and consumer, indigene and tourist, or body and spirit.

By taking the body surface as our focus, we investigate one of the frontiers upon which individual and social identities are simultaneously created, and we join a variety of scholars studying bodily representation in other regions of the world. In particular, we address human processes for constituting the social self, social organization, and shared notions of authority and value. The body surface has been called “the symbolic stage upon which the drama of socialization is enacted” (Turner 1980, 12); it is a field for representation, which, being concrete, has lasting semiotic value. Being personal, it is susceptible to individual manipulation. Being public, it has social import.

By taking kin-based polities as our focus, we are reminded that self, family, class, community, political party, and state are interconnected entities. These African cases remind us that individual action is always shaped by family, gender, and residential groups, that political, spiritual, and economic activity are intertwined, and that it is social *groups* that affect cultural configurations.

Ultimately, our essays provide alternative views of the structures underpinning Western systems of commodification, postmodernism, and cultural differentiation. African social histories teach us that factors considered integral to Western social development—such as heterogeneity, migration, democratization, transnational exchange, and media representation—have existed elsewhere in different configurations and with different outcomes. In Africa, such transformative social processes can be considered afresh. Cultural and linguistic diversity, for example, can be studied as an age-old condition of everyday living in many parts of Africa. Meanwhile, nation-building, entrepreneurship, and mass consumerism can be explored as they continue to emerge in African societies.

In investigating African case material, the fact that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please” (Marx [1852] in Tucker 1978, 595) can be seen from a new angle. Moreover, since Africans have been subject to Western imperialism and later made poor partners in Western industrial economies, the investigation of African history and experience helps to reveal the underside of Western politico-economic systems.

Most specifically, our essays provide new evidence for the ways that cross-cultural relations structure and evoke concepts of value. 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. Clearly, the power of industrial systems to define those meanings—and of materialist analyses to account for them—is more limited than it may appear.

Treatments of the body surface are not just commodities circulating between

and among social groups, nor are they simply markers of social status or identity. In the societies considered here, we find that bodies and dress also help to express and shape ideas about the most potent kinds of political and spiritual power thought to be available to human beings. These too are social facts that must be taken into account, even in the West. We learn from these African cases that, at this late-twentieth-century moment, acts of devotion to notions of identity belie postmodern cynicism about the tyrannies of the past, the emptiness of the present, and the disconnections of the future.

In this introduction, I first consider research and writing on dress in Western contexts to sharpen an understanding of how our African cases complement, extend, and challenge these analyses. Second, I identify methodological and conceptual differences in our social scientific investigation of this subject. Next, I present the individual papers and go on to place our contributions within the context of recent Africanist research. Finally, I consider the implications of our work for a semiotics of the body.

Western Dress and the Politics of Postmodernism

The essays collected here contribute to a widening body of research on the body surface as a principal site of social and political action in industrial society. While the analysis of dress has been undertaken by art historians, social psychologists, and social historians (e.g., Veblen [1899] 1957; Flugel 1930; Roach and Eicher 1965; Bell 1968; Hollander 1975), some of the most challenging recent work has emerged out of American and British feminist and cultural studies (e.g., Hebdige 1979; Gaines and Herzog 1990; Ash and Wilson 1992; Benstock and Ferriss 1994). Current works consider dress as both sign and commodity enmeshed in multiple webs of meaning and value. Subjects as diverse as high-fashion houses (Taylor 1992), paramilitary clothing in Northern Ireland (Herr 1994), female bodybuilding (Schultze 1990), and Hollywood costumers (Nielsen 1990) have been fruitfully analyzed.

Many of these new analyses focus on marginalized social groups—such as women, gays and lesbians, and ethnic minorities—in late-twentieth-century capitalist contexts. Such studies may explore the “repressive power” of fashion as a commodity (Benstock and Ferriss 1994, 8) or the ways that “the camera . . . support[s] (and sometimes subvert[s]) . . . notions of the feminine and of the female body (clothed or unclothed) as something-to-be-looked-at” (11). The theory asserts that the eye of the camera should be equated with the gaze of masculine power-holders, whose vantage point is unattainable for most of those viewed.

