

*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*

Midterm Examination BUF 4900

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The *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* exhibition aims to celebrate and examine how Black culture from around the world influences fashion. Through nine themes, like "Reaching for Africa" and "Monumental Cloth," it shows how Black designers from different regions including, Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas—interpret and share Black cultural stories (*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*, The Museum of FIT, 2024). The curator Elizabeth Way, associate curator of costume at The Museum of FIT, focuses on fashion as a way to explore and express Black identity, crossing lines of nationality, gender, and other identities (*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*, The Museum of FIT, 2024). This is important because it recognizes the unique and diverse ways Black culture is expressed, moving away from one-sided views and honoring shared history and resilience. Understanding this concept helps viewers see how fashion contributes to conversations on race, identity, and history, acknowledging the commonalities and individuality within the Black diaspora. Fashion here serves as a powerful means to share and honor these varied experiences and stories.

The chosen piece for this garment-focused paper is the multi-colored silk-chiffon evening gown "Serengeti" by designer Kevan Hall. Drawing specifically from Tanzania, Hall incorporates elements like rich colors, detailed beadwork, and earthy tones that reflect the beauty of African art and scenery (*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*, The Museum of FIT, 2024). The gown's flowing lines and color transitions mirror the warm tones and natural shapes found in the

Tanzanian landscape, capturing the essence of Africa in a refined, abstract way (*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*, The Museum of FIT, 2024). Hall explains, “The inspiration... was Africa. I looked at the beautiful people there, the artwork, the gorgeous embroideries and the beading, and also the beautiful land (*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*, The Museum of FIT, 2024).” Through this design, Hall honors African beauty with an elegant and modern twist on color and form.

A line refers to the path created by points moving in space within a garment. Lines can guide one's eye while designing shapes and setting a mood—creating a specific presentation (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Lines can be vertical, horizontal, diagonal, or curved, each creating different visual effects and senses of movement or stability. The evening gown, “Serengeti” by Kevan Hall, uses a combination of vertical, diagonal, and horizontal lines to structure and shape its gazing appearance. Vertical seams run along the length of the dress, which elongates the silhouette and creates a sophisticated, streamlined look that draws the eye upward. Diagonal lines, formed by the angled transition of color blocks, add a dynamic effect, suggesting movement even when the dress is still. These diagonals break up the vertical structure, making the dress feel less rigid and more playful. The neckline and hem act as horizontal lines, which frame the top and bottom of the dress and give a sense of closure to the design, anchoring its structure.

Rhythm in design refers to the repetition of elements to create a sense of organized movement and flow. This can guide the viewer's eye across a composition, creating harmony and balance within the design (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Rhythm is established in Kevan Hall's multi-colored dress through the alternating blocks of mauve, brown, and white colors, each serving as a visual “beat” that repeats down the garment. These sections create a steady flow as the eye moves from one color to the next, encouraging engagement with each segment of the

design. The rhythm of colors is not only visually appealing but also reinforces the dress's dynamic, balanced feel. By having a regular rhythm, the dress achieves visual unity, making each color block part of a cohesive whole. This rhythm keeps the eye moving, ensuring that no single color block dominates the garment and that the design feels connected and harmonious.

Form in fashion refers to the volume of a garment, impacting how it fits, contours, and moves on the body. Form is influenced by factors such as fabric, structure, and silhouette, and it helps define a garment's overall aesthetic (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The colorful dress showcases a balance between fitted and flowing forms. A more fitted bodice emphasizes structure, giving the dress a tailored, elegant look. In contrast, the lower part of the dress is fuller, allowing it to introduce a sense of softness and movement, contributing to an airy, graceful effect as the dress moves with the wearer. The fabric's lightness also adds to the form, allowing the dress to drape naturally around the body and enhance the flow of color from top to bottom. This contrast between fitted and loose sections creates a blissful silhouette that combines structure with fluidity, adding versatility to the dress' overall shape.

Balance in design is the distribution of visual weight within a composition, creating a sense of stability. Balance can be symmetrical (mirrored on both sides) or asymmetrical, where elements are offset but still create harmony (Bell & Ternus, 2017). Kevan Hall's evening dress achieves balance through the even distribution of color blocks across the garment. Despite the range of hues, each color section is positioned thoughtfully to avoid overwhelming the design. The placement of colors is symmetrical, with each block sized proportionally, providing stability and harmony. This symmetry allows the dress to feel well-composed and ensures that the eye can move naturally from one color section to another without disruption. This balance helps the

design feel cohesive and unified, giving the dress a classic yet modern look that is both visually pleasing and structurally sound.

The contrast in design highlights differences between elements. This includes light and dark colors, textures, or shapes, to create visual interest (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The colorful dress By Kevan Hall showcases contrast through its use of vibrant versus neutral colors, creating a visual impact that highlights the individuality of each color block. For instance, pairing bold colors with softer, muted tones allows certain areas to stand out more prominently, adding dimension to the garment. This contrast between colors adds depth, ensuring the garment has dynamic visual layers. By emphasizing certain sections over others, the contrast in the dress brings a unique character to each part while maintaining an overall cohesive design.

The dominance within a garment often stands out due to its color, size, or placement within the composition. Dominance refers to the most prominent element within a design, which naturally draws attention and often sets the tone or theme of the piece (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The dominant feature of the dress is likely one of the boldest color blocks, strategically placed to catch the eye. The color section serves as a focal point, establishing a sunset theme for the entire garment and guiding the viewer's initial impression. Its position both centrally located and near the top of the dress, anchors the visual balance and helps other colors support rather than compete with it. This dominant block color brings cohesion to the design, serving as the visual anchor around which the other colors and details orbit. As the defining feature, this color choice shapes the aesthetic direction and mood of the entire garment.

