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# Sequined Styles, Intersectional Moves: Economic Geography, Let's Dress Up!

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## abstract

In this article, we build on the vital insights of feminist thought in economic geography, extending this body of work via a global Black feminist geographic lens. To do so, we center two moments of the Ugandan bridal industry: the international trade of imported dresses and their design and refashioning there. Via the journeys of these dresses, we make visible how *connected* racial-gendered and classed power relations structure, drive, and manifest global trade networks. We provide geographically contextualized accounts of the gendered-racialization of economies, while always tracing the ties between varied forms of that racialization across place and through history. And we demonstrate the agency and crucial economic worldmaking of African women who labor within and fashion economic geographies. More broadly, we use dress, and the act of dressing up, in two ways. First, via a global Black feminist lens, we show how dress can be a deeply instructive material object that tells us much about the geographies of economies. Second, we use dress as a metaphor for urgent and playful connection, helping us to refashion the subfield of economic geography as feminist, antiracist, and critically transformative.

**Key words:**

Africa  
fashion  
global Black feminist  
geography  
neoliberal globalization  
postcolonial geography  
trade

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In June 2019, the city of Kampala, Uganda, hosted the eleventh annual Bride and Groom Expo. Demonstrating the lucrative rise of the wedding industry in East Africa, the annual trade fair showcased myriad products and services related to that special day, including lavish hotel event bookings, multtiered wedding cakes, videographers, luxury car rentals, and honeymoons, along with financial planning seminars to manage the new and dramatically rising costs (see Figure 1). But the key attraction was a sneak peek at the latest in bridal fashions, with runway models showcasing a host of glimmering gowns and emerging Ugandan design talent.

Lining the expo walls were gowns imported from China by entrepreneurs like Christine. Part of a dramatically growing number of small-scale entrepreneurs using pooled money from friends, family, and partners to fund her importing business, she selects and transports these dresses from the maze-like malls of Henan, one of China's shopping epicenters. The growing economic and political integration of Uganda and China, but also Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has meant dazzling imports like these are within reach for more Ugandans than ever. For Christine, and other Ugandan women like her who are *trying on* the trade, business is good.

On the catwalk, designers refashion traditional white wedding gowns with styles reflecting Uganda's historic and contemporary global positioning, while remaining attentive to local norms and trends: removable modesty shawls for the shift from church to dance floor; sequins and rhinestones stitched into simpler designs for the extra sparkle demanded by discerning Ugandan consumers; and the colorful sari-inspired designs of the Gloria Glosch Fashion house.

Why should an economic geographer care about Gloria's styles, Christine's tenacity, and those sparkly Cinderella gowns? And what can an intersectional, global Black feminist, geographic eye bring to our understanding of economies like these: booming amidst neoliberal austerity; rooted yet transformed in place, all the while forged in and forging new trade routes, new connections, and new kinds of debt? Influenced by South Asian, Western, and African trends, produced in the US, China, Turkey, and locally, and journeying in the suitcases and cargo holds of transnational traders, wedding dresses both reflect and remake pathways of East African globalization. This is very much a geographic

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INNOVATION AND EXCELLENCE

Figure 1. An advertisement for the 2010 Bride and Groom Expo.

Source: [www.brideandgroomexpo.co.ug](http://www.brideandgroomexpo.co.ug) and archival sources at Makerere University.

intellectual journey—one concerned with new mobilities of goods, ideas, and people; the tensions around nation-state sovereignty; and the porosity of Ugandan borders and bodies in the wake of historic and contemporary global engagement.

This article is inspired by a vibrant body of feminist geographic research that still sits on the margins, if not outside, of the subfield of economic geography. In particular,

we revisit Nagar et al.'s landmark article "Locating Globalization: Feminist (Re)readings of the Subjects and Spaces of Globalization" (2002). Our intellectual contribution is to extend the feminist insights laid out there via a global Black feminist lens (e.g., Mullings 2009; Noxolo 2011; Pierre 2012; Mollett 2014; Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018, 2019a, 2019b; Christian and Namaganda 2018; Hawthorne 2019; Okoye 2021). Complicating established feminist economic geography in this way directs us to the historic, material, and embodied groundings of economies in and through place: its globalized pathways, the sociocultural and colonial norms and ideals of improvement, chastity, sexuality, and aspiration it reflects and reworks; the varied and spatial relations of capital and labor that infuse and are remade through it; and its moorings in particularly grounded colonial pasts and neoliberal presents. That is, we attend to its geographies. This provides, first, a more complex understanding of capitalism as always grounded in and coproduced through the "past-presents" of racial-gendered power (Faria and Jones 2020, 86). Second, it pushes us to provide geographically contextualized accounts of the gendered-racialization of economies, while always tracing the ties between varied forms of that racialization across place and through history. And last, it recognizes Black African women as crucial and agentive actors in, and formative of, those very economies. Beyond this nuanced intellectual contribution *within* feminist economic geography, we use dress more broadly as a metaphor for the transformation we call for in wider economic geography. That is, we want economic geography not only to make space for intersectional feminist work but to recognize, value, and center the concerns, approaches, questions, and arguments of this scholarship across all of the work in this field. The continued elision of global Black feminist frameworks constrains the critical explanatory abilities of the subfield of economic geography, reproduces its whiteness, and stymies opportunities for just economic geographic futures. Christian (2019, 169) argues that, via this kind of feminist analysis of racial power in economic systems, instead "both the permanence and flexibility of racism across the global can be seen, in all its overt, invisible and insidious forms, that ultimately sustains global White supremacy in the twenty-first century."

