

Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty

Volume 15 Number 1

© 2024 Intellect Ltd Introduction. English language. https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb_00068_2

Published Online May 2024

INTRODUCTION

ROBERTO FILIPPELLO

University of Amsterdam

ERIQUE ZHANG

Northwestern University

Who's in and who's out of (queer) fashion (studies)?

Keywords

transgender fashion
transgender
queer fashion
beauty
embodiment
style

Abstract

Despite vast scholarship on LGBTQ+ fashion, within fashion studies there is still a relative lack of engagement with transgender identities and epistemologies. 'Transgender Embodiment in Fashion and Beauty' interrogates how trans people and their experiences have been minimized within fashion studies and argues for an expansive and interdisciplinary understanding of what trans fashion studies might be. To do so, this Special Issue brings together scholars from a variety of fields, including trans studies, Black studies, design history, performance studies and postcolonial studies, to

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reflect on the trans/fashion nexus. It ultimately aims to pave the way for researchers to excavate unknown or obliterated fashion histories and to centre trans identity as the field of fashion studies continues to evolve.

Situating dress and transgender embodiment

At the 2020 annual meeting of the College Art Association, Sarah Scaturro and Ann Tartsinis (2020) chaired a panel titled 'Who's in and who's out of fashion (studies)?', in which they 'argu[ed] and advocat[ed] for fashion [studies] as an interdisciplinary field that has the ability to transcend traditional boundaries and welcome the work of others' (Marcus 2020: 1). The title of this introduction, a play on Scaturro and Tartsinis's rhetorical question, cheekily proposes a similar quandary: how has *queer* fashion scholarship neglected to engage with the field of transgender studies, thus failing to fully account for how trans embodiment has always been shaped by fashion – and vice versa? Who, in other words, has been left out of queer fashion studies? Our answer is perhaps predictable, but pre-empts the rationale behind this Special Issue: cisgender queer people, mostly white, have long been 'in' (consider the abundance of gay male fashion designers); trans people, especially trans people of colour, have historically been 'out' but are now becoming 'in'.

The career of Black trans model Tracey 'Africa' Norman exemplifies this fickleness. Decades after she was blacklisted by the fashion industry in the 1970s for being transgender, Norman has recently been welcomed back as a trailblazer (Brown 2019). As the fashion industry becomes increasingly inclusive of trans models, one might forget that as recently as the 2010s, models such as Andreja Pejić and Teddy Quinlivan have also had to hide their trans identities (Zhang 2023b). These stories illustrate how trans people have been excluded from the fashion industry and even from fashion histories; recent histories, however, have begun to unearth the contributions that trans people have made to the industry, most notably Elspeth Brown's (2019) monograph *Work!*.

Just as trans people have always been part of the fashion industry, even if their presence has been erased, so too has dress always been critical to trans embodiment. In the Weimar Republic in the interbellum, for example, the *Transvestitenschein* (or 'transvestite certification') afforded trans people some level of official recognition (Nunn 2023). That 'transvestite' became the standard terminology to refer to trans people reveals how dress practices – specifically 'crossdressing' – are central to trans history. Indeed, it was often through dress that gender was not only expressed but also disciplined throughout history, as the transmisogynistic insult that trans women are 'men in dresses' suggests. The case of Aimee Stephens, who was fired in 2013 after coming out as a trans woman, serves as a recent example: her employer cited dress code violations as cause for termination (Ortiz 2020). Before that, anti-crossdressing laws in the United States allowed police to brutalize those who

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deviated from legally codified norms of dress, resulting in the 1969 Stonewall Riots. Even earlier, reporters sensationalized Black trans sex worker Mary Jones's female dress at her 1836 trial, dubbing her 'the Man-Monster' (Gill-Peterson 2024; Snorton 2017).

Throughout history, trans identity has been stigmatized even within queer subcultures. In her ethnographic study of female impersonators, Esther Newton (1979) describes how hierarchies formed between what she identified as two types of female impersonators: stage impersonators, who dressed in drag only to perform onstage, and street impersonators, who dressed as women in their everyday lives. Newton notes that stage impersonators who embodied 'glamorous' drag were seen as the ideal, while street performers whose drag was too 'transy' (derived from *transvestite*) were seen as deviant and undesirable. She observes:

Transy drag is wrong because it violates the glamour standard, which is synonymous with professionalism, that is, the right context and motivation for impersonation (performance, making legitimate money) as opposed to the wrong context and motivation (private life, private compulsion to *be* rather than to *imitate* a woman).