Jane Gaines (1990) traces this idea to the work of Laura Mulvey (1975) and John Berger (1972), the latter asserting, for example, that “men look at women and this is the visual organizing principle in oil painting, magazine advertising, and motion pictures” (Gaines 1990, 3). Gaines notes that earlier feminists “explained the danger of fashion culture in terms of patriarchy in league with capitalism. Femininity, in this analysis, was false consciousness” (4).

Gaines asserts that feminist thinking has taken a leap forward from a preoccupation with patriarchy (1990, 6) and from the cynicism of the position that “the image has swallowed reality whole” (5). She contends that since the 1980s, feminist theorists of dress have begun to analyze the pursuit of fantasy and pleasure in fashion. They have fruitfully applied to women theories of resistance and subculture taken from British cultural studies and investigated the place of women in consumer culture. Utopian dreams, deep ambivalence, and subtle forms of resistance have been uncovered in analyses of the empowered position of female consumers in thrift shops (Young 1994) or the ways that women may create a kind of bricolage of fashion, modifying the products and messages received from international designers (Partington 1992).

Elizabeth Wilson (1985, 1990, 1992) has written extensively on the ways that such populist phenomena, emerging particularly since the 1960s, are a part of what the Marxist cultural critic Fredric Jameson (1991) and others have called postmodernism. The language and imagery used to describe the postmodern social world are striking in their severity:

The post-modern social landscape has a kind of ghastly kitsch excitement about it. Its “hallucinatory euphoria,” and the glittering, depthless polish of the postmodern urban scene reflect a world denuded of feeling. . . . Postmodernism expresses at one level a horror at the destructive excess of Western consumerist society, yet in aestheticising this horror, we somehow convert it into a pleasurable object of consumption. (Wilson 1992, 4)

Wilson, like sociologist Fred Davis (1992), however, recognizes that in this context, dress serves both to dominate and to subvert—that “fashion, like postmodernism itself, remains ambivalent” (Wilson 1992, 14–15). In Wilson’s analysis, however, people are not paralyzed by their postmodern condition. Rather, they are seen to express and pursue multiple, contradictory desires in the semiosis of dress.

Evidence for a wider, more popular interest in the linkages between postmodernism, dress, and the self can be found outside academic publications. For instance, in a *New York Times* interview with fashion designer Thierry Mugler, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin commented recently:

I would also tie [fashion] in to certain postmodern ideas about the self—that there is no self even. That the self is a condition of disguise and that we can move back and forth in terms of sexualities, in terms of social being, in terms of all kinds of sense of who we are. And I think fashion helps us wonderfully in this. That's why, in a sense, I would say that fashion is *the* postmodern art, because it helps to destabilize the self in such a wonderful way. (*Times Sunday Magazine*, 17 July 1994, 46, 49)

Marjorie Garber goes to the core of postmodern ambivalence about representation, the self, and society in her *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992). Garber identifies numerous culturally unsettling instances of cross-dressing in literature, film, opera, and the popular arts, which she takes as central not only to postmodern society but to society itself. She turns the analytical spotlight on a fantastic array of female Peter Pans, male Salomes, discovered cross-dressed murderers, Shakespearean actors, transvestite female saints, and the “transvestite continuum” of Liberace, Rudolf Valentino, and Elvis, who inhabit the “ghastly kitsch world.”

Garber suggests that if we refuse to elide the physical existence of these cross-dressers, we will notice that these figures perform a “necessary critique of binary thinking, whether particularized as male and female, black and white, yes and no, Republican and Democrat, self and other” (1992, 10–11). Garber draws upon Lacan's psychoanalytic theory about the tripartite functioning of the psyche to posit that the transvestite acts as a disruptive “third”—that is, an

interruption . . . of things that “exist” in a theatrically conceived space and time but were not present onstage as agents before, [which] reconfigures the relationships between the original pair, and puts in question identities previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded, and “known.” (1992, 12–13)

The transvestite is an essential, anxiety-producing index of a crisis of gender, class, racial, or other categories somewhere offstage, Garber contends. Ultimately, she argues that “transvestism creates culture [and] culture creates transvestites” (1992, 16). Her analysis explores how one cannot exist without the other, how both categorizing and category-confounding implicate and create one another.