## Renewing Our Vows: A(nother) Commitment to Intersectional Feminist Thought

Feminist interventions have pushed economic geography to integrate women as agentive economic actors (Monk and Hanson 1982), to trace how the economy is embodied and produced through power-laden social relations and contradictions (Massey 1997; Werner 2012; Larner 2016), and to rethink how gender ideologies structure our understanding of the economy (Gibson-Graham 1996; Martin and Sunley 2001; Lawson 2010; MacLeavy, Roberts, and Strauss 2016). This work complicates Marxist scholarship by insisting on the explicitly gendered and spatially grounded drivers and impacts of global political-economic processes (Wright 1997; Pollard 2013). For example, feminist economic geography expands categories of labor and work by integrating the home to reveal how feminized and reproductive labor underpins and sustains capitalist systems (McDowell 1991, 2015; Katz 2001; Mullings 2009). More recently framed through the *global intimate* (Pratt and Rosner 2006), feminist work has disrupted scalar norms in geography, demonstrating that we *cannot* make sense of macro geo-economic and geopolitical processes, like neoliberal globalization, without recognizing these as already and always corporeal, embodied, affective, and thus riven by power. These moves have shown how women's daily lives not only matter to but *make up* the global economy. They dovetail with efforts to confront

spatial and scalar binaries such as informal/formal, productive/reproductive, and household/workplace. These moves fundamentally complicate how we have theorized capitalism in economic geography, creating openings to challenge its hegemony and examine, “the heterogeneity and plurality of economic forms” (Oberhauser 2017, 69).

Nagar et al.’s (2002) article emerges from this body of work. In this piece, they insist we think about the subjects, spaces, and scales of the economy more complexly (i.e., in a way that is more attentive to power and its fallout). They stress the insights of a feminist lens as a way to address key critiques of the subfield of economic geography. These are, namely, the exclusion of informal activities; the continued privileging of macroscales and Western spaces; and the neglect of women and other feminized, and thus devalued, actors in the economy. Pairing each vacancy with feminist work developed in critical development studies, migration studies, and elsewhere in and beyond geography, Nagar et al. demonstrate how the economy and global economic processes are already being rethought and retheorized from the margins. They lay out the insights of a feminist economic geographic approach: an understanding of scale that pays attention to everyday, grounded accounts of globalization and intimate traces of power; an examination of gender and difference as it structures uneven global economic processes like neoliberal structural adjustment programs; and a commitment to decentralize Western and White actors to make room for alternative theorizations of the economy. In this way, they push economic geographers to engage with feminist approaches as a corrective measure. But they also show how this opens up the subfield to new methods, questions, and insights around the operations of space, scalar politics, and political-economic flows. We find it deeply instructive for our own work on the geographies of economies, particularly when placed in conversation with, and extended through, postcolonial approaches.

Postcolonial economic geography is strongly influenced by, and produced through, feminist geographic thought. In a very feminist sense, this body of work rethinks “the economic as plural, contested, and above all situated” (Pollard, McEwan, and Hughes 2011, 3). Deepening Nagar et al. (2002), and in line with moves to *provincialize* neoliberalism (Chakrabarty 2000; Pollard, McEwan, and Hughes 2011; Larner 2016), a postcolonial economic geography situates the formations of *economic theory* and economic processes historically, and *particularly* within colonial histories and eurocentric models of development. It troubles naturalized assumptions that the economy should be theorized from examples of the formal, Western case (Sharp and Briggs 2006; Pollard et al. 2008). Instead, postcolonial economic geographies recognize the intellectual value of theorizing from Global South subjects, spaces, and practices (Mohammad and Sidaway 2012). This body of work has also made important methodological innovations in how we research the economy. It connects archival, qualitative, and sometimes quantitative approaches, and engages discursive analyses of cultural products and expression while insisting on a firmly materialist grounding in objects, people, and places (McEwan 2003). Postcolonial work has focused on the spatialities of colonial economies and markets (Domosh 2004; McEwan 2011) but has also richly extended into analyses of contemporary economic institutions, practices, and relationships, for example, around that of Islamic finance (Pollard and Samers 2007; Atia 2013).

Feminist economic geography, well exemplified by Nagar et al.’s (2002) provocation and extended historically via postcolonial economic geographies, has done much to bring an analysis of race, via its relationship to gender and coloniality, into the field. However, this must be deepened and complicated via explicit and continued engagement with global Black feminist thought. As Bonds (2013) cogently notes, economic

geography has examined the economic outcomes of racism, and the field has, more recently, made limited space for racialized analyses of the economy (Fraser 2018). But sustained Black feminist economic geographies remain largely absent from the sub-field. Yet such analyses are imperative. Still underdeveloped in feminist economic geography is work that interweaves gendered and racial power, patriarchy, and anti-blackness; centers Black life and Black worldmaking; attends to the Black globalities of economic geographies; and approaches capitalism as, fundamentally, a racial-gendered spatial formation produced through geohistories of White supremacist power. A global Black feminist lens brings to the fore and connects across place those varied histories of European encounter, enslavement, and colonial administration (Pierre 2012). It links these geohistories to the continued devaluation, disposability, and commodification of African and Afrodescendent women in the global economy (Mullings 2009; Smith 2016; Hawthorne 2019). Describing this as a “transnational intersectionality” framing, Christian and Namaganda (2018, 316) argue this lens provides a “stronger engagement with how global processes and transnational spaces shape marginalized identities, forms of inequality, and resistance” (see also Mollett and Faria’s 2013 *postcolonial intersectionality*). Strongly informed by Black Marxist theories of racial capitalism (Rodney 1972; Robinson 1983; Gilmore 2007; McKittrick and Woods 2007), a Black feminist approach imbues this work with analyses of gender-sexual ideologies and the political economies of care (Vasudevan 2019; Massaro 2020). Such work profoundly complicates feminist economic geography and, more broadly, the established interests of economic geography in uneven development and neoliberal capitalism.

