MA Fashion Major Research Project Proposal

REDEFINING FASHION CAPITAL(S)
CONTEMPORARY GHANAIAN AND NIGERIAN FASHION

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Introduction

On April 30, 2016, the Brighton Museum & Art Gallery opened the first major UK exhibit dedicated to African Fashion. The book *Fashion Cities Africa*, edited by Eritrean-born journalist Hannah Azieb Pool, was released the same month, and shares insights into the aesthetics and designs emerging from four cities within Africa including Nairobi (Kenya), Casablanca (Morocco), Lagos (Nigeria) and Johannesburg (South Africa). Since the start of the millennium, fashion journalists (Alexandra Kotour and André Leon Talley) have been discussing the prevalence of high-end African fashion designers such as Duro Olowu, Lisa Folawiyo, and Folake Folarin. Meanwhile, stereotypes of "Africanness" including Ankara prints and tribal themes remain a source of inspiration for Western designers. As Victoria Rovine observes: "Africa seems to be the muse du jour for a wide array of designers, including Jean Paul Gaultier, Donna Karen, Kenzo and Dolce and Gabbana" (5). What is less examined is the emergence of African-made couture and fashion design, which is the focus of this proposed study.

My Major Research Project (MRP) focuses on two countries in Africa, namely Ghana and Nigeria. These two countries represent unique comparative cases that allow for an exploration of the emergence of African-made fashion. I propose to compare and contrast the experiences of Ghanaian and Nigerian fashion brands over the past five years, examining how major commercially successful indigenous African fashion brands such as Maki Oh, I.AM.ISIGO, A.A.K.S., Christie Brown, and Deloa Sagoe are being received both in local and international contexts. I will also consider some of the barriers that Ghanaian and Nigerian designers might face. In this study, I will conduct scholarly research and review relevant journalism to explore some of the problematic of the emerging field of African fashion. In addition, as part of my role as production and marketing intern with Raffia Clothing in Accra, Ghana from August to September 2016, I will add to my knowledge through observation, conversation, and experience. Conditional on approval by the Ryerson Ethics Board, I propose to conduct interviews with designers in the two countries.

Ultimately, the goal of this research is to discuss the burgeoning fashion design talent in West Africa as current and future competitors in the global fashion sphere, while underscoring unique opportunities and obstacles (such as cultural and socio-economic conditions in Ghana and Nigeria) to illuminate how African fashion designers navigate through

them. In conducting this research, I will learn from those residing and growing businesses in Ghana and Nigeria, and will immerse myself in African fashion theories to hone a critical vocabulary (see Literature Review below).

The Cultural Context of African-Made Fashion

African designers, known for their bold use of colour and combined aesthetics of traditional artisanal techniques with contemporary cuts, have achieved recognition for showcasing their work at fashion shows in London, Paris, and New York. Further, they have been worn and endorsed by celebrities such as musician Solange Knowles and actor Thandie Newton. As Jennings notes: "Whereas fashion was not traditionally seen as a viable occupation within Africa, today's designers are making desirable, well-made, well-marketed collections" (8). As part of this research I will uncover some of the factors that have led to a lifting of the political and cultural barriers that previously faced African designers. I will also explore issues with infrastructure, limited financial support, competition in local markets caused by cast-off clothing donations from the West (Frazer 1765), and the lack of trained tailors and dressmakers. A shortage of dependable infrastructure, which includes problems with routine power outages and inconsistent Internet access, are still a daily reality for those working in cities like Accra and Lagos (Jennings 17). Building a business in the less than ideal circumstances outlined above make it difficult for African brands to compete with Western brands that have more reliable infrastructure. This research will look at the ways in which Ghanaian and Nigerian brands are able to overcome these barriers and which factors pose the greatest risks to their business.

The juxtaposition of Nigeria and Ghana is prompted by the two countries' geographical proximity to each other. That said, each country is distinct. Historically, Nigeria and Ghana did not share a common language. They have very disparate Indigenous groups, and Nigeria's population is much larger than that of Ghana. Nigeria's capital, Lagos, is a megacity of about 20 million. At roughly 2 million inhabitants, Ghana's capital, Accra, is much smaller. Nigeria and Ghana are often compared, however, because of their shared heritage: both were British colonies and became independent at roughly the same time (1960 and 1957 respectively). Following independence, both shared migration and trade. While it appears as though Lagos is receiving most of the attention in the global fashion arena, Ghana is also developing new cutting edge brands such as Osei Duro and Mimi Plange. In this study, I will explore the differences within

the fashion markets they participate in, on a local and global basis. I will also inquire about any shared socio-economic and infrastructural barriers.