What motivates actual people to occupy the pivotal cultural role of the cross-dresser is perhaps best understood by listening to transvestites' own words, as heard, for example, in the film *Paris Is Burning*. The lived world of the transvestite is animated by irony, desire, and belief. Gay, African American men, the

participants in the New York transvestite balls that are the film's subject, struggle with prejudice against their race, gender, and sexual orientation. In response, they create temporary utopias—they pursue fantasy to the limits of its possibilities. They show that through active, bodily devotion to an alternate vision of the world—ultimately through belief—people alter and recreate that shared system of ideas we call culture. Though they are in profound ways bound by the symbolic and social systems within which they act (see Butler 1993), the “legendary mothers” and “children” of the drag world show that the dressing of the body can be empowering and creative, even if it does not become more deeply subversive.

The Analysis of Dress by Social Scientists

Work like that of Gaines, Garber, and Wilson illuminates the relation between some social groups and representation in Western industrial society. It is limited, however, by its singular cultural vantage point. It cannot provide a more general understanding of the human uses of dress and the body in social, economic, and political life. We need to know how widely concepts like “patriarchy,” “the masculine gaze,” “cultural anxiety,” and “a world denuded of feeling” can be applied. They do not adequately describe the spectrum of non-Western social realities, and this raises questions about their comprehensiveness when applied to Western case material.

What is needed for a full understanding of these symbolic processes is the cross-cultural investigation of the desires, fantasies, representations, resistances, and capitalisms that are, have been, and may be possible for human societies and groups therein. By exploring a variety of African social histories and taking treatments of the body surface as a point of departure, the essays in this volume illuminate some of the ways in which dress is deeply connected to structure and agency in cultures, plural. Like Roach and Eicher (1965), Cordwell and Schwartz (1979), Appadurai (1986), Weiner and Schneider (1989), Barnes and Eicher (1992), and others before us, we bring to the discussion of cloth/clothing, commodities, and cultural change cross-cultural insights from the increasingly intertwined fields of anthropology and history.

As is true for other social scientists, our strongest contribution to the wider literature on dress and the body comes through our ethnographic methodology. Each chapter presented here consists of original observations and analysis resulting from recent and extended residence among and consultation with members of varying societies in their own languages whenever possible. Like earlier generations of anthropologists, we strive to translate terms in the sym-

bolic experience of others who share this late-twentieth-century moment with us but who inhabit it with a different set of values, wishes, and representations.

The fact that an ethnographic methodology offers a way out of potentially circular auto-theorizing has recently been recognized by analysts accustomed to producing more subjective interpretations of cultural activity as text (e.g., Wright 1992). Ethnography has been embraced by the burgeoning, politically conscious field of cultural studies (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992). The recent public appreciation for Anna Deavere Smith's powerful interview pastiche stems at least in part from the recognition that some of the critical stuff of life is in the spoken words of others—that testimony is where culture and self are mutually created and perpetuated, where both social action and motivation can be examined.

Moreover, this collection is, like the projects of cultural studies, “interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary” (Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler 1992, 4). Our ethnographic techniques are combined with a range of other methodological approaches. We combine oral histories and archival data with the insights of a wide range of living speakers—men and women, young and old, insiders and outsiders, conservatives and mavericks—to illuminate both the present and the past. We use historical photographs, advertisements, and cartoons as data pertinent to the exploration of cultural systems. We participate in and analyze contexts for action as varied as tourist traps and funerals.