(1979: 51, original emphasis)

This hierarchy between the 'proper' stage impersonator and the 'deviant' street impersonator reveals how the subjugation and disciplining of trans bodies has always hinged on social norms of gender as embodied through dress.

These examples illustrate how trans histories have revolved around dress, even while trans people remain underrepresented in fashion studies. In this introduction, we tease out the evolution of queer fashion studies to assess how engaging with trans theory and trans epistemologies might transform fashion studies' understandings of dress and (queer) embodiment. We then outline how the contributions to this Special Issue move us forward in the goal of 'transing' the field of fashion studies. As Eriq Zhang (2023b) argues, the fashion industry has only recently begun to grapple with what trans identity means for the organizational logic of fashion; so too must queer fashion scholars account for trans embodiment if we are to advance our ability to fully address the complexities of dress and gendered embodiment in our contemporary landscape.

A note on terminology and cultural specificity

Researching trans history can be tricky due, in part, to the ambiguity and fluidity of gender identity labels across space and time. The western term 'transgender' emerged in the 1990s as a cohesive identity (Stryker 2008; Westbrook 2021); historically, terms like 'crossdresser', 'transvestite', 'drag queen' and 'transsexual' were used by specific subcultures with their own group identities. However,

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as Marta Vicente (2021) and Roberto Filippello (2021) argue, terms like ‘transsexual’ and ‘transvestite’ may help us to rethink the category of ‘transgender’ while also making space for alternative examinations of queer histories. Given that several of the articles are historically oriented, we must clarify that in this Special Issue we use the terms trans and transgender as shorthand to refer to the range of gender-nonconforming communities discussed herein, rather than to suggest that these groups can easily be lumped together under the modern label of transgender.

Attending to the historical and geopolitical fluctuations of language is crucial in analysing self- and collective fashioning within trans communities – or more accurately, communities that the West groups under the category of ‘trans’. The tendency for trans activists to claim historical, non-western figures as trans risks imposing contemporary Eurocentric understandings of sex and gender onto groups that may have had their own autochthonous gender categories (Everhart 2020). For instance, across many areas of the Global South, such as Latin America, terms like *travesti* once indexed self-adornment and embodiment leaning towards an idealized femininity but have since evolved into descriptors used to defy essentialist attempts to pin down gender and sexual embodiment through normative, teleological framings of gender transition (Howe 2013). Scholars such as Marcia Ochoa (2014) and Giancarlo Cornejo (2019) have argued for the liminal and often imaginative slippages in gender dis/identification, while others have mobilized *travesti* as a ‘trans analytic’ (Rizki 2019).

As communities across the Global South reckon with Euro-American understandings of queerness and transness, adaptations and reformulations of ‘trans’ are ever-increasing. Such reconfigurations occur, in terms of both language and aesthetics, through lived experience, and often find expression on social media or at in-person gatherings as these young people negotiate their identities in the face of religious and/or political control and surveillance (Rahbari 2020). It is beyond the scope of this issue and this introduction to account for the multiple queer and trans epistemologies across space and time, but the multiplicity of trans identities suggests the need for further historical and historiographic investigation and geopolitical accuracy. Scholars of queer and trans fashion must avoid romanticizing localized gender and sexual identities while remaining attentive to their specificity and the globalized networks in which trans people partake if we are to shift understandings of the fashion/trans nexus.

The contributions to this issue pay close attention to the rhetorics of trans representation as well as the embodied experience of transness in particular places and epochs; however, much work remains to be done on queer and trans fashion in the Global South. Scholars such as Violeta Casoni, Carolina Brandão Piva and Luciene de Oliveira Dias (2023) have begun to conduct this reparative and decolonial work; moreover, the development of vital research networks such as the de-centralized Research Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion make us hopeful that queer and trans fashion in the South(s) will receive more attention in years to come. Although the articles in this Special Issue largely focus on western contexts, the authors address the cultural specificities of race and nation to

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elucidate how these social categories intersect with trans identity to produce different experiences of trans dress and embodiment. This issue lays the groundwork for future work to further destabilize the categories of race, nation and gender in fashion studies.