Literature Review, Theories, and Key Terms

Scholarship on African fashion and contemporary brands is only just emerging. As Karen Fiss asserts in "Designing in A Global Context: Envisioning Postcolonial and Transnational Possibilities," fashion has long been associated with "advanced societies" and "non-Western dress historically has been considered costume and not fashion" (8). Much of the academic literature available today is primarily concerned with textiles, craft and adornment and practices of dress during the colonial era, such as "Fashioning the Colonial Subject" by John Comaroff and "Weaving a Biblical Text: Ewe Cloth and Christianity" by Malika Kramer. Both works provide insights into the complex histories of textile practices, as well as a critical study on the evolution of dress. Victoria Rovine and Leslie W. Rabine have looked at fashion from a contemporary vantage point, approaching sartorial style in terms of "fashion from the continent" rather than "African fashion," the latter conveying an image of homogeneity. Despite these works, scholarship in this realm remains scarce. In my MRP, I am concerned with the study of African-made contemporary fashion. I follow Hannah Azieb Pool's perspective that asserts, "there is no such thing as African fashion any more than there is "European" or "North American" fashion" (Pool 14). She states that each city harbours its own history, priorities and influences, and that these factors are reflected in the work of designers. I am approaching this research in concert with Pool's perspective, directing my focus on designers that are based in Ghana and Nigeria that are working within the economic, structural, and cultural systems of these countries. Some of the designers I mention, such as Osei Duro, are run by non-local designers. Others, like Raffia and A.A.K.S., have been spearheaded by designers who were born in these countries, lived abroad and returned to the continent to begin their business. The brands mentioned above offer diverse products that are the result of varying influences, teachings, experiences, and personal networks of the designers that made them. Each brand contributes to an output of meaning that redefines the place and culture from which they emerge.

One of the realities of the fashion industry in Ghana and Nigeria is that the price point at which many of these consumer goods are available makes them inaccessible to a large

portion of the country where they are made. Rovine states: "Only consumers of substantial means can afford to purchase the clothing that is shown on runways, sold in boutiques, and promoted via glossy magazines" (108). While some of the companies I hope to research could appeal to a broad market, they reflect a reality for a small portion of the population, while at the same time, inadvertently representing an aesthetic that become important signifiers and identifiers of place. As Schroeder et al. state in *Brand Theory*: "In the practice of brand management, companies are constantly engaged with issues of social and cultural identity" (116). Further, each of the designers I have mentioned incorporates elements that are historically associated with West African aesthetics like the batakari (a Northern Ghanaian smock) or a basket weaving technique re-adopted to make clutches rather than market baskets. This work redefines and rebrands the original uses for these techniques.

British fashion journalist Helen Jennings' "A Brief History of African Fashion" and "Haute Africa," outlines regionally specific textile practices, such as the West African boubou and agbada (embroidered gowns with Islamic influence) and the shweshwe (printed indigo cloth) worn by Sotho people in Southern Africa (3). Her work shows that many young African designers study abroad and return to their countries to create hybridized contemporary garments. Her book *New African Fashion* (2011) gives an overview of the high-end fashion landscape across Africa. She was also editor of now defunct *Arise* (2009-2013) – an online African culture and lifestyle magazine. In addition, there are fashion blogs shedding light on the use of African print/Ankara print among the African diaspora, such as OkayAfrica.com founded by Ginny Suss and run by Abiola Oke, and Africanprintsinfashion.com written by a writer going by MsK, the latter based out of New York. In my research in Ghana and Nigeria I will explore media context, reviewing TV programs and fashion events as well as locally circulated magazines. While English is the official language of both countries, and most media broadcast English in Accra and Lagos, a multitude of languages are spoken in each, including Yoruba in Nigeria and Akan in Ghana. These factors are barriers in my complete understanding of local experience. The social media platform Instagram will also be a subject of research, as it provides links and suggestions to brands that I would otherwise not be familiar with or be able to find through English-language search engines. African designers depicting their work on Instagram include Christie Brown, Raffia, A.A.K.S., and I.AM.ISIGO (see appendix A). The suggestion platform on Instagram has assisted me in rapidly broadening

my knowledge of existing and emerging brands that would not otherwise get wide coverage on English-language media channels.