Like others in our fields, we borrow from literary criticism and cultural studies to further our study of the political nature of identity claims, the relation between symbolic form and meaning, and the analysis of media representations. We also attempt to span the theoretical distance between materialist and idealist social analyses, drawing on the insights not just of Marx and Michel Foucault but also the work of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Thus, we attend to the constructedness of authority and value, the power of collective action and ritual, the motivating role of spirituality and religion, and the systemic nature of representational thought as well as processes of commodification and consumption.

Our work also builds upon that of earlier anthropologists who have long grappled with issues of identity and difference—whose explicit mission in fact has been to identify cultural universals and to account for cross-cultural variation. Dress and the construction of self have long received attention within this literature, as the early work of Georg Simmel (1904) and Marcel Mauss ([1950] 1979) attests.

While Barthes ([1967] 1983), Kroeber (1963), Sahlins (1976), Hebdige (1979),

and Bourdieu (1984) have turned their attention to clothing and fashion within complex societies, Terence Turner (1980) stands out among anthropologists investigating clothing and body adornment in pre-industrial societies. In his definitive analysis of Kayapo bodily ornamentation in South America, Turner explores the body surface as inscribed over historical time by many actors who thereby work to build up a social person. He underscores the importance of body treatments in creating the individual experience of the limitations and possibilities of social life: “through the symbolic medium of bodily adornment, the body of every Kayapo becomes a microcosm of the Kayapo body politic” (1980, 121).

The research considered here has also been shaped by the cross-cultural analyses by Weiner (1980, 1985, 1992) and Weiner and Schneider (1986, 1989) of cloth as a class of object with particular concrete characteristics and symbolic potentials. Cloth is now understood to have considerable semiotic value in the expression of both the fragility and the potency of social statuses and sociopolitical relations. Of particular importance for our studies here is the idea that cloth is critical in the representation and reproduction of society—that it is often a critical link between social groups across space and through time.

Dress and the Body in Eight African Societies

Authenticating social identities

The essays collected here explore the significance of the body surface in three processes central to social reproduction and representation: the authentication of social categories, the legitimation of authority, and the creation of value. The essays by Renne, James, and Masquelier focus on body coverings as essential in the constitution of the social identities of married women, traditionalist dancers, and supernatural spirits, respectively. Tracing change in Ekiti Yoruba ideas about a marriageable woman’s bodily state and the cloth that is the sign of her moral virtue, Renne shows how ideas about the existence of hymenal bodily tissue and blood and the physiological state of virginity have long been conflated in Yoruba thought. The white cloth used to test a bride’s virtue against this standard has been symbolically linked with these ideas. White cloth has become a sign of what was, especially in the past, the proper bodily state of a marrying woman.

Renne delineates the role of the body in the long-term exchange of cultural knowledge and the changing historical circumstances, which have affected the Yoruba conceptualization of women, virginity, and bodily practice. She explores the weakening of paternal control of young women’s bodies, fertility, and

movement within domestic space after British colonial policy legalized divorce. Virginity and marriage have come to be less strictly equated, and ideas about the virginity cloth, women, and women's bodies have taken a new turn. "Modern" women's bodies have come to be associated with sexual knowledge and fertility, virginity is now a sign of a backward or diseased body, and the cloth with which it is associated no longer receives great social attention.

James investigates the ways in which clothing serves to articulate differences in gender, age, and religion within a southern African community. She explores the complex content and use of notions of *sesotho* (*sotho* ways) in opposition to *sekgowa* (white ways) for Sotho speakers in the northern Transvaal of South Africa. She draws upon the life histories of women belonging to a group that since 1976 has performed dances and songs considered *sesotho* in style. The female performers wear dress that has come to reflect aspects of *sekgowa* style.

James argues that these performances at least temporarily empower women. They create a collective female identity that obscures the economic and other status differences between women, unifying the participants into an effective representation of Sotho historical identity. Ultimately, she asserts, these symbolic forms can "enunciate [women's] autonomy from male control." James analyzes the categories *sesotho* and *sekgowa* as historically emergent, contextually sensitive, and individually manipulated—as "conceptual tools . . . used as grids or templates to order experience in a variety of different settings." Indigenous notions of a Sotho ethnic identity have developed in opposition to and in tandem with the idea of *sekgowa*, and Sotho women have been particularly closely associated with the definition and perpetuation of *sesotho* identity.