State of the field: Fashion studies on queerness and transness

Annamari Vänskä (2014) famously asked, 'Wasn't fashion always already a very queer thing?', tracing a genealogy of feminist and queer theorists who saw fashion as complicating hegemonic gender norms. Looking at fashion through a queer lens, Vänskä argued that 'traditional identity categories are not a desirable starting point when thinking about "queer fashion"' in that 'queer fashion is a performative, something that does gender and sexuality instead of reflecting a fixed homosexual identity underneath clothing' (2014: 458). In alignment with Vänskä's premise about the relationship between (queer) fashion and gender, Susan Kaiser and Denise Green have recently written that 'Style-fashion-dress, like feminist theory and queer theory, challenges and destabilizes categories of gender and sexuality. Visual and embodied, style-fashion-dress is one mechanism through which both subjectivities are culturally constructed and ever-changing' (2021: 165). The potentially queer ontology of fashion is a topic that continues to (re-)emerge in contemporary fashion studies.

Fashion theory is heavily indebted to early studies on gay and lesbian representation (e.g. Cole 2000; Lewis 1997; Fuss 1991) as well as the relationship between fashion and gender more broadly (e.g. Crane 2000; Evans and Thornton 1989; Wilson 1985). These studies have expanded to include topics such as gay masculinities and femininities in film, fashion shows and photography (e.g. Brajato 2020; Hitchcock and McCauley Bowstead 2020; Rees-Roberts 2013; Seely 2012). In the past decade, there have also been several edited volumes (Karaminas, Geczy and Church Gibson 2022; Reilly and Barry 2020; Steele 2013), monographs (Granata 2021; Geczy and Karaminas 2013, 2020) and special journal issues (Gilligan 2020; Reddy-Best 2019; Cole and Lewis 2016) focusing on queer fashion. This vital work, however, has primarily engaged with white and cisgender queer theory, not fully addressing issues of trans representation and embodiment beyond the semantics of 'gender fluidity'. More recent work that places fashion studies in conversation with queer of colour critique (moore 2018; Pritchard 2017), queer affect theory (Filippello 2019, 2020; Filippello and Parkins 2023), and, of course, trans theory (Esculapio et al. 2023; Zhang 2023a, 2023b) have been invaluable in understanding the virtually limitless potentialities of queer and trans self- and collective fashioning.

Even under the heading of queer fashion studies, there is still an epistemological need to engage more directly with transgender studies. Trans studies challenges feminist and queer theory's readings of trans identity through the lenses of gender domination and heteronormativity (Keegan 2020). Echoing TJ Billard and Erique Zhang's (2022) call for a trans critique of media studies, we similarly

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argue for a uniquely trans approach to fashion studies that moves beyond simply reproducing queer and feminist fashion histories to more fully attend to the particularities of trans fashion cultures. In *Viscose's* recent Special Issue on trans fashion, editors Alex Esculapio, Che Gossett and Jeppe Ugelviv wonder, 'what is a fashion theory of transness, and what might a trans theory of fashion be?' (2023: 2). Embracing 'transness' not as a concept but as an action-inducing critical positioning vis-à-vis the ethics, aesthetics and politics of trans cultural production, they advance an argument that resonates with Elspeth Brown's (2019) observation that while trans folks have been historically discriminated against by the fashion industry, they have at the same time been pivotal in its formation.

At the same time, fashion has been key in the construction of a trans identity in that 'the heterogeneous practices of trans (self-) fashioning [are] part of the lived experience of trans people [...] [and] constitute forms of trans world-making in their own right' (Esculapio et al. 2023: 2). In the words of Francisco Galarte, editor of the now defunct section of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* dedicated to fashion and style, fashion is a significant but overlooked site of analysis 'where knowledge by and about transgender phenomena and communities is produced' due to the 'political significance and possibilities that fashion opens for queer and trans subjects' (2023: 129–30). Indeed, style 'cuts through and transforms the social fabric that actively seeks to smother, constrain, and suffocate queer and trans subjects' (2023: 130).

