

International Journal of Fashion Studies  
Volume 4 Number 1

© 2017 Intellect Ltd Editorial. English language. doi: 10.1386/infs.4.1.3\_2

## EDITORIAL

EMANUELA MORA, AGNÈS ROCAMORA AND PAOLO VOLONTÉ

### In this issue

This issue of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies* is characterized by an unusual structure. Besides the peer-reviewed articles that we publish, as always, according to the timing of their submission, we entrusted Rikki Byrd with the task of organizing a special Open Space section on Black Fashion Studies, focused on the idea of black style. The opportunity originated from the exhibition devoted to *Black Fashion Designers* held at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), New York, from 6 December 2016 to 16 May 2017. The exhibition is critically reviewed by Adelle McElveen, and discussed in an interview with the curators, Ariele Elia and Elizabeth Way. Both these contributions underscore the main hurdle that 'black fashion' designers have to face in everyday activities, namely the presumption that there is a single 'black style' unifying their creative efforts, and the corresponding presumption that blackness is what qualifies the work of a black fashion designer.

Black fashion studies deserve special attention because they are developing at the core of a contradiction in western fashion. On the one hand, blackness often appears in western mainstream fashion media (magazines, advertisements) as a sign of the exotic, the eccentric or the 'edgy'. On the other hand, such media often reduce black bodies to side players, some sort of prop, as in the case of the many fashion shoots, for instance, that, set in 'exotic' settings such as Africa, stereotypically feature 'local' characters, whose black bodies are only there to serve the aesthetic function of singling out the white bodies of the fashion models. Power relations, cultural context and racial tensions are brushed over by the simplifying and exoticizing lens of the photographer. The variety of experiences and practices that black consumers and producers of fashion engage with as a means of articulating identities demands more attention.

The special Open Space section edited by Rikki Byrd attends to this by proposing a rich range of contributions: a theoretical piece by Eric Darnell Pritchard; the two articles, mentioned above, about the *Black Fashion Designers* exhibition; a conversation between Julee Wilson (fashion and beauty director of *Essence* magazine) and Michaela Angela Davis (image activist) on black women's hair; a review by Kenny Morifi-Winslow of the conference *Black Portraiture[s] III*; and book reviews – Carol Tulloch's *The Birth of Cool* (2016), reviewed by Jonathan M. Square; Alphonso McClendon's *Fashion and Jazz* (2015), reviewed by Joy Davis; and Tanisha C. Ford's *Liberated Threads* (2015), reviewed by Carol Tulloch.

In this issue, attention to black fashion studies is not confined to the Open Space Special Section alone. It can be found in Duane Gilson's vibrant article 'The revolution in our pants: Hipsters, race and American fashion'. There, Gilson sets a stimulating parallel between Malcolm X's zoot suit and twill jogger pants, which could be seen everywhere in the Autumn/Winter 2014 menswear collections and have become cherished by hipsters. Both the zoot suit and the jogger are loose at the knees and tighter at the ankles. The style similarities between the two, however, are not the point; according to the author, the contemporary trend plays a similar and problematic role for white middle-class young men as the zoot suit did for black middle-class young men in the middle of the twentieth century. For them, the zoot suit was both a way to be fashionable and a way to affirm their ability to take part in consumer society whilst asserting their black identity. According to Gilson, the contemporary joggers allow hipsters to destabilize white masculinity and critique capitalism, even though they are themselves a product of the conservative/neoliberal fashion system.

Ebba Lisberg Jensen and Babak Elahi's article 'Conspicuous conservation' reconstructs the clothing habits of activists of the Swedish environmentalist organization Nature and Youth towards the end of the last century. As in Gilson's contribution, the article outlines the critical meanings that clothing habits convey in specific cultural frameworks. The authors highlight the multiplicity of features that characterized the rather uniform clothing choices of the organization's participants, describing it as a kind of 'conspicuous conservation', in explicit reversal of Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption'. The activists' style at that time adopted military, second-hand, vintage, old but 'practical' items. However, as Lisberg Jensen and Elahi convincingly argue, their main role was not functionality but an effort to symbolize and mediate the wearers' relationship with nature, conceived as part of social life. This is particularly striking in light of the contrast they make with today's outdoor clothes, which, though branded as environmentally conscious, are engineered to manage the impact of nature on the body. Whereas outdoor clothes were thought of as a membrane of communication with nature by Swedish environmentalists, in today's fashion industry they are designed as a membrane of protection against nature's adverse elements.

Daniel J. Carr and Jenny Mercer deal with the ever-topical subject of fashion modelling. Through an exploratory study informed by the theories and methodology of psychology – a discipline still under-represented in fashion studies –, they investigate the experience of young people caught in the world of fashion modelling. The exploration of the lived experience of three fashion models draws attention to the role of modelling defined as a lifestyle. However, the ways in which the three subjects reflect on their experience is

very different, highlighting, respectively, an increased self-confidence; body dissatisfaction; and low self-esteem concurrent with high self-scrutiny.

Pierre-Yves Donzé's article discusses the process of outsourcing the production of fashion watches in East Asia. Fashion watches are produced for the fashion industry. The first watches branded by fashion companies were produced in very small amounts by renowned Swiss watch manufacturers. However, due to an increase in the cost of labour in western countries and to technical change linked to digitalization, two main effects arose: a relocation of production centres to China and the confluence of most of the business into a leading watchmaking group, Fossil Inc. Today's fashion watch industry consists of few enterprises having their headquarters in countries with no company production plants and using international value chains to procure supplies of products.

Finally, the issue ends with Kira Craft's review of the exhibition *Izaak Mizrahi: An Unruly History* (2016); a review, by Denise Green, of Alison Mathews David's book *Fashion Victims* (2015); and a review, by Paul Jobling, of Brent Luvaas's book *Street Style* (2016).

Emanuela Mora, Agnès Rocamora and Paolo Volonté have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

---