Masquelier's essay focuses on clothing as a principal medium of communication between people and the spirits among the Hausaphone Mawri in Niger. Dress creates spiritual beings; specific spirits require particular types of attire, which must be provided by those faithful to them. Clothes express the commitment of the living to the spirits and the harmony between them. Clothes give substance to these incorporeal beings—they "extend the spirits' personae in space and time." The garments themselves come to have potency. A spirit's clothes can be used as a channel through which communication with the spirit can be effected in private, domestic contexts. By borrowing specific clothes, one may unknowingly inherit a spirit that is associated with them.

Masquelier notes that clothing aptly expresses the ephemeral nature of the link between living people and the spirits; both the garments and the relationship should be periodically renewed. She also links specific ritual uses of body coverings with the symbolism and use of everyday clothing. While the tying of clothing is metaphorically linked with marriage and reproduction and with the

initiation of relationships and social statuses, untying speaks of relationships severed and death, when the deceased's clothes are given away. Dress is also found to express Muslim modesty and social deviance in a wider Mawri world.

Ideologies of authority

Bastian and Weiss trace the creation and perpetuation of systems of authority as well as challenges to them. Like Renne, Bastian investigates one strand within the complex web of cultures and histories upon which the nation-state of Nigeria has been founded. She explores the ways in which Igbo women and men test the limits of senior male authority by wearing types of body adornment associated with it and with Muslim Hausa elites to the north. Bastian argues that this constitutes a politically inspired "clothing practice" with implications for a late-twentieth-century imagination of gender and authority.

Using a cartoon from the Nigerian popular press among other data, Bastian outlines the possibilities that clothing provides women, as a relatively disempowered social group, in making satirical and potentially subversive statements about their identities in relation to power-holders. These possibilities turn on culturally shared conceptions of body shape and structure and ideas about a gendered treatment of the body, which cross-dressing women, for instance, confound.

Bastian goes on to show that another subordinated political group, young men, has also used clothing practice to challenge existing articulations of identity. Their enthusiasm for new styles of dress, especially in colors associated with both mourning practice and the suits of Europeans, is troublesome to their male elders. It signifies the engagement of junior men in social arenas that are potentially disruptive to traditional authority. Bastian concludes, however, that while such signifying practice challenges older regimes of value, it does not deeply threaten them—women will not soon be the power-holders they impersonate and junior men will someday themselves be elders on the other side of the power equation.

Weiss's essay introduces the idea that body treatments can act as mnemonic devices that help to construct and represent lasting relationships between generations and between the living and the dead. He discusses the importance of body treatments, including clothing and bark-cloth funerary shrouds, in the remembering and forgetting that are critical in intergenerational relationships, especially at death among the Haya in Tanzania. In his analysis, as in Masquelier's, clothes are seen to have the possibility of a history of their own.

Like Masquelier, Weiss also focuses on the links between dress and the dead, between notions of corporeality and spiritual potency. Among Haya mortuary

observances, for instance, bark cloth is wrapped around both the corpse and his living clansmen, serving as a reminder of the long-term nurturance provided by these people and their relatives. Blankets and sheets given as bride-wealth years before are conceptually linked to these mortuary cloths. The Haya say that the cloths given at marriage replace those used by a mother to wrap her infant and are a form of recognition for the years of care a mother has provided to her marrying child. Weiss calls all these cloths “material recollections” which “invoke memories that are features of intergenerational relations.”

Weiss goes on to delineate the broader meaning of body coverings for the Haya, contextualizing the meaning of these material symbols within a system of ideas about the closure and exposure of the body. At funerals, mourners are dissolute, unraveled. They wear special headcloths in an effort to regain their bodily integrity. The one large piece of bark cloth that is used to enclose both the mourners and the corpse contributes to this reintegration, expressing an “aesthetic of seamlessness” which also prompts the Haya to oil their skin. In these and other ways, bodily coverings help the Haya think about and personalize the past and the future, to remember that death comes at the end of long years of nurturance, that grief can be overcome, and that the next generation will sustain life.