In recent years, there have been a few remarkable contributions towards trans fashion scholarship. Work on transgender models (Brown 2019; Jobling et al. 2022) has brought to light the careers and experiences of queer and trans models, often models of colour, whose bodies, voices and images had been cast out from histories of fashion and photography. Interventions from trans youth involved in 'hacktivist' community building (Barry and Drak 2019) also highlight how fashion can allow subjugated groups to, in the words of Eddy Francisco Alvarez, 'find sequins in the rubble' (2016: 18) in times of authoritarianism and nationalism – in other words, to expand the psychic and aesthetic possibilities of subjectivization in the face of erasure or criminalization. Additionally, work on clothing production and branding by and for trans and gender-nonconforming people has explored trans embodiment by focusing on the entanglement of the affective properties of dress with the fantasies, imaginings and perceptions of wearers (Parkins and Findlay 2023; Reddy-Best et al. 2023; Rand 2017).

Fashion media are perhaps where trans, genderqueer and nonbinary representation has found the most fertile ground. Given their attunement to queer aesthetic sensitivities and tastes (Reed 2006) and their 'relational opacity' (Parkins 2014: 7), fashion magazines have historically functioned as 'queer desirous archives' (Filippello 2024: n.pag.) for queer and trans people – in other words, as a repository of queer and trans styles and feelings – moving us beyond gendered and heteronormative economies of visual consumption. More recently, the digital circulation of fashion media has generated new media ecologies that 'put long-standing hierarchies [e.g., race and gender] into question'

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(Gaugele and Titton 2019: 25). The expansion of the fashion mediascape to include – and often-times tokenize, commodify and capitalize on – a greater ‘diversity’ of gender-nonconforming models and celebrities, as well as the growing usage of digital media by trans social media influencers, has further encouraged the growth of digital fashion media studies.

In writing about digital fashion media from a feminist perspective, Ilya Parkins and Lise Shapiro Sanders have warned scholars about ‘the insufficiency of any analysis of fashion media that would over-invest in the myth of fashion’s digital democratization’, and have invited us to zoom in on ‘the circulation of new images and uses for the fashioned body, ones that intentionally resist the narrowness – the white, slender, normatively gendered and nominally heterosexual bodies – long in evidence across fashion media’ (2023: 3). Indeed, work on personal style blogs as sites of racialized labour for the production of and experimentation with queer styles (Pham 2015), on queer ‘fa(t)shion’ bloggers and ‘fatshionistas’ (Connell 2013; Gurrieri and Cherrier 2013), on butch fashion on Instagram (Minai 2022) and on trans vloggers (Zhang 2023a) have provided insight into how digital media have allowed for nonnormative bodies (fat bodies, queer and trans bodies, and bodies of colour) to enter into fashion while simultaneously producing new normative modes of so-called ‘diverse’ representation.

Throughout ‘Transgender Embodiment in Fashion and Beauty’, the authors attend to how the contours of race, nation and temporality have produced trans identities and fashion cultures, taking into account the unique positionalities of the subjects they write about. Several articles turn to media – ranging from mainstream and subcultural periodicals to film and television – to understand how images and discourses of trans identity circulate in culture; others centre trans people’s agency in fashioning their own identities. Together, the articles in this issue demonstrate how fashion and beauty can serve as aesthetic practices that expand the possibilities of trans identity formation and worldmaking.

Roadmap of ‘Transgender Embodiment in Fashion and Beauty’

‘Transgender Embodiment in Fashion and Beauty’ opens with Alex Nora Esculapio’s ‘The trans-feminine mystique’, an excavation of the careers and lives of trans models and performers April Ashley and Amanda Lear. Using a rich archive of primary materials, Esculapio reconstructs how Ashley and Lear’s embodiment of (trans-)femininity was represented in, speculated on by, and shaped by British mass media in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as how Ashley and Lear contributed to the crafting of their own public personas. In bringing to light these histories of fashion, the author thoroughly explores how these models negotiated class, race and national identity, in addition to gender, in the context of a seemingly progressive yet still largely white and cis-heteronormative fashion industry. Mobilizing McKenzie Wark’s (2021) concept of the

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'cisgender gaze', Esculapio dissects how transmisogyny was enacted through spectacle, hypersexualization and abjection. The author offers a model for 'doing' trans fashion theory, revealing forgotten fashion histories and attending to how transness is produced and performed at the interface of media and the body. She resists romanticizing discourses of resistance and subversion, instead attuning the reader to the ambivalences of trans (self-)representation. Further, the article brings queer affect theory into conversation with fashion history, accounting for how 'transsexual feelings' and 'antitranssexual feelings' function as 'public feelings' that ground gendered and racialized stagings of transfemininity.

