

Fashioning the Complexity of Gender Experiences: Critical Perspectives on and Beyond the Gender Binary

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The decision of *ZoneModa Journal* to dedicate this issue to the topic of fashion and gender comes at uncertain times in which critical reflections on identity and body politics are becoming increasingly necessary.

Recent debates in the field of fashion studies, in line with the critical scholarship on the multiple experiences of gender,¹ have optimistically welcomed the gradual disintegration of the visual and sartorial conventions attached to the gender binary and its effects on the dressed body.² Despite the challenges to a normative understanding of the dressed body that contemporary fashion has introduced, it is still the case that in the discourse on gender and fashion, both in the industry and in popular culture, naturalized normative assumptions on male and female dressed bodies remain hard to dismantle.³ Furthermore, considering the backlash that non-conforming subjects are facing today due to the resurgence of homobiphobic violence and discrimination⁴ and the emergence of international anti-gender movements,⁵ it is clear that the disruption of the gender binary circulating on an industry level is still

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1. See, for instance, Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Rob Cover, "Micro-Minorities: The Emergence of New Sexual Subjectivities, Categories, and Labels among Sexually Diverse Youth Online," in *Youth Sexualities*, ed. Susan Talburt (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2018), 279–301.
2. See, for instance, Ben Barry and Philippa Nesbitt, "Self-fashioning Queer/Crip: Stretching and grappling with disability, gender and dress," *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, 9.1 (2022): 1–18; Paul Jobling, Philippa Nesbitt and Angelene Wong, *Fashion, Identity, Image* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022); Jay McCauley Bowstead, *Menswear Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry, "Gender More: An Intersectional Perspective on Men's Transgression of the Gender Dress Binary," in *Crossing Gender Boundaries*, eds. Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry (Bristol: Intellect, 2020), 122–36.
3. Ben Barry, "The toxic lining of men's fashion consumption: The omnipresent force of hegemonic masculinity," *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*, 2.2–3 (2015): 143–161.
4. Karolina Konopka, Joanna Rajchert, Monika Dominiak-Kochanek and Joanna Roszak, "The Role of Masculinity Threat in Homonegativity and Transphobia," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 68.5 (2021): 802–29.
5. Daria Colella, "Femonationalism and anti-gender backlash: the instrumental use of gender equality in the nationalist discourse of the Fratelli d'Italia party," *Gender & Development*, 29.2–3 (2021): 269–89; Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte

far from permeating everyday dress practices and experiences of gender.

In the words of sociologist Judith Lorber, this can be considered as an example of today's *new gender paradox*, characterized by the simultaneous fragmentation and persistence of the gender binary and "a rhetoric of gender multiplicity undermined by a continuing bi-gendered social structure that supports continued gender inequality."⁶ The contrasting sides that give shape to this gender paradox find in the dressed body and appearances a fundamental instrument for both the performative reiteration and disturbance of gender norms. Indeed, as Joanne Entwistle points out, "[c]lothing is one of the most immediate and effective examples of the way in which bodies are gendered, made 'feminine' or 'masculine.'"⁷ Nevertheless, in the words of Patrizia Calefato, fashion is ambivalent: on the one hand, it reproduces the rigidity of social and cultural codes; on the other hand, it includes actions (especially nowadays) that go beyond these codes, subverting them and embracing a wide range of social subjects.⁸ Thus, fashion and appearances also represent strong mediums through which reflecting, rethinking, and embodying the complexity of human experiences, highlighting the pivotal role that aesthetic bodily boundaries might have in developing a critique of fixed identity categories.

This issue aims to start from this perspective to stress the sociopolitical relevance of this topic and to foster critical thinking on the relationship between fashion and gender in a cultural and political climate where gender diversity and self-determination are increasingly under attack. The complex and multi-faceted reality of this matter is clearly outlined by the variety of perspectives offered by the articles that form this issue, including, for instance, critical analysis of the contemporary fashion industry, anthropological accounts on dress, gender and colonialism, and the experience of gender in the digital realm.

The volume opens with Judith Beyer's investigation of British designer Jonathan Anderson's eponymous label, which expands on what Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor define as *antigender fashion*.⁹ Beyer's reading of JW Anderson aims to highlight how the designer's constructivist approach to fashion can offer a structural and visual language for the proliferation of gender categories, revealing the multitudes, pluralities, and nuances in-between masculinities and femininities. The idea of the disruption of gender binaries moves to the digital ecosystems with the essay by Filippo Maria Disperati, Margherita Tufarelli and Leonardo Giliberti. By exploring the fluid and non-binary forms of body representation, self-image making, and gender identities in digital cultures through the case studies of Italian performer and artist Ambrosia and the digital paradigm offered by video games, the authors encourage the reader to reflect on the gender-digital binomial as a way of understanding the contemporary dynamics of self-representation.

The following is Leonardo Campagna's article, which invites us to open the wardrobe of the art critic and feminist Carla Lonzi to investigate her relationship with fashion. After highlighting the complex dynamics between fashion and feminism, Campagna explores the role of fashion in Lonzi's biography starting from archival materials and photographs in her books and diaries, demonstrating how her theoretical and political reflections combine with her personal relationship with clothing. The feminist analytical lens continues in Stephanie Lever's essay, which focuses on a reformulation of "power-dressing" through the perspectives of hyper-feminine and hyper-sexualised professional appearance. Lever's exploration centers on the figures of writer and former prostitute Virginie Despentes and media personality Paris Hilton, and on how their sartorial and self-sexualisation interact with theories and ideas of power, gender, and sexuality.

The effects of the *new gender paradox* mentioned above can be found in the contribution of Virginia Spadaccini, which sheds light on a cultural analysis of the colour pink as a tool to read the time we live

(eds.), *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing against Equality* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

6. Judith Lorber, *The New Gender Paradox* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), ix.

7. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 141.

8. Patrizia Calefato, *La moda e il corpo* (Roma: Carrocci, 2021).

9. Vicki Karaminas and Justine Taylor, "Harry Styles: Fashion's Gender Changeling," in *Fashionable Masculinities. Queer, Pimp Daddies and Lumbersexuals*, eds. Vicki Karaminas, Adam Geczy and Pamela Church Gibson (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 9–25.

in. Indeed, through her multidimensional analysis, Spadaccini looks at how in our contemporary culture this colour is still capable of denoting gender norms and disrupting them, therefore maintaining its reputation as one of the most shocking and subversive colours in the fashion industry and in everyday life. Finally, drawing on visual anthropology, Lorenzo Maida's contribution offers an interesting perspective on how the dressed body was a fundamental element in the strategies of gender and identity construction in the Italian colonial Somalia during the 1920s. Based on the analysis of the "Carlo Vittorio Musso" photographic fund of the University of Turin's Museum of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnography (MAET), the article highlights how it is precisely in the analysis of the dressed body that we can also trace and illustrate the historical trajectories of colonial violence.

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