The creation of value

The essays by Burke, Schoss, and myself delineate the processes whereby value is created in body treatments that derive from foreign sources. Schoss analyzes dress that marks two styles of culture brokering in the Swahili tourist trade in Malindi, Kenya. She identifies two styles of dress and comportment, one associated with the professionalized “tour guides,” who have ties to tour operators, the other with the “beachboys,” who offer their services to tourists on a freelance basis.

Not only dress but bodily comportment and social behavior differ widely between these two groups. The tour guides present themselves in fastidious, European-style clothing that is either produced in Europe or custom-made locally. They comport themselves with restraint at all times in public, thereby emphasizing their control over the tourist economy and themselves. In contrast, the beachboys value the unconventional—their dress incorporates bright color; innovative, locally made designs; and Euro-American items such as jeans and fanny packs, which they acquire through trade with their clients. During their off-hours, they behave with abandon and excess, frequenting the discos, ostensibly run to attract the tourists themselves.

Schoss finds that both groups understand and move within a “cosmopoli-

tan,” multicultural world, between local mores and those of the wider world economic system. This competence is made apparent in their control of bodily practice. Further, she argues that despite the considerable knowledge of global culture that is acquired by these Kenyan businessmen, they remain a part of local social worlds as well—they are not marginalized at home by their competence with foreign commodities and lifestyles.

Focusing not on clothing *per se* but on skin treatments, Burke also considers the strategies employed by African people encountering the agents and products of a wider world economic system. Burke analyzes nineteenth- and twentieth-century commodity exchange in colonial Zimbabwe, tracing the development of ideas about the body, hygiene, and race that structured colonial relations there. He investigates how colonial bureaucrats, missionaries, travelers, and mercantilists linked order and rationality with cleanliness, defining African bodies—and African people in the process—as unclean, disorderly, depraved, and polluting.

Burke argues that these conceptions played an important part in the development of colonial policy. Hygiene was taken as a discipline through which the bodies and minds of African workers, mission converts, and pupils could be improved. Women’s bodies in particular were scrutinized, and women’s domestic practice became a subject of bureaucratic and mercantilist concern. But even as they were coerced and convinced to adopt European practices of hygiene and manners and so transform themselves into more properly socialized persons, Zimbabwean consumers used and symbolically constructed skin products in their own culturally idiosyncratic ways, which were never fully understood or controlled by capitalist producers.

Burke argues that “the” body should be seen as a particular construct of a nineteenth-century, European colonial world, which was preoccupied with control of the body. He cautions that the African bodies that were the collective object of colonial fascination and abhorrence must be seen as belonging to members of heterogeneous Shona, Ndebele, and Tonga groups and subgroups, each of which had their own aesthetics of body adornment and hygiene.

My own essay focuses on changing and differentiated conceptions of value, on developing representations of collective and gendered identity in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Namibian history. In oral histories, particular male Herero leaders are said to have reimagined morality and society in a nineteenth-century era of economic and political change. The commitment of individuals to newly defined ideas about moral social relations and male leadership, in particular, has been expressed and read in the practice of wearing tokens of colored cloth, first on hatbands and later on other parts of the body.

In spite of explicit attempts by Europeans to inculcate the use of banners as symbols of the unified polity, the Herero use of banners as individual bodily symbols has expressed a characteristically individual-centered relation of people to the wider collectivity. Herero notions of identity hinge upon the expressed commitment of individuals to the authority of male leaders and the moral values they live by. This is expressed in their use of individual bodies as flags.