To briefly review some deeply instructive examples: in Tornabé, Honduras, Mollett (2014) examines state land appropriation driven by neoliberal imperatives to accumulate capital by transforming the coastal region into an internationally attractive tourist site. Via a Black feminist political ecology lens, she shows how this move is powerfully mobilized by racist, and historically entrenched, ideologies of anti-blackness; specifically the idea that Afro-Indigenous Garifuna people are *backward*. More complexly, they are displaced *in place*, exploitable because assumptions of that very lack of civilization satisfies tourism’s insatiable demand for authenticity. Beyond a singular analysis of racist and racially grounded capital accumulation, Mollett (2014) traces here (and in more recent work in Panama, e.g., Mollett [2019]) the inseparability of sexual and gender ideologies that position Garifuna women as cultural artisans, girlfriends, and domestics. As she demonstrates, the economic geographies of land theft and capital accumulation, uneven and neoliberal development, and labor exploitation—central themes in economic geography—cannot be fully understood without a global Black feminist geographic lens (see also Mullings 2009). This makes visible both the historic foundations of these processes in colonialism and enslavement and their coproduction via gendered and sexual power.

Global Black feminist geographers have also deeply complicated analyses of labor and exploitation by attending to the agency, subjectivities, worldmaking, and resistance of Afrodescendent people, and particularly women in and moving between Africa and the African diaspora (McKittrick 2006, 2013; Perry 2013; Hawthorne 2019; Okoye 2020). One instructive example in this vein for our empirical focus is Adeniyi Ogunyankin’s work with low-income women in Nigeria (2019b). Adeniyi Ogunyankin’s research examines the efforts of women in Ibadan to resist neoliberal urban renovation projects. Revealing the colonial and neoliberal drivers of these urban renewal efforts, Adeniyi Ogunyankin describes how and why these women feel incompatible with state-led urban imaginaries. Adeniyi Ogunyankin documents how

these women collectively organize, employing maternal discourses of care to assert their right to urban space. She shows how these women are making space for Afrofutures rooted in social justice and free from these pasts (Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018, 2019b; see also Kinyanjui 2014).

In this article we extend feminist economic geography and its postcolonial strands via global Black feminist scholarship. In what follows we examine two parts of the Ugandan bridal industry. We begin by situating the trade within its wider rise across the African continent, locating its drivers in a connected set of colonial-rooted racialized ideals and contemporary neoliberal shifts around transborder trade. We then turn to the remaking of imported dresses, detailing the refashioning of both white wedding and traditional gomesi dresses in the malls and boutiques of Kampala. Through our account we deploy a global Black feminist framework, demonstrating the framework's crucial insights for feminist economic geography and the wider subfield of economic geography. That is, we center the racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed nature of the wedding economy—recognizing these power relations *not* as epiphenomena, or the “side show” (Oswin 2019), but as central to it. We trace 256 global intimacies of racialization manifest through the wedding dress. And we make visible the central role of African women who struggle within, innovate, and fashion this economy.

## Methods

Our analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in Kampala, Uganda, and Dubai, UAE, in the summers of 2014, 2015, and 2017 with our Ugandan collaborators at the School of Women's and Gender Studies, Makerere University (Whitesell and Faria 2020; Faria et al. 2021). This involved a survey with two hundred bridal entrepreneurs, participant observation at three Bride and Groom Expos, and fifty interviews with key bridal and fashion stakeholders in Uganda and in Dubai, including traders, designers, boutique owners and staff, and wholesalers. The surveys were a mix of closed and open-ended structured questions. Specifically, we spoke with stakeholders about how long they had worked in the industry, who inspired their fashions, the design and tailoring process, customer trends and product preferences, the sources of their products, the import process, their regularity of travel for those purchasing in person, their sources of funding, the challenges of the industry, and their everyday experiences. Focus groups with 110 female consumers ages eighteen to twenty-three complemented this work, along with archival research on wedding and fashion coverage since 1995 in two leading Ugandan newspapers: *New Vision* and *Daily Monitor* and colonial era coverage in the latter newspaper's earlier iteration, *Uganda Argus*. Pseudonyms or actual names, along with preferred titles and names, are used throughout as requested by participants.

## Taking Measurements: The Scope and Reach of the Wedding Industry

“Wedding gowns are a *big business!*” (Interview, Aisha, June 2015).

Fundamental to Nagar et al.'s (2002) work is a call for economic geographers to examine the work of neoliberal globalization by linking macroeconomic processes with the grounded and quotidian everyday. Global Black feminist arguments deepen this assertion, prompting us to examine how these embodied processes are produced through colonial past-presents of the economy, and the diasporic and (neo)colonial

circuits of Blackness (and anti-black whiteness) that enliven them (Hawthorne and Heitz 2018). The white wedding gown and associated ceremony has grounds both in Victorian colonial and US American military histories, as well as far longer bridal traditions in the country, with routes to South and East Asia (Adrian 2003; Erlank 2014; Mupotsa 2014). Following Queen Victoria's marriage in 1840, and her unusual choice to wear white, the color of the dress became bound up with ideals of cleanliness and purity, virginity, privilege, and power (Ingraham 2008). These ideals were already deeply racialized via their attachment to whiteness and their association with White supremacy. This was forged by more than two hundred years of European colonial encounter, enslavement, and the exploitation of Africans and African resources that relied upon, constructed, and reinforced notions of a Dark Continent and savage, primitive, uncivilized and/or unpowerful infantile African people (Omi and Winant 1994; Pierre 2020). Prior to and alongside the white wedding gown, other consumer goods facilitated the ties between civility, fairness, and whiteness, and their distinction from blackness and its oppositional and negative attachment. Soaps, lightening creams, cosmetics and foodstuffs, among other manufactured goods, offered a promise of (almost) whiteness while buttressing and reproducing White supremacy (Domosh 2004; Pierre 2008, 2012; McClintock 2013; Thomas 2020). As Pierre (2008, 2020) instructively argues, processes of racialization and racial ideologies forged during the period spanning the transatlantic slave trade and European continental colonial rule have a sustained significance for contemporary, and globalized, ideals around whiteness and blackness *within* Africa. These interweave with contemporary political-economic shifts to shape the white wedding industry in Uganda and, as we detail further below, the valorization of white dresses and their origins of manufacture.

