

Subject: Fashion Abstract Submission

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THE WILL TO ADORN: AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND
THE AESTHETICS OF DRESS AND PERSONAL ADORNMENT

The arts of dress and adornment in African American culture are more than simply statements of personal taste and sense of style. They can be understood as visual vocabularies of community and individual self-naming; as markers of ethnicity, of entitlement, of commitment to a faith, a cause or an idea; as avenues of artistic expression and mastery. The sheer variety of community dress, adornment and body art traditions speak volumes about the richly heterogeneous and complex African American population. These arts of attire incorporate both the aesthetics of everyday dress and that of ritual regalia; both the production of material culture and the arts of performance.

African American arts of dress include the design and construction of clothing, hair and headwear (millinery), jewelry, cosmetics and other arts applied to the body by trained and self-taught artisans skilled in these traditions. African Americans also attend to details in the arts of social dressing—the way that men and women assemble their hair, jewelry, elements of clothing and embellish their bodies making an aesthetic statement of social and cultural identity. Members of varied cultural communities within the African American population convey ideas of what is beautiful and provide feedback on what best exemplifies what it means to be well dressed or appropriately attired. Grounded in the culturally aesthetics of their clients, master tailors, dressmakers, designers and stylists of the head and body exercise their knowledge and skills to innovate as they cater to these distinct African American community tastes. This paper discusses aesthetics of dress as a mirror of ethnic, regional, religious, class, gender, and political diversity within United States African American communities and as a major genre of expressive culture across communities of the African Diaspora.