The idiosyncratic Herero use of cloth banners and the issues of gendered authority that underlie them continue to be elaborated in the twentieth century. Annual Herero "troop" ceremonies celebrate the heroism of nineteenth-century paragons of masculinity and virtue. Further, they constitute an effort to unify Ovaherero behind a common history. Though these ceremonies are only one type of symbolic construction in a changing history of Herero representations of gender and identity, they have come to be seen as "traditional" by Ovaherero and varying groups of interested onlookers.

Dress and the Body Surface in Africanist Scholarship

In these eight essays, we show that clothing and other treatments of the body surface are primary symbols in the performances through which modernity—and therefore history—have been conceived, constructed, and challenged in Africa. We have discovered a distinctive African modernity expressed and shaped through redefined body commodities, funerary ritual and dance, and spiritual practice. We find that both the "modern" and the "traditional" are powerfully and principally constituted in body treatments. We explore the fact that "the body . . . cannot escape being a vehicle of history, a metaphor and metonym of being-in-time" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992, 79).

The performative nature of these processes is especially clear in the essays by Masquelier, James, and Weiss, which explicitly examine ritual uses of dress. Furthermore, the whole collection focuses on potent, public performances, which have contributed significantly to African social production and reproduction in the last two centuries. In taking ritual as a critical starting point in the analysis of African modernity, our work exemplifies a recent focus in historical and anthropological Africanist research (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; J. Comaroff 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993).

In this effort, we also build upon the considerable insights of earlier analysts of African culture, for whom both quotidian and ritual dress have long been fruitful points of analysis. The symbolic interplay of bodily and social experi-

ence has been investigated within African societies by such authors as T. O. Beidelman (1968, 1986), Mary Douglas (1967, 1970), Michael Jackson (1983, 1989), and Hilda Kuper (1973a, 1973b).

Among the most recent analyses (e.g., Heath 1992), Karen Tranberg Hansen (1994) has shown how used clothing from abroad is redefined and recommodified by Zambians empowered by the new consumer choices, economic opportunities, and ties to a wider cosmopolitan world that this clothing offers. As has been recognized in much of the other literature discussed here, however, the enjoyment of such freedoms is "tinged with ambivalence" (Hansen 1994, 522) for Africans wearied by the instability of their local economies and cognizant of their peripheralized position in a wider politico-economic world.

Like other recent researchers (Jackson and Karp 1990), we also follow Fortes (1973) and Riesman (1977, 1986) in exploring the relations between lived experience and culturally constructed ideas about moral persons in Africa. It is the fertile ground between official and unofficial ideologies of personhood and identity (Jacobson-Widding 1990, 34) that we examine here. By investigating the symbolic use of the body surface, we are able to accomplish a fine-grained analysis of the ways in which both individual agency and sociocultural constraint are operative in social life. We consider ways in which individual-centered notions of "fantasy" and "fashion," familiar in Western settings, are operative in African contexts as well.

Bodily Signs and Spiritual Representations

As discussed earlier, Garber has raised the provocative question of whether dressing across social boundaries is in fact essential to, or even constitutive of, culture. Our studies are not new in suggesting that opposing social categories always implicate each other; however, we do contribute evidence that cross-dressing, broadly defined, has indeed been a powerful symbolic tool in African contexts as well as Western ones. Whether it has involved women dressed as men, male commoners dressed as elites, colonized men dressing as colonizers, young men dressed as cosmopolitan tourists, spirits dressed as living people, or grandchildren dressed as grandparents, "cross-dressing" is here found to be cross-cultural. In Africa as in the West, dress has been an index of difference between social groups.

An index is a sign in which form and referent are linked physically as if by cause and effect (see C. S. Peirce in Buchler 1940). Our analyses suggest that cross-culturally, the body surface is an especially compelling indexical sign. Bodily signifiers present an ever-present semiotic possibility for expressing identity and intention, for asserting the legitimacy of the status quo or subvert-

ing it. In the African cases we discuss here, treatments of the body surface allude to linkages between oneself and people, power and knowledge beyond the immediate, local context. Such allusions are powerful because they can challenge the taken-for-granted categories into which the social world is divided.