Isabelle Held's contribution, 'Shaping foundations', offers a critical historical analysis of bust pads (or 'falsies') in the post-war United States. Similar to Esculapio, Held scavenges magazines, catalogues, brochures and other ephemeral sources to bring to life a history of padded foundationwear produced and used by transfeminine and gender-nonconforming people. Held's approach combines material culture, rigorous archival work and a close reading of affective networks of transfeminine people, networks that were built through the sharing and circulating of information about falsies. By showing how trans people used DIY (do-it-yourself) to 'materialize' community formation, Held's contribution echoes Jeanne Vaccaro's assertion that 'connecting transgender corporealities to labor and the politics of the handmade is a way to explore alternate modes of identity production, and to resist institutionally sanctioned gender formation' (2010: 254). Held reads the evolution of available materials and design production technologies in post-war America against the grain of trans history with the aid of advertisements, as well as articles by and interviews with self-identified 'transvestites' and 'transsexuals'. Moreover, she gives an account of how prosthetic styling (re-)shaped wearers' bodies and moods – by way of the proprioceptive inputs of fabrics on their skin and psyche – as they moved through public spaces, the private settings of their own homes, and small clothing stores, and even as they engaged in postal communications with producers and marketers. Held's endeavour powerfully argues for the importance of embodied technologies in endowing both makers and wearers with the means to build 'trans feminine communities of practice'.

In 'Transgendering-assemblages', Rachel Hann zooms in on practices of 'drag fictioning' through a Deleuzoguattarian lens, from which she derives the term 'transgendering-assemblages'. Analysing nonbinary Chinese Canadian multimedia artist Sin Wai Kin's (單慧乾) artwork, Hann draws attention to what she calls processes of 'more-than-human costuming' through which transmasculine people of colour can actualize their identities. Hann's article relies on a complex philosophical theoretical framework – applying posthuman philosophy and gender theory to the study of costume – to demonstrate that 'all gender assemblages are also racializing assemblages'. The author theorizes drag as a scenographic project of transgender, racial assemblaging through which capitalist and colonial expectations of intelligibility are challenged or 'outperformed'. Mirroring Held's interest in the role of DIY in trans

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subjectification, Hann's examination emphasizes the political dimension of costuming as a makeshift practice that 'reterritorializes' the capacities of racialized trans identity.

Ahmad Qais Munhazim takes readers on a compelling journey through the sartorial practices and experiences of exiled Afghan trans women called *murat*. These women have managed to carve out 'clandestine' practices of self-fashioning under Taliban-run Afghanistan before migrating to Ireland as refugees. Drawing on postcolonial theory alongside ethnographic work conducted in both Kabul and in Dublin, Munhazim discusses the dynamics of dress, (nonnormative) gender identity and place in two different geographical and political contexts. In so doing, the author resists both Orientalist assumptions about the absence or repression of queer and trans people in the Middle East as well as western neo-liberal fantasies of gender and sexual freedom. The originality of this article, besides its topic, lies in its deployment of sartorial ethnography as a method to explore these dynamics. More specifically, Munhazim foregrounds how fashion helps carve out moments and spaces of collective care, kinship, joy and power under multiple, interwoven conditions of duress. The material-affective aspects and the styles of the outfits and the makeup worn by the *murat* in different locations – whether in nightclubs in Afghanistan or in the street in Ireland – speak to their resilience and their commitment to using fashion and beauty as indispensable tools for surviving the violence of war and transmisogyny. They must constantly negotiate their in/visibility as queer political subjects with the ultimate goal of crafting alternative *murat* lifeworlds.