In studying African-made fashion, my research takes inspiration from, and contributes to, the emerging international scholarship, which has been concerned with critical questions of identity and colonial history. Victoria Rovine uncovers the use of traditional textile practices in contemporary fashion, and the economic and cultural weight fashion has on many African countries. In "Colonialism's Clothing – Africa, France and the Deployment of Fashion", she uses a postcolonial model to explore how French West Africa was depicted in French clothing in the early 20th century, when African fashion was pejoratively labelled "traditional". This cultural bias is sometimes perpetuated in fashion journalism today as an exoticization. Rovine argues that boundaries of cultural identity should not be viewed as separate from one another: "African" or "Western" styles are points on a continuum rather than discreet categories" (5). These distinctions are often lost in the marketplace; multiple North American and European style blogs feature housewares that incorporate Ankara print, allowing customers to introduce "ethnic" elements into their home without having to commit to deeper engagements with the culture that produced them and often in ignorance of whether these styles have been wrongly appropriated in the West by non-African designers. As Jennings notes, "European designers choose certain colours or materials without necessarily understanding their value" (14). In "Dilemmas in African Diaspora Fashion," Lewis Van Dyk articulates concerns about making short-term trends of other people's cultural history. Scholars like Rovine underline how the "borrowing and adaptation" of cultural aesthetics led to "sartorial conventions" (Rovine 47). While not specifically focusing on "African print," Gott and Loughran's book *Contemporary African Fashion* identifies where colonization has left its mark on current fashion trends while being interlaced with localized techniques, stating that "in today's globalized world style inspirations travel in all directions" (5). The authors highlight where this has been successful and when it has proven problematic due to certain forms of dress holding deeply imbedded meaning or association to specific traditions.

Leslie Rabine investigates the informal transmission of African fashion in *The Global Circulation of African Fashion: Dress, Body, Culture*. Rabine provides insight into businesses operating outside of the traditional networks of business in regions of Senegal, Kenya and Los Angeles and how artisans reinterpret and adapt traditional designs in order to compete with their

peers and make a living in the precarious world of design. She explains that through adaptation, artisans are helping dispel the colonial idea of tradition as static. While I will not be investigating informal fashion networks, her discussion on tradition and adaptation is helpful in the context of postcolonial theory.

African-inspired design has been used in Western fashion for a number of years from Thierry Mugler's spring/summer 1987 collection to Junya Watanabe's spring/summer 2009 collection (Jennings 13). In the last 10 to 15 years, however, there has been a growth in what Leora Farber terms "hybridised identity options" (129) in her article "Africanising Hybridity? Toward an Afropolitan Aesthetic in Contemporary South Africa." She examines three Johannesburg-based designers, Sun Goddess, Stoned Cherrie, and Strangelove, who have what she references as an "Afropolitan" aesthetic "in which both African and cosmopolitan aesthetics are reworked and integrated" (Farber 29). Postcolonial theories like Farber's privilege an understanding of hybridized identities, providing insight into the designers' histories and identities. However, this risks perpetuating Western designers as progressive, contemporary and fashion forward while African designers could be seen as romanticising the past. This dichotomy could locate Westerners as leaders in fashion while relegating African designers to endlessly renegotiate their pre-colonial histories.

Furthering the discussion of hybridity, Hansen and Madison's edited collection *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance* (2013*)* features chapters from a group of scholars who incorporate ideas of performance and identity in discussing clothing across disparate regions within Africa. The editors describe African aesthetics as "visibly global and resolutely local at the same time" (9). The authors assert that clothing can signify power, status, religion, and gender as well as awareness of and "plugging in" to Western trends. In this work, dressing well helps individuals in difficult economic times reclaim power. The authors bring to light the importance and weight that clothing bore historically and contemporarily in disparate social groups. Among low-income earners in Niger, "men and women share intense preoccupation with clothes" (143). The Senegalese norm of "looking good" is "one way of coping with economic adversity," and the author notes that "fashion thrives in Senegal despite decades of economic decline" (63). In colonial-era Togo, showcasing one's wealth was important during social functions and this was typically done using the expensive Dutch wax fabric (discussed below).

Dutch wax fabric is a central component in current and colonial era African fashion

around which most of the scholarship is based. A key piece in understanding aspects of West African textiles and of the broad term "African print" is the example of the Dutch company Vlisco (see appendix B) founded in 1846. Vlisco uses a wax cloth method in its textiles that is historically an Indian and Indonesian practice. While these products are designed and manufactured in Holland, they are sold predominantly to African markets. In their article "The Commodification of Ethnicity: Vlisco Fabrics and Wax Cloth Fashion in Ghana", Christine Delhaye and Rhoda Woets note that "The multi-layered history of wax cloth is embedded in a long and ongoing history of global trade and cultural (re)appropriation" (94). Although the brand has been copied and manufactured at cheaper rates in China, "fancy prints," as they are called, still sell to a large market and remains a strong identifier of African aesthetic.