Whether or not bodily signs are intended to be read as indicators of specific motivations and identities, they may be taken as such by onlookers. Bodily signs may be conservative because their symbolic forms are material and potentially lasting. Simultaneously, concrete bodily signs are potentially subversive, since they are literally manipulable by individuals or groups with differing motivations and access to power.

Moreover, our African case studies allow us to state that the body surface has been a powerful arena in which colonial relations have been enacted and contested. While colonial projects may entail the rigorous separation of social and economic interaction between colonizer and colonized, colonial domination ultimately is grounded in the face-to-face relations between local coresidents. The circumstances of physical contiguity that are central to the creation of ideologies and industries of “the other” are necessarily contexts in which the visually accessed languages of the body and body coverings are central.

Under these conditions, the body is a signifier that is shared cross-culturally yet assigned contrasting, simultaneous meanings. Especially in the absence of shared spoken language, colonial encounters can be seen as a particular kind of semiotic event in which a visual language of bodily forms is especially critical. The recognition of formal, material or physical commonalities between members of unlike groups or cultures may constitute an avenue of implicit resistance to developing ideologies of the other. Material symbolic forms, especially the body, draw cross-cultural notions of personal, moral, and social identity into metaphorical relation. Possibilities for resistance lie in the fact that this semiotic process can never be fully controlled, even by a dominating colonial power.

In the concrete processes of construction and decay to which they continuously allude, bodily signs also refer to the passage of time and processes of change that occur at rates different from that of the everyday. Object “events”—in the sense of the purposeful manipulation of material signs in an effort to alter social representations and therefore relations of power—happen at a slower pace than speech events. Paradoxically, this makes them persuasive agents for change. The body is perhaps the quintessential subversive object sign, since it refers almost inevitably to individual as well as to group intentions and identities, which are always at issue—and at risk—in a changing, plural, social and cultural world.

These essays also remind us that there are multiple ways of thinking about the relations between people, objects, and spiritual/social power. Cross-culturally,

corporeality can itself be seen as containment of power. As is true among many of the people we discuss in this volume, the body may be one among many types of objects in which power is thought to reside. In these societies, restrictions on contact with spiritually powerful objects may follow from age, sex, marital status, lineage, or caste, but many categories of people and not just religious specialists have personal contact with the most potent containers of power. People in such societies thus enjoy considerable access to the sacred in their daily lives.

If, alternatively, power is thought to reside only in nonmaterial entities—as is common in the Protestant iconoclastic thought associated with Western industrial societies, for example—then people may have no personal contact with or control over the most potent forms of power at all. It is ironic that it is capitalist consumers who fetishize commodities, even while they are constrained from worshipping icons: they are encouraged to “believe” in the products they buy, but they are taught to separate the power of products from the power of gods.

It is to these cosmological matters that the analysis of the symbolic uses of the body surface ultimately reaches. The essays in this collection demonstrate anew that economic and spiritual matters mutually inform one another, and that cynicism is not the only tenor of these postmodern times. The world of spiritual belief, of what humanists might call desire and its fulfillment, may not be the social dead-end that Western cultural critics since Marx have suggested. In fact, it may be belief that rescues us from alienation. The feminist turn toward exploring the fantasy element in consumer behavior seems attuned to this idea. We must look outside our own societies to be reminded that even postmodern capitalist consumers act within an imagined world of potency and possibility which can affect concrete realities. To overlook this symbolic production is to obscure the creative processes through which ordinary people understand and shape their daily lives. Women and men make their own history and they do not make it just as they please, but they make it, we have learned, in powerful semiotic forms.

To fully understand Western economic, political, and spiritual life, we would do well to heed the African examples and give attention to issues of imagination and belief as they are associated with objects and manifested on the body. These cases remind us that what Garber calls cultural anxiety—awareness of the unresolved contradictions in a system of symbolic thought that guides daily life—is the common cultural conundrum with which all human societies must contend. Many who coexist with us in a postmodern world greet these conditions not with cynicism but with creativity and conviction.