The tightening of ties between conspicuous consumption and wedding celebrations has accelerated dramatically since the close of the nineteenth century, forming an expansive and lucrative industry (Ingraham 2008). While both celebrated and maligned in economic and popular reports, in the last thirty to forty years the white wedding fashion has rapidly taken off becoming, as Aisha (Interview, Aisha, June 2015) notes above, "big business" across many African countries. While macroeconomic analysis on the wedding industry in Africa is limited, country-specific reports, economic and popular, offer some insight. For example, prominent wedding blogger Mo Dharrah Sage estimated that an average Nigerian wedding, "has between 350–500 guests and costs between 2–3 m naira (US \$9,460–13,515)" (quoted in Shearlaw 2016). Further, as Idowu (2017) reports, the national bridal industry has seen a rise in celebrity, high-end weddings with accounts of one spectacular wedding costing \$US6 million in 2017 (see also Hume and Busari 2012; Hyde 2018). Conservative estimates place the wedding industry throughout the continent in the multimillions (\$US) (Iwuoha 2013; Forbes Women Africa 2014), as "recession proof" and even, in connection with other industries including fashion, tourism, and bridal event planning, as "sustaining African economies" (see Idowu 2017; Hyde 2018; Gachanja 2019).

The growth of the wedding industry is linked to the neoliberalization of trade regulations and the positioning of African economies as massive market opportunities (Forbes Women Africa 2014; Signé 2018). This narrative mirrors wider racist neoliberal discourse that celebrates Africa's shift from a "hopeless to hopeful" continent, homogenizing Africa and positioning it within a modernist, Western framing of development (*The Economist* 2000, 2011; Owusu 2012; Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018, 2019a). This is particularly so for Uganda, which has undergone extensive neoliberal reform in the last three decades. Beginning with the Economic Recovery Programme in

1987, the Ugandan government has restructured its national economy to prioritize foreign investment and international trade (Lakuma et al. 2017). With the financial backing and political encouragement of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the World Trade Organization, Uganda has stressed economic liberalization and the implementation of structural adjustment programs since the 1980s. Specifically, the government has passed varied reforms that have liberalized international trade. This includes the Public Enterprise Reform and Divestiture Act in 1993, which curbs government spending and incentivizes foreign direct investment, the Capacity Building Initiative in 1997, which shrinks the maximum tariff rate to 15 percent, and the Malaba One-Stop Border Post in 2017, which limits the time taken to process imports and exports at the port of entry. In addition, Uganda has created a floating exchange rate; devalued the Ugandan shilling; reduced barriers to trade, like tariffs and quotas; removed domestic protections; and privatized bank and lending institutions (Lakuma et al. 2017). In reviewing these sweeping reforms, and both their rapid and continued implementation (Harrison 2006), scholars argue that Uganda is one of the most neoliberalized economies on the African continent.

258 Our *sizing up* of the Ugandan wedding industry demonstrates the global intimate relations of capitalist restructuring that drive the trade. It shows, following Nagar et al. (2002, 263), how, “globalized capitalisms are historically and culturally contingent and engage with people in places to generate diverse and contradictory outcomes.” But it is deepened by a Black feminist attentiveness to the power of colonial and neocolonial logics of race, notably whiteness and liberal Western models of development and/as improvement. Lastly, it begins to point to globalization through, *but also outside of*, the Global North, linking Ugandan trading economies to those of South Asia, the Gulf, East Asia, and other parts of Africa.

## Cinderella Silhouettes and Mermaid Bodices: Mobilities and Fixities in the Bridal Industry

Nagar et al. (2002, 264) argue that, “when we view economic globalization from the standpoint of women’s lives, we uncover the complex and contradictory ways in which globalization reworks class processes and . . . expand women’s entrepreneurship and political activism.” Their call is deeply attentive to the grounded realities of women in the Global South, and the links between patriarchy and uneven and unjust development practices. Global Black feminist approaches nuance and complicate these insights further. Detailing the casual, informal, and everyday spaces of Uganda’s wedding industry, we take seriously here the work of Black African women entrepreneurs, their skills and know-how, and their mobilities and fixities, understanding these as *central to* the neoliberal shifts in the wedding industry. In turn, we show how these are powerfully shaped by linked racial, gendered, sexual, and classed logics (Mullings 2009; Kinyanjui 2014; Mollett 2014; Christian and Namaganda 2018; Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2019b).

From Cinderella-style white wedding gowns to artificial flower arrangements and glossy photo albums, imports also dominate the bridal industry in Uganda. Reflecting this demand, 73 percent of bridal suppliers present at the 2014, 2015, and 2017 Bride and Groom Expo in Kampala import all of their wedding gowns and related bridal products (Survey data, 2014, 2015, 2017). Specifically, 45 percent of wedding dresses sold by survey recipients are bought wholesale from China, the UAE, or Turkey (see also Whitesell and Faria 2020). Even dresses tailored entirely in Uganda used imported textiles, fixtures, and adornments (Survey data, 2014, 2015, 2017). Significant here is

the liberalizing of Uganda's borders, which has enabled increased access to international markets and made imports more financially competitive. In turn, the majority of these imported goods are bought by individuals for themselves and/or friends and colleagues. No major import wholesaler dominates the trade; instead it is largely made up of individuals and small groups who travel abroad, or pay others, to select and buy dresses.