In his 2010 article "The European 'African Print' and the Direction of Authentic African Print Design Efforts in Nigeria," Nigerian scholar Tunde Akinwumi takes a critical postcolonial approach to document that Vlisco does not feature indigenous African motifs. Instead, Indian, Javanese, Indonesian, European and Chinese inspired designs have been and are currently used, thus effectively misrepresenting African heritage. In his 2008 article "The 'African Print' Hoax: Machine Produced Textiles Jeopardize African Print Authenticity," Tunde Akinwumi documents that the prints are actually "developed from batiq" a technique that is indigenously Indian (181). Akinwumi states that historically, Christian missionaries introduced wax prints to West Africa before the Dutch company began producing largely for West African markets (182).

While my proposed research takes inspiration from scholarship on hybridized identities and Ankara print, which represent an already well-established scholarly subfield, it does not focus on these topics alone. I propose to focus on an underexplored domain of African fashion, namely, the access and barriers that young West African brands face, both locally and internationally, in breaking into the international fashion market and the ways these issues manifest. Pool and Jennings detail these problems, noting that "weak infrastructure includes poor transportation and an inconsistent power supply… a lack of trained tailors and seamstresses and no big manufacturing factories" (91). Likewise, Franklin Obeng-Odoom's "An Urban Twist to Politics in Ghana" is informative, noting that Africa has one of the fastest rates of urbanization in the world, though with largely disproportionate income earnings. Obeng-Odoon suggests that Ghana in particular has a reputation as a strong and stable political body, represented in the recent work in beautifying the city of Accra, building business centres, and supporting the arts.

To what degree financial backing is given to those in the arts and to fashion is not readily available in current scholarship and while poverty rates are decreasing outside of the capital, Obeng-Odoon notes that they have risen in the city Accra.

In "Developing the Fashion Industry in Africa: The Case of Johannesburg," Christian Rogerson discusses the example of South Africa, where a number of initiatives were put in place in the early 2000s to support the creative industries, particularly fashion, in what was believed to be business with "…the greatest potential for growth as well as labour absorption" (22). He states that fashion in pre-apartheid South Africa was lead largely by white South Africans travelling to the U.S. and Europe to bring back the latest foreign designs. Post-apartheid, however, many new local designers, particularly black South Africans, have established themselves. While South Africa has a specific political history of its own, Rogerson makes an important point about the power dynamics affecting local entrepreneurs. As he observes, "several studies confirm the importance of understanding the uneven nature of power relationships in the global clothing economy" (3), referring specifically to large foreign retail outlets making it difficult for small businesses to emerge and survive. On a continent with strong local identities but where information is largely entering from the West, not only in fashion trends but also across media networks, it is understandably challenging for emerging entrepreneurs to carve a niche for themselves. In "Culture and Nigerian Identity in Print Media," Onyinyechi Nancy Nwaolikpe discusses the role print media should take in furthering and preserving Nigerian cultural identity(ies). The author underscores that because Nigerians use the Internet and television as a main source of information consumption, there is a large influence from the US, perpetuating an American ideal over a more local way of life. She also suggests that not enough effort is being placed on preserving local culture and states: "only a few newspapers are written in indigenous languages" (7) which, combined with greater Western influences on culture, is placing local cultures at risk of being diluted or lost. At the same time, social media helps spread awareness of up and coming brands and artists across the continent and beyond. How do entrepreneurs ensure that they are being true to themselves in their creative work without being clobbered by Western markets, or diluting their products to meet a Western idea of status quo? Do designers feel the need to acquiesce to markets outside of the continent if they are going to succeed internationally?

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Postcolonial theory, as suggested in some of the above, provides a helpful overarching framework that heightens awareness of appropriative or colonialist mechanisms in the fashion industry. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said underscores how culture and imperialism cannot be separated from each other and that the mixing of identities have occurred over long and short periods in areas with a history of colonization, in particular. In *Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha underscores the lively presence of stereotypes left over from colonialism. He suggests that "the analytic of ambivalence questions dogmatic and moralistic positions on the meaning of oppression and discrimination" (67). According to Bhabha, cultural hybridity is a mechanism of survival, but is also an active choice. As he writes, "the 'past-present' becomes part of necessity, not the nostalgia of living" (7).

