

The Anthropology of Dress and Fashion: A Reader

Edited by Brent Luvaas

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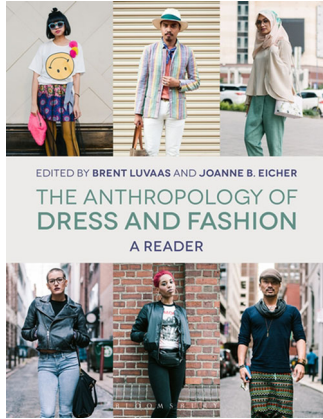
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The Anthropology of Dress and Fashion: A Reader

Edited by Brent Luvaas and Joanne B. Eicher

London: Bloomsbury, 2019

“We are a small and scattered group, with no identity cards, and no journal to call our own” (3).

And thus, editors Joanne B. Eicher and Brent Luvaas describe anthropologists with an interest in dress and fashion in their introduction to this very welcome reader. The description cannot fail to strike a chord with those, like me, who have always been drawn to what, how, and why people wear the clothes they do each day but often have struggled to find a scholarly community with which to share their fascinations and perceptions. This collection, the first of its kind in terms of bringing together a wide range of historic and contemporary ethnographic work, is a sight for sore eyes not least because it provides the opportunity for current anthropologists to see that they are not alone in their efforts to bring dress and fashion research more “front and centre” (2) within anthropology itself. This is particularly important given that those with a professional interest in dress and fashion do not always readily identify themselves. Eicher and Luvaas point out that many of the contributors, all of whom refer to themselves as anthropologists, do not have their dress and fashion research listed on university websites.

This volume recognizes “dress” and “fashion” as two distinct terms worthy of anthropological attention. Eicher and Luvaas set out clear definitions in the introduction. They use dress in the broadest sense, with its emphasis on any human-body modifications or supplements worn to communicate with other human beings. Dress inherently involves social practice and interaction. Fashion, however, describes the economic processes, as a result of industrial capitalism, through which dress practices appear at a given time.

The book is organized into eight sections, the first five focusing on dress and the last three on fashion. Each section opens with a brief overview by the editors, followed by four or five contributions. In total, forty-two texts span over a century of ethnographic studies and almost every corner of the globe.



The first two sections identify articles that represent classic works and theoretical approaches. The classics include contributions by Alfred L. Kroeber, Ruth Benedict, Edward Sapir, and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown. While these will undoubtedly already be familiar to both students and professionals, the benefit of their inclusion is accessibility. Both Benedict and Sapir's writing are to be found in the 1931 *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, which is only held by a handful of libraries in the United Kingdom. The third section, on material culture, features the important work of Jane Schneider, Sophie Woodward, and Kaori O'Connor. In doing so, it pays tribute to the work of Daniel Miller, whose article on style and ontology in Trinidad can be found in the section on theoretical approaches. The next two sections focus on dress, the body, and processes of colonization, including contributions by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, Deborah Durham, as well as Eicher's work on Kalabari cloth.

The sixth section marks a transition from dress to fashion, highlighting how dress distinguishes groups within the same society rather than across national and imperial boundaries. The editors posit that urban selves are multiple and always being negotiated amongst others. Notable contributions include the dress of male tour guides in Malindi, Kenya, by Johanna Schoss and Emma Tarlo's work on Islamic fashion in London.

The last two sections examine the ways in which fashion is understood through the lenses of globalization and the afterlives of clothing. The section on globalization pays particular attention to global distinctions, the politics of production, and the industry's regressive attitude towards environmental costs. Contributions include research on haute couture in Tehran, Asian dress in global markets, and the application of sustainability claims to clothing brands such as Patagonia.

The last section looks at the unsanctioned ways that clothing exists within the process of fashion production through fake brands, secondhand markets, and historical reproductions. It includes contributions by the anthropologist Karen Tranberg Hansen and her work in Zambia alongside research by Philomena Keet on Japanese denim brands. This section might have benefited from more on clothing use that is sanctioned but hard to categorize, such as that linked to cosplay, image consultants, personal shoppers, and clothing banks. However, as the editors suggest in the introduction, "an anthropological focus on analysing Western fashion remains an underdeveloped domain" (4), so gaps such as this merely illustrate how much is still to be discovered about the anthropology of dress and fashion.

Eicher is the ideal choice for co-editor of the reader. Having co-edited the first book of readings on dress with Mary Roach in 1965, Eicher has a long and distinguished career in writing and editing books about the subject for a diverse audience that includes those within and beyond the discipline of anthropology. With extensive ethnographic experience of indigenous dress practices amongst the Kalabari people of the Niger Delta, Eicher, along with her colleague Mary Roach-Higgins, drew upon a multidisciplinary approach to studying dress to develop a conceptual framework in their seminal article "Definition and Classification of Dress: Implications for Analysis of Gender Roles" in 1992. This article quite rightly deserves its place within the theoretical approaches section because, as the editors Eicher and Luvaas suggest, it still provides the broadest definition of the term, with an emphasis on objects, bodies, and social communication.

Whereas Eicher brings expertise regarding the study of dress from an anthropological perspective, her co-editor Brent Luvaas is focused on defining and exploring the term fashion. Luvaas studied social anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles in the mid-2000s, and his research has focused on the production of fashion and new media technologies such as style bloggers and DIY clothing design in Indonesia—work that is represented in the final section of the reader. More recently, Luvaas has been exploring the role of the anthropologist as active participant, not just critical outsider, by starting his own street-style blog, which also led him to work with fashion brands and magazines creating photographic features.

The pairing of Eicher and Luvaas therefore is relevant and inclusive for those within and beyond anthropology. Between them, they represent different generations, different

disciplinary approaches, and different geographical areas. Both have contributed to journals and conferences beyond the discipline of anthropology, reflecting an important point they make in the introduction that the reader is as much about interdisciplinary work as it is about giving recognition to the disparate group of anthropologists studying dress and fashion.

Faulting the reader is very difficult, especially as it is the first of its kind. The contributions are diverse and interesting, while the sections are comprehensive and relevant. Perhaps having a section dedicated to methodological concerns would have been helpful, especially as participant observation and, more broadly, ethnography are complex and ever-changing means of research work. Kroeber's ethnographic approach is very different to that of Sophie Woodward or Christina H. Moon, for example. As the editors point out, however, a focus on ethnography is one characteristic that marks anthropologists from others in terms of disciplinary expertise, so to create a separate section might have undermined how integral approach is to the subject.

The reader makes an excellent resource for both those teaching and those learning about anthropology's contribution to the study of dress and fashion. It also invites emerging anthropologists, whether students or early-career researchers, to see potential future selves and projects where the exploration and description of sartorial consciousness are not only possible but crucial to our concepts of culture and society. As anthropologists like Eicher and Roach-Higgins pointed out in the mid-1960s, what we apply to our bodies is never the whole picture when it comes to understanding culture and society, but it is undoubtedly always part of the whole picture. Given the richness of this reader, it would be brilliant to see a journal "of our own" emerge and remedy the deficiency the editors mentioned in their introduction, so that scholars like me might feel more "front and centre" and less diasporic within and beyond anthropology. I think we might be ready to embrace that leading role, after all.

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