As we note earlier, this importation of wedding gowns and styles, and the attachment of ideals of whiteness to material objects, has a colonial history of connection bound up with class that operates within Uganda and between Uganda and its former colonial power (Christian and Namaganda 2018). The UK, and more recently the US, have long been key sites for wedding dress purchasing, valued for their assumed quality and the cosmopolitan and historically racialized ideals of glamour attached to imported goods from the Global North. Initially, access to these goods was limited to elite buyers with international mobility, a fact that deepened the *caché* of these goods. Even into the 1980s and 1990s, the costs and visa constraints of international travel meant this was an option limited to a small number of buyers with established connections, power, and capital. For example, Mrs. Rose owns *Tendo Bridals International: New York Styles* in the Ham Shopping Mall in Wandegeya, Kampala. She has been buying wedding dresses from the fashion district in Manhattan and from stores in Maryland since 1992. Her husband regularly travels to the US to work, and her son lives there, as she also has in the past. They help her source the dresses, provide accommodation when she travels and, via remittances, support her company financially. As a result, she can frequently travel there to buy dresses, shoes, and purses for her boutique. She exemplifies the past norms of the Ugandan wedding industry, strictly limited to particular women who had access to considerable capital, privileged travel, and established family networks abroad (see also Lo 2015).

With the liberalization of travel, including reduced border tariffs and visa restrictions, new airline routes east, and the growth of new wedding wholesale markets, along with deepening ties between Uganda and China, the trade has opened up to many more, young, and lower-income women. While London and New York are traditionally important locations for purchasing wedding dresses, Dubai, Turkey, and China have seen considerable growth in recent years (Survey data, 2014, 2015, 2017). Buyers reported travel to Henan and Guangzhou in China and Dubai in the UAE most commonly, noting that these locations were now cheaper and easier than travel to the UK and US. Classes in Mandarin are increasingly popular across the capital, with Makerere University approving a new Bachelor of Chinese and Asian Studies in 2019 (Masinde 2018). Joy, a fashion design student at Makerere, has recently started her own bridal business on the side. She imports her gowns from China but plans to make her own when she graduates. Like many surveyed traders, she pools money from friends to fund her trips. Some make one or two trips a year, while other more established buyers, like Achayo Rose the owner of *Black Abba Ltd.* (not related to Mrs. Rose of *Tendo Bridals International*), travel every three months when business is good. They buy stock for friends and other boutique owners or renters, keeping their costs low by pooling with other vendors to buy the plane ticket and cover the cost of freight. Another trader, Flavia, sells wholesale to other bridal business shops in addition to supplying her own shop, *Divine Bridals*. Prior to travel, they share tips on navigating the large wholesale shopping malls of Guangzhou and Dubai's *Dragon Market*. They minimize costs by staying in shared accommodation with other African buyers, and in cheaper locations—Sharjah, as opposed to Dubai (UAE), for example (Interviews with Ugandan traders in UAE, December 2018).

While liberalization has widened access to, and the geographies of, the trade, it can only succeed with the savvy fashion know-how of its women traders. Margins are thin and competition is fierce. Dead stock will quickly end a business venture. To mitigate this, buyers seek out dresses that fit with Kampala's vibrant and distinct bridal fashion scene, or that can be adapted to it by skilled designers. To meet customers' stringent and changing demands, the recent shift in demand from Cinderella styles to mermaid silhouettes, for example, these entrepreneurs carefully research styles on social media and television programs like Bukedde TV's Sunday wedding show *Emikolo N'Embaga*, and by speaking regularly with consumers and tailors (Survey data, 2014, 2015, 2017). Also central is an understanding of how value is woven through the fabric of their gowns. Where gowns come from, and their subsequent value, is underpinned by racial power, colonial, and postcolonial pasts. As Joy, Achayo Rose, and Flavia shop, they know how their Chinese dresses will be viewed back home. Contemporary hierarchies around dress origin draw from and reproduce those colonial inflections described earlier. Though dresses from China and Turkey are viewed as significantly superior to dresses made in Uganda, they cannot compete with the value attached to dresses imported from the US and Western Europe (Survey data, 2014, 2015, 2017). The US and UK in particular, remain the standard bearers for quality. Consumers and business owners are fully aware that many American and European dresses are also, originally, imported from China, but they argue that Western trade standards for clothing are stricter and more closely enforced than in Africa (Survey data, 2014, 2015, 2017). Conversely, and in defense of Chinese imports, some argue that US manufactured goods may be of reduced quality and safety if they were initially destined for the Global South markets anyway (Interviews with bridal retailers, 2015, 2017). This reflects recognition by these traders of the historic and ongoing devaluation of African consumers on the global stage. In turn, Ugandan designers feel compelled to import their dresses, or materials like sequins and particular kinds of cloth to create them, due to their perception around the poor quality and choice of Ugandan materials (Interviews with bridal retailers, 2015, 2017). In all these complex ways, their economic decisions are carefully considered, shaped by their understanding of long-established, manufactured and racialized ideals of value, hierarchy, and superiority that imbued the gowns and their customers' relationships to them.