The issue of "past-present" described above is not just a question of culture and nostalgia but applicable in acknowledging the economic repercussions in post-colonial societies. In "The Intimacies of Four Continents," Lisa Lowe states: "liberal forms of political economy, culture, government, and history propose a narrative of freedom overcoming enslavement that at once denies colonial slavery, erases the seizure of land from native peoples, displaces migrations and connections across continents, and internalizes these processes in a national struggle of history and consciousness" (3). In a free market economy, countries that have been historically held back due to colonialism, such as Ghana and Nigeria, are in a paradox of contending with their relatively recent freedoms while operating within systems established in the postcolonial marketplace that provides little acknowledgement and "sweeps under the rug" recent histories.

Anticipated Outcomes and Contributions to the Field Fashion

My research in Ghana and Nigeria will uncover the climate of contemporary West African Fashion and help expand the scholarly work that currently exists. It will explore barriers that young African designers are facing in accessing international markets and what changes have taken place in the last decade by way of governance, economy and culture. The research will look at how contemporary brands have been received in West Africa and beyond the continent's borders while addressing issues of appropriation, hybridization and economic growth. Through this research, I will enhance my knowledge and understanding of the fashion labels emerging in Ghana and Nigeria and locate uses of indigenous techniques and Ankara fabric. By working with a local Ghanaian designer, conducting interviews with local fashion entrepreneurs (conditional on ethics approval), and immersing myself in the fashion culture, I will seek out the experiences and challenges of those working within the West African textile and design industry. Some of the designers that I hope to interview will have cultural roots in Africa while others will be entrepreneurs from outside of the continent, which will help uncover any shared experiences between them in establishing a brand. The importance of this research lies in presenting the economic, structural, and cultural complexities that exist in a foreign market in the context of fashion design and production. With African countries being touted as a destination for greater foreign investment (Akwagyiram), it is possible that the geographical orientation of the fashion industry will experience a shift, impacting fashion entrepreneurs both in the West and in Africa.

Population Sample/Data Collection/Analysis

The participant research will be conducted using snowball sampling to locate interviewees. Snowball techniques build a sample "created through a series of referrals that are made within a circle of people who know one another" (Berg 1). The reason for using this approach is as follows: First, for the purpose of my research on emerging brands, it is imperative that I gather information from those who have attempted or are looking towards working within international markets. Second, obtaining the trust and interest from a designer to participate in the research will prove to be less complicated if we have a mutual acquaintance. Finally, while I have foundational knowledge on the brands that are emerging in

Accra and Lagos, I have not established a detailed understanding of the landscape and value information share from those who reside on the continent.

The majority of the interviews will be conducted while I am in Ghana and Nigeria in August and early September of this year. Interviews will be conducted in-person and, should the participant agree, recorded and transcribed. I aim to interview at least 10 designers (5 in the each country), however I will consider increasing the amount of interviews should opportunities present themselves for more subjects. I will also consider conducting online surveys if I am no longer in the country and an opportunity arises to interview another designer. All participants will be over 18 years of age, with no limitation placed on the size of the company. I aim, however, to interview those designers who are looking towards international markets or have done so already. Designers will be asked about the inception of their business, their aesthetic choices, and their target market as well as the progress and setbacks they have experienced since starting their company. Designers will also be asked about the perception of their brand within local and international markets and to identify perceived successes and drawbacks. Lastly, I will pose questions on the company's trajectory, how they plan to achieve those goals, and how they identify any risk factors or barriers.

Appendix A

African designers Christie Brown, I.AM.ISIGO, Raffia and A.A.K.S from Nigeria and Ghana showcase sample pieces from their collections depicting the variety and boldness in their contemporary aesthetics.

Figure 1: Christie Brown , (christiebrowngh). "Living life like it's golden!" April 29, 2016. Instagram.

Figure 2: IAMISIGO, (iamisigo). "Taking you back to our ss15 collection" May 13, 2016. Instagram.

Figure 3: Raffia (raffia_gh), "Farah cropped blouse (mango) + bisha gathered skirt" Nov 6, 2016. Instagram.

Figure 4: A.A.K.S, (a.a.k.s.) "Expanding our stocklist one #weave at a time!" May 6, 2016. Instagram.

Appendix B

Two examples of Dutch company, Vlisco, and their 'African print' made in Holland and sold predominantly to African markets.

Figure1: Vlisco (vliscofashion). "Vlisco women's month" March 4, 2016. Instagram.

Figure 2: Vlisco (vliscofashion) "Styling Tips" February 16, 2016. Instagram.

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