Proportion refers to the size relationship between various elements in a design, ensuring they work together harmoniously. Balanced proportions create a sense of unity, while

exaggerated proportions can add drama or uniqueness (Bell & Ternus, 2017). The evening gown by Kevan Hall maintains proportion by using similar-sized color blocks throughout, ensuring a balanced look where no single section feels out of place. Each color block is proportionate to the others, creating a visual hierarchy that appears intentional and well-organized. If certain blocks are slightly larger, they provide a natural point of emphasis without overwhelming the design of the dress. This proportional balance allows each color to stand on its own while contributing to the overall visual unity. By carefully considering the size of each block, the dress achieves a look that feels complete and thoughtfully arranged.

Repetition in fashion strengthens the unity and cohesiveness of a composition.

Repetition is the recurring use of certain elements, such as colors, shapes, or patterns, to create consistency and rhythm within a design (Bell & Ternus, 2017). In the dress, repetition is evident in the consistent use of color blocks, which create a cohesive theme that runs through the entire garment. By using repeated shapes lines and colors in an organized pattern, the designer establishes a sense of order and predictability, making the dress visually appealing. This repetition reinforces rhythm and unity, allowing each color block to feel like a natural extension of the previous one. As a result, the dress appears harmonious and intentional, with the repetition of shapes and hues connecting each section to form a unified design. Repetition not only ties the garment together but also enhances its overall aesthetic appeal.

The sunset-themed evening gown “Serengeti” by Kevin Hall displays a varied interplay of textures that enhances its visual depth and interest. The dominant fabric appears to have a smooth surface with a slight sheen, giving it a polished, silk chiffon-like quality that reflects light subtly (*iTextiles.com*, SwatchKit, 2023). This silk/chiffon adds a sense of elegance, making the colors appear more vibrant. Some sections seem to incorporate a contrasting texture, perhaps a

more matte finish, to provide subtle contrast against the smooth, glossy areas. This combination of smooth and slightly textured fabrics creates a tactile appeal, emphasizing the garment's layered design. If one would refer to textile swatches for this dress, a dominant swatch would likely be a lightweight chiffon or silk fabric for the areas with sheen, while a cotton or linen blend might be used for the more matte sections, giving the dress a balanced look that shifts in texture and light (*iTextiles.com*, SwatchKit, 2023). This interplay makes the garment both visually dynamic and appealing to the touch.

The sunset-themed evening gown "Serengeti" by Kevin Hall reflects a spirit of bold self-expression and cultural identity, much like the 1973 Battle of Versailles. Black models broke barriers at the 1973 Battle of Versailles and redefined beauty standards (Heymann, 2023). This historic event celebrated diversity and cultural pride, shifting global perceptions and embracing inclusion (Heymann, 2023). Kevin Hall's gown's vibrant hues and varied textures echo the energy and movement that Black models brought to the Versailles stage. Just as the garment challenges conventional design with its striking contrasts, the show moved away from Eurocentric norms, highlighting the beauty and charisma of Black models (Heymann, 2023). Iconic figures like Pat Cleveland and Bethann Hardison didn't just participate; they transformed the fashion direction, reshaping cultural landscapes (Heymann, 2023). This dress, like the Battle of Versailles, symbolizes change, using fashion as a form of storytelling. It serves as a modern testament to diversity, resilience, and the evolving impact of fashion on life.

The multi-colored dress symbolizes identity, heritage, and individuality, much like Michaela Coel's exploration of her roots on her Vogue cover. Coel's visit to Accra, Ghana, where she shares her thoughts on love, life, and representation, parallels the vibrant design of the Hall's dress (Chibelushi, 2024). Both Coel's reflections and Kevin Hall's gown celebrate

cultural pride and the importance of self-expression. As Coel embraces her heritage, the dress's choice of color, neon green, and textures reflects a deep sense of identity (Chibelushi, 2024). Her creative freedom is echoed in the dress's bold style, representing a life lived authentically. Together, the gown by Kevan Hall and Coel's story highlights the importance of representing and honoring one's roots. They show how fashion and personal experiences can meaningfully mirror and shape our lives.

In conclusion, *Africa's Fashion Diaspora* exhibition serves as a powerful exploration of Black cultural expression through fashion, showing how designers worldwide celebrate and interpret Black identity. By weaving themes such as heritage, resilience, and innovation into their work, these designers bring a fresh narrative that challenges limited views of Black culture. Fashion, seen in iconic designs like Kevan Hall's African sunset-themed dress, becomes an artistic and intellectual platform to represent complex identities and histories. Hall's dress, with its bold colors, rhythms, and textures, symbolizes self-expression and mirrors the impact of events like the Battle of Versailles, where Black models redefined beauty standards and Michaela Coel's celebration of her roots in Ghana. Through these visual stories, fashion reveals itself as a dynamic, connecting force that honors individual experiences while embracing shared cultural legacies. The exhibition reinforces the idea that fashion is not merely aesthetic but a vibrant conversation about identity, belonging, and change in the African diaspora.

Figure 1

Figure 2



Figure 1 & 2:

*Africa's Fashion Diaspora*, The Museum of FIT, 2024. *Africa: A Safari Collection*, “Serengeti” silk chiffon evening gown, Spring 2008, United States.



Photo of Myself at *Africa's Fashion Diaspora*, The Museum of FIT, 2024.



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