Women's ability to understand and navigate racial-gendered and classed histories and ideals are central, then, to the success of the industry. And yet, those very ideologies mean they often face disapproval for this work. The increased mobility and empowerment of Ugandan female traders has been met with significant tension and apprehension both on national and international scales. This is perhaps most evident in public concerns around Ugandan women's involvement in the sex trade in foreign cities where they buy goods. Some media reports, recurring over the years, worry over women lured into prostitution. These position the women as naive, helpless victims in need of state action and intervention (Abbey 1995; Musa Ladu 2012). Others view them as a disgrace to the nation, using their new mobility immorally (e.g., Vision Reporter 2011). This concern has affected state-level relations and policy. For example, in late 2012, China denied future visas to all Ugandan women under the age of thirty-five for two months (Musa Ladu 2012) under mounting pressure from the Ugandan government and following a series of arrests of Ugandan women there. Generally however, women traders we interviewed were less concerned. They noted that sex work is sometimes used to fund travel and purchases but viewed this as just another way to get by and engage in the new market (Interviews with Ugandan traders in UAE, December 2018). They did not describe the kind of trafficking media and government

reports worried over as common. Instead, they noted that women without the capital to travel independently, and who thus relied on agents and their networks in destination cities and emirates, were much more vulnerable (Interviews with Ugandan traders in UAE, December 2018). Following Black feminist insights, we read in these anxieties, and the drivers of the sex trade that some women use, or are forced to use, colonial, heteropatriarchal sexism intersecting with anti-Black racism to eroticize and fetishize Black women. In connection, we see how these narratives are deployed by governments to police Black women's global economic activity. Indeed, women are disciplined for the very mobility demanded by this liberalized economy, and its consumers, wholesalers, and retailers. They work within and navigate this contradiction.

A global Black feminist framing pushes us to understand mobile subjects like Flavia, Mrs Rose, Achayo Rose, and Joy as complex, political and economic subjects, not just cogs in the "clanking gears of capitalism" (Hawthorne and Heitz 2018, 149). Through their accounts, and businesses like *Black Abba Ltd.*, we attend to those subjects typically elided in economic analyses: women and particularly African women. And we view their engagement in the economy as active, and always *situated* within racialized, historic, gendered, and classed contexts. This makes clear how new macro geoeconomic relationships around trade are grounded and embodied but also how they are made possible. Through their research and savvy, they identify international styles that will sell well in Uganda; they use a range of strategies to raise capital for their travel and purchases; and they invest time and labor to move, or to fund the movement of others, while juggling parental, school, and other work responsibilities. Through their investment of time and labor, they bring a host of financial benefits for the state via taxes and for those who buy their goods and sell them to consumers. These social-spatial ties also reveal the contradictions they work in: buy global to fit the Ugandan, be mobile just as your mobility may mark you as immoral, and pool your resources to engage in the cutthroat competition. And while heightened flows of trade and movement across international borders dovetail with *hopeful* neoliberal narratives, these mobilities are not only constrained by connected historic formations of gendered, classed, and racial power. They are also marked by distinct fixities for those still unable to access these new markets, or who must take on considerable personal and financial risk to do so.

## Rhinestone Sparkle, Modesty Veils, and the Gomesi Zipper: Alterations at the Economy's Edges

Attending to the spaces, scales, and subjects that, "underwrite and actively constitute the public spheres of globalization" (Nagar et al. 2002, 260), prompts us to pay attention to the unpaid, underpaid, and otherwise unrecognized labor of women that make possible macroeconomic restructuring and liberalization in places like Uganda. We center them in this section, describing the workshops, rental mall space, catwalks, trade fair stalls, and the bodies of brides and designers where Uganda's wedding industry dazzles. But, via these spaces and the work of global Black feminist thinkers, we extend Nagar et al. and feminist economic geography by interrogating, "the situated ways in which Blackness takes place" (Hawthorne and Heitz 2018, 149). For us this means tracing the innovation and entrepreneurship rooted in Black cultural histories as at once cosmopolitan, diasporic, and indigenous (Pierre 2008). It means examining how "deep and malleable global logics of whiteness" as civilized and modern, drive capitalist processes (Christian 2019, 169), and how these logics can be disrupted and remade via Black innovations and spatialities (Hawthorne 2019).

Although imported dresses were most highly valued in the Ugandan wedding market, they must still be transformed before they will be accepted by Ugandan brides. Boutique staff and owners described the demanding requirements of customers who wanted changes in colors, styles, and added sparkle to imported dresses in line with national, regional, and Pan-African trends. Sophie, a Makerere University student and an aspiring wedding gown designer, notes, “I have already designed my dress. The bust and the trail will be African and then the rest of the dress will be white, it will be a mixture of African and Western” (Interview, July 2015). This labor is undertaken both by high-end *designers* and tailors, a distinction many eschew (e.g., Interview, Wavamunno, June 2015). Women are the ones who primarily innovate with these dresses, adapting them to, and transforming, local markets. As the late fashion critic Keturah Kamugasa explained,

I think what makes fashion unique in Uganda is that Ugandans may take an international trend and interpret it in like a thousand ways . . . They take all these trends, transform them, embrace them, and own them and you can think that this trend started here right in Uganda.