The last original contribution is by Ev Delafosse, who works at the crossroads of Black, queer and fashion studies. Their contribution 'The inescapable haunt(ing)' is a theoretical reflection on Black trans life after death. By applying a trans lens to Derrida's hauntological analytic, Delafosse asks what it would mean to think *with or through* dress as an affective connector of life and death – collapsing the dualism of the two – in Black trans people's experiences and imaginations. The author contends that the 'garmenting of [Black] trans people' can operationalize a material reconstruction of the life-death continuum under biopolitical conditions of anti-Blackness and transmisogyny. They prompt us to think about the ghosts of murdered Black trans women and the potentialities of clothing in the afterlife. What happens to fashion embodiment when death shatters the reproduction of liberal, individualist fantasies of self-optimization? Entering into imagined conversation with Black trans women who have passed, Delafosse ponders how clothes – in their resistant aliveness after death – can be haunting, leaving traces of what has been and what is not yet. Delafosse thinks through queer, anti-linear, disassembling temporalities and stresses the cross-generational and intersubjective bonding of living and dead Black trans folks, theorizing body-fashioning as an ethical, archival, vitalist praxis of care. Analysing the multifaceted aesthetics of ballroom culture – in particular, scenes from a ball honouring iconic transgender dancer Daesja LaPerla, as well as the TV show *POSE* (2018–21) – they argue that fashioning practices can help one to cope with and to revere the deaths of those with

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whom one is in community and to find pleasure in connecting with them, inasmuch as dressing is about ‘inescapably’ co-existing with and inhabiting life as much as death.

Finally, Drew Gonzales’s review of Nicole Erin Morse’s (2022) book *Selfie Aesthetics: Seeing Trans Feminist Futures in Self-Representational Art* offers an additional point of departure for future studies at the intersection of fashion, digital media and trans studies. Gonzales agrees with Morse that ‘reading selfies’ can be a hermeneutic and even a pedagogy of self-reflexivity and imagination for trans people, namely ‘for reckoning with the materiality of the now as well as the trans futures to come’ – a theoretical mission for which this issue (humbly) seeks to pave the way.

Conclusion

Scaturro and Tartsinis’s provocation with which we opened this introduction – who’s in and who’s out of fashion (studies)? – calls for fashion scholars to resist the disciplinary siloing in the academy and to reach beyond departmental divisions. In adopting their proposal, ‘Transgender Embodiment in Fashion and Beauty’ interrogates not only how trans people and trans experiences have been minimized in the subfield of queer fashion studies but also to argue for a more expansive and interdisciplinary understanding of what constitutes fashion studies – including trans fashion studies – in the first place. The contributions to this Special Issue answer this call, bringing together a group of scholars whose work spans diverse methodological and theoretical approaches, including historical and archival analysis, material culture, ethnography, Black studies, performance studies and post- and decolonial theory. We hope that this Special Issue will pave the way for researchers to further excavate forgotten trans fashion histories and to continue to centre trans epistemologies as the field of fashion studies evolves.

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Suggested citation

Roberto, Filippello and Eriq, Zhang (2024), ‘Who’s in and who’s out of (queer) fashion (studies)?’, *Critical Studies in Fashion & Beauty*, Special Issue: ‘Transgender Embodiment in Fashion and Beauty’, 15:1, pp. 7–21, https://doi.org/10.1386/csfb_00068_2

Contributor details

Roberto Filippello (he/him) is assistant professor of media and culture at the University of Amsterdam, where he is affiliated with the School for Cultural Analysis and the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies. He specializes in queer and feminist fashion practices across a variety of historical and geopolitical contexts. He is the co-editor of *Fashion and Feeling: The Affective Politics of Dress* (Palgrave, 2023) and is currently at work on his first monograph, *Dressed for Dissent: Decolonial Fashion and the Queer Struggle for Palestine*.

Contact: University of Amsterdam, Turfdragsterpad 9, BG 1, 1012 XT Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
E-mail: r.filippello@uva.nl

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4790-4915>

Eriq Zhang (they/she) is a Ph.D. candidate in media, technology and society in the School of Communication at Northwestern University. Their research asks how media representations of transgender women reproduce normative beauty ideals and how trans women and femmes of colour navigate these norms in their everyday lives. They are a co-founder of the Center for Applied Transgender Studies, an editorial assistant of the *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies*, and an affiliate of the Center for Critical Race + Digital Studies.

Contact: Northwestern University, 2240 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.
E-mail: erique@u.northwestern.edu

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2700-7689>

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