262 (Interview, June 2015)

Catwalks at the Bride and Groom Expo are one space where we see this transformation showcased. Designers there reveal imported dresses with a lot of added embellishments, bodices blending African kitenge and white satin fabrics, and gowns with built-in and removable *modesty* shawls. Innovations to the gomesi were the darling of the 2017 event. This is a traditionally colorful floor length dress, with high shoulder lapels, and a wrap belt, worn at introduction or Kwanjula ceremonies in Bugandan culture. The gomesi has come to symbolize traditional regional Bugandan and, to some extent, national Ugandan dress. However, it is the result of a blend of colonial-era Indian, Dutch, and Indigenous stylings (Mugabe 2014; Interview with Kamugasa, June 2015). Today it has undergone innovation at the hands of local designers. For example, Gloria Glosch maintains the unique silhouette while integrating Indian influences, including silk textiles more typically used as saris, gold jewelry, bindis, and henna hand painting (see Figure 2). India and Uganda have long-standing cultural, political and economic ties, reflected in these dresses. As Kamugasa noted, “Indian culture has played a huge role . . . it’s so colorful and bright and that is what the Ugandans want” (Interview, June 2015). Another designer, Christine Luboga, has also adapted the gomesi by integrating a zipper into the traditional gown. A seemingly simple addition, the choice is in fact quite radical, as the laborious tradition of dressing the bride is central to the Kwanjula ceremony. Now, as one consumer noted, “you just zip and go and it looks perfect” (Focus Group participant, June 2015).

What is showcased on the catwalk is informed by more mundane labor occurring across the city. The airy top floors of malls on Luwum Street, and its myriad boutiques, are important sites for this work. Recognized as the *bridal hub* of Kampala (Whitesell and Faria 2020), these downtown malls are filled with tailors detailing dresses and adding sparkle, creating custom-made designs from first- and secondhand imported dresses. Independent designers spoke of the importance of these long-established spaces as those where they first took up apprenticeships and learned how to sew and style (Interview with Wavamunno, June 2015; Participant Observation at Kampala Fashion Week workshops, July 2017). From these spaces in the last decade, a nascent but dynamic fashion industry has emerged. Innovators like Gloria Glosch, Monica Kansiime Kasyate of *Ipigogo Designs*, and Gloria Wavamunno are part of a growing number of innovators building a network of homegrown designers. This is



Figure 2. Designer Gloria Gloshe's gomesis hit the catwalk.  
Source: Dominica Whitesell.

complemented by new spaces to showcase their work, such as *Bold Africa* a boutique in upscale Acacia Mall, which stocks the work of designers from across East Africa. In turn, Kampala Fashion Week, created by Gloria Wavamunno and supported by the newly formed Ugandan Fashion Council (<https://fashioncounciluganda.com/>), is now in its seventh year. Speaking about Uganda's fashion industry, and the creation of Kampala fashion week, Wavamunno stated,

All these are things that some people think are nonexistent in Africa. But we have the people who know what they're doing. We have a few designers and why not build with a few designers. Why not build and get bigger? At the end of the day, it's a platform for other designers all over the continent to then go show in other countries and then create relationships within those countries. (Interview, June 2015)

These designers, creating both *high* and everyday fashions, challenge simplistic ideals of Western hegemony in the bridal and wider fashion industry. Uganda has long been a regional hub for skilled tailors and seamstresses, though this tradition was disrupted and curtailed first by colonial policies and then in the twentieth century first by Idi Amin and then then neoliberal reforms that flooded Ugandan markets with cheap imports (Interview with Wavamunno, June 2015). These were dominated by second-hand and cheaply manufactured clothing, including bridal gowns (Interview with Wavamunno, June 2015). Certainly, local manufacturing of textiles has been devastated

by these shifts (Brooks 2015; Katende-Magezi 2017), with public and political debate around this issue regularly making the headlines (e.g., Ndiwalana 2010). Today the last remaining textiles to be produced in Uganda (in a factory based in Jinja) are bought almost entirely by the government for making army and school uniforms.

Yet as we have shown above, and as a global Black feminist lens makes clear, African women traders and designers are not simply victimized by these shifts. Instead they actively navigate and refashion in the wake of these structural transformations (Christian and Namaganda 2018; Kinyanjui 2019; Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2019b). In interviews and in debates observed at local fashion workshops, designers complicated narratives that rising imports competed directly with, and had thus damaged, local industries. In fact, bridal and other fashion designers described the possibilities created by cheap imported clothing, including secondhand clothing, for enabling creative innovation. For example, in a 2017 Kampala Fashion Week seminar, many designers and fashion entrepreneurs spoke out against the then-proposed ban on secondhand clothes. Here, designers stressed their benefits. Secondhand clothes (particularly the *secondhand first class* variety) offer an affordable, and often good quality, foundation from which to practice and improve, and to fashion something anew. In turn, the new industry has reinforced and created new economic infrastructures for designers to lean on such as apprenticeship opportunities. While the competition is stiff, there is also collaborative creative energy in the efforts of established and upcoming designers.

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Nagar et al. (2002) argue that we must attend to these kinds of grounded operations of globalization, their embodied contestations and contradictions, and the ways globalization is energized and enlivened by women's ingenuity and labor *in place*. Uganda's wedding industry both embodies and redefines how global processes are manifested in the everyday. Global trends are both adopted and glorified but also customized to suit Ugandan-led fashion trends. Through both grand acts of visibility and recognition, such as Kasyate's and Wavamunno's creation of Ugandan-based fashion houses and events, and more seemingly mundane routines, like adding extra beading to an imported gown, Uganda's bridal industry challenges ideas that globalization in the Global South is just about "copy and paste" (Interview, Designer, June 2017). A global Black feminists lens pushes us further. It prompts us to attend to these ordinary intimacies of "Afrofuturist imaginings" (Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018; see also Pierre 2012)—imaginings that acknowledge and reckon with past colonial relationships while undoing and transforming them via the wedding dress design and the stitching of sequins. The tailor-designers' work disrupts common narratives that equate globalization/importation with assimilation/Westernization and the modernist goals for an Afropolitian elite (Adeniyi Ogunyankin 2018; Hawthorne 2019), offering us something more transgressive. Indeed, their innovations reflect the desire to mess with and move between binaries: between the church and the dance floor, chaste and sexy femininities, and between African Indigenous and cosmopolitan subjectivities. Instead, these kinds of grounded innovations transform imported wedding dresses in vital ways. Ugandan women are creative and responsive. They design and form dresses that are attractive to consumers in the Ugandan market and that add value to the garments for buyers, designers, and retailers. These are everyday negotiations with neoliberal shifts—strategies to manage and mitigate the flood of cheap imports that rely on innovation and drive it. But this is not simply a celebratory account. It is a move that takes work: organizing workshops and fashion events; bringing popular influences to bear on *traditional* designs; working convenience, modernity, and sexiness into a dress; and stitching sequin after sequin in the airy top floor of a downtown shopping mall.

## Conclusion: Undressing Economic Geography, Fashioning Anew

Feminist economic geographers remain inspired by Massey's (2013, 2) work to "bring space alive, to dynamize it and to make it relevant, to emphasize how important space is in the lives in which we live, and in the organization of the societies in which we live." Extending these insights via global Black feminist thought, we recognize the space Massey describes as always imbued with and productive of intersectional racial-gendered power, and that this racialization has a history. In Pierre's *The Predicament of Blackness* (2012), she calls on African scholarship to attend to the legacies of the European transatlantic slave trade and subsequent colonial annexation of Africa that grounds contemporary and spatialized processes of racialization, and connects them to other places and periods. In line with global Black feminist thought, she pushes for analyses that link this racialization to analogous forms of racialization operating in the diasporas of Europe, the Americas, and beyond via White supremacy (Pierre 2008, 2020).

In this article, we take up these threaded calls via the white wedding gown and the burgeoning globalized wedding industry emerging around it in Uganda. Intellectually, we reassert the rich insights of feminist economic geographic perspectives that "fundamentally [change] how we understand economic globalization" (Nagar et al. 2002, 280). Following Nagar et al., we embed contemporary economic relationships and processes in place and in the bodies of everyday people—Ugandan women—who make them possible. We attend to those subjects and spaces typically ignored: Africans generally, and African women in particular; the work of informal or *casual* entrepreneurs, traders, and fashion innovators; and the feminized and trivialized spaces of the trade expo, the boutique, the catwalk, and the bodies of brides. We extend this work via a global Black feminist approach that roots these subjects and spaces in colonial economic and sociocultural past-presents, and that sheds light on the intersectional racial-gender-sexual and classed logics that drive and are formed through them. We make clear the importance of Ugandan women as economic actors upon whom the globalization of the industry relies: traders to travel, pack, transport, pay levies on, and distribute supplies; and business entrepreneurs to select, refashion, advertise, and sell gowns. And we trace how the industry and the experiences of the women involved are shaped by power relations and by Western, but also non-Western, convivialities and connections.

Such a framing casts new light on our case study of the Ugandan bridal industry, too, repositioning it not simply as a paradigmatic example, an unusual and eye-catching topic, but as *theory making*. It is a move to tell a different story, or to tell the usual story of globalization differently, by starting in the Global South, in Africa, with the seemingly trivial and uneconomic. To borrow from Adichie (2009), what accounts of, indeed *accounting of*, economic geography emerges when we begin with other people, places and moments? What if we begin with *Ugandan women* trading and creating? What if we turn to the boutiques, malls, and catwalks of Kampala, instead of those of New York and London? What if we begin the story of Uganda's market liberalization not in the 1980s but in the 1880s or 1780s? Through a global Black feminist lens, we see how the mobilities of global capital manifest in other mobilities—those of women's constant hustle to get by and create other futures for themselves than those dictated by colonial pasts and neoliberal presents. We read the reuse and recycling inherent to the bridal industry as a *model* for the wider globalizing clothing industry, rather than an example of its backwardness or marginality in the global economy. To get these

insights, we need to work from elsewhere, to look to Global South economies, entrepreneurs, innovators, and those making-do there; and to look through new eyes for the work of power in those entities long held dear by economic geography—the firm, its logistics networks, its uneven patterns of investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment. We choose the wedding industry as our site of theory making. We say yes to the dress.

But not only does our project shed light on one way that “race and racialization impact local African communities” (Pierre 2020, S230), it also demonstrates the insights that attending to racial power, as intersectional and as a foundational part of economic structure, offer for feminist geographers and the wider subfield of economic geography. Indeed, our work responds both to recent, anxious hand-wringing in economic geography about the state of the subfield (Barnes 2018; James, Bradshaw, and Coe 2018; Martin 2018) and, in the same moment, to the exciting formations, connections, friendships, and intellectual ties we see among economic geography’s others: feminist, queer, antiracist, postcolonial, crip, and minor Marxist geographers who undertake important research on economic life and lives but who remain on the fringes, or actively reject, the subfield and its institutions (Hierofani 2016; MacLeavy, Roberts, and Strauss 2016; McDowell 2016; Gray and Pollard 2018; Pugh 2018; Rosenman, Loomis, and Kay 2019). Bringing this particular space to life for *Economic Geography* readers, or would-be-if-only readers, we invite you to dress up with us. Via global Black feminist maneuvers, we invite you to play with new ways of approaching and understanding the global economy. In the same move, we invite those who may refuse the subfield of economic geography, or feel excluded from its intellectual spaces, to instead try it on, and in doing so, to transform it. We use dress, and the act of dressing up, then in two ways: in its Ugandan bridal expression as a deeply instructive theory-building material object, practice, relationship, and process that tells us much about the geographies of economies. And second, we use it as a kind of *redress*, an acknowledgment and recompense for what and who has been left out of our economic geographic story. In this way it becomes a metaphor for playful connection, refashioning, and reimagining of economic geography as transformative, transgressive, feminist, and antiracist.

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