

# Fashion Education

## The Systemic Revolution

Edited by  
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## Queering the Fashion Classroom: Intersectional Student Perspectives

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I am a white, gay, Jewish, cisgender man, and I developed and taught the first semester-long undergraduate *Queer Fashion* course in the United States. The course is described as 'an examination of LGBTQ+ experiences via historical fashion analysis; emphasis on LGBTQ+ identity fashioned through sartorial choice; gay aesthetic, camp culture, and LGBTQ+ designer contributions'. My aim is to introduce students to fashion history from a queer perspective of the eighteenth to twentieth century. My approach to developing and delivering this course is informed primarily by queer theory in an attempt to consider fashion, identity and gender outside of the heteronormative status quo perpetuated by typical fashion education and industry practice.

Many years ago, as an openly gay undergraduate student, it was often an isolating experience. Although I came out at age 19 in a very public way in the school newspaper, there were no coming out experiences that I was able to emulate or other gay men with whom I was able to discuss my journey. Even more bleak was the classroom experience that discussed every topic from a heterosexual point of view. The opportunity to develop and deliver this class which centres queer identity and considers fashion from a broader perspective about gender and sexuality, has been a full-circle process for me. My goals were to, in some way, provide a classroom experience for young queer folk to see and learn about people like themselves and to create a less isolating experience for the next generation.

Gathering the material necessary for the course was challenging; I spent several years collecting sources. The course starts with the impact of men milliners in the eighteenth century, like the hairdresser to Marie Antoinette Monsieur Leonard, and then examines cross-dressing masquerade parties and mollies and molly houses

prevalent in cities such as London. In the nineteenth century, we explore how dandyism was used as a means of variable representation of masculinity from the very macho Beau Brummel to the aesthetic sensibilities of Oscar Wilde. The twentieth century portion of the class covers a variety of topics; how mannish lesbians of the early twentieth century dressed, the phenomenon and powerful artistry of drag, sexual sartorial signifiers such as red ties and suede shoes, queer art and performance that explored femme identity and sexual fetishes through dress, the contributions and impact of gay male designers and ultimately how subculture impacts mainstream fashion. I began the course by using two books: *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* and *Queer Style*. I have since developed a course reading and film list instead of textbooks. This more promising approach allows me to update the content as new scholarship is published in this evolving area of inquiry.

The course begins with an introduction to queer theory to help students understand the performative nature of gender perpetuated by society and achieved in part through sartorial choice (Butler 1999). Using lectures, planned class discussions and assigned readings and films, students understand how members of the LGBTQ+ community have used dress to shape identity and form community while influencing mainstream fashion. Students complete various small assignments, including annotated citations of assigned readings, and the semester culminates in a group queer styling project. In this applied project, students style looks and collaboratively complete photoshoots to consider appearance and dress from a queer perspective. Students create looks inspired by historical representations of queer fashion reviewed in the course. Many take their cues from important readings and classroom topics. For example, students enjoy learning about queer designer, performance artist and activist Leigh Bowery (Bancroft 2011; Figure 3.1).

My diverse students' voices and presence make the course a transformative space. Since the course began in the spring of 2018, it has been offered every semester to an average of 40 students in face-to-face, Hyflex, and online asynchronous formats. I am happy to share specific details of course content with anyone who is interested<sup>2</sup>. However, for this essay, I thought it would be more compelling to hear directly from my students what the course meant to them. Included are the voices of my insightful former students who speak to their experiences in a queered classroom.

### *Reconciling my identities through fashion (Alicia)*

I identify as a Black lesbian woman. I feel most aware of my identity as a 'Black' 'woman', and as such, it feels very important to understand Black history. I feel

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FIGURE 3.1: Leigh Bowery inspired image from student queer styling group project. Bowery often created elaborate costumes that entirely covered his body, intending to illustrate that gender is a construct that can be manipulated through appearance. Photograph courtesy of Autumn Pickney.

like I belong because of my experiences in childhood and adolescence with strong Black female protagonists like my mother, grandmothers and school friends. As a Black lesbian woman, I have often felt made to choose between blackness, femininity and being gay in order to help others avoid confusion and to, at times, avoid difficult questions regarding my identity.

I came out during my first year of college. It was a scary but liberating experience, and I was left with a 'what's next?' or 'now what?' feeling. Other than my physical attraction to other women, I knew very little about what it meant to be lesbian. I did not know the culture, the history, the communities I could connect with, the verbiage or definitions. Therefore, I did not know how to take this identity that millions of others hold close and make it my own. I spent time and

energy attempting to prescribe to society's idea of a lesbian. At this time, I found most online imagery and information primarily featured masculine presenting lesbians. An online quiz entitled 'Which Lesbian Stereotype Are You?' is a prime example of this. The quiz featured several curated outfits to pick from, with only two of seven being feminine and all others featured menswear or hypermasculine clothing. Quizzes like these increased the pressure I felt to subscribe to specific masculine lesbian stereotypes. The modification of my self-presentation through clothing and appearance to align with images I encountered of masculine presenting lesbians in popular culture artificially led me to believe that strangers would know I was a lesbian. Then I'd feel affirmed and acknowledged. This was how I practiced representing my identity as a lesbian in the public sphere for a year or so, but I then realized that this did not matter because I still did not know what it meant to be lesbian. So, I tried to understand gay culture and history but did not get very far. I felt stumped and needed more. I began to question my place in the LGBTQ+ community.

On my journey, I also encountered homophobia in the Black community. When I initially came out, not only did I feel a lack of belonging in the LGBTQ+ community, but I also experienced alienation from Black social groups. It became harder to find support and friendship when the Black community does not accept you for being gay. Rachel Haug researched the increased psychological distress experienced by LGBTQ+ minorities for her dissertation. According to Haug, minority groups experience greater distress and lack of belonging than their majority counterparts because of added discrimination and harassment (Haug 2018). Furthermore, DeMarquis Clarke urged people to understand a multicultural perspective by stating, 'Those who have multiple positions of powerlessness and lack of privilege experience oppression from multiple sources [...] [which] is threatening for a queer person of color who is already facing racial discrimination' (Clarke 2011: 5).

My college campus was not visibly diverse so I did not know who to ask for help. When I heard about a new *Queer Fashion* class, I leapt at the opportunity to enrol. I was not completely sure what it would entail, but I knew it was a start, and I wanted to be a part of it. What made me even more excited to take the class was that it discussed not only LGBTQ+ history but also its connection to fashions past and present. Once receiving the syllabus, I got even more excited, particularly by the unit covering lesbianism. In our *Queer Fashion* class, we had in-depth conversations about lesbian sartorial choices and ways of dress ranging from the mannish styles of the early twentieth century to the handsome revolution of the twenty-first century.

In Katrina Rolley's article 'Cutting the dash: The dress of Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge', we learned how two twentieth century women used dress to

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convey their identities as lesbians. According to Rolley, Radclyffe Hall's modernity resulted from her need to express her sexual identity through 'masculine' dress and appearance. For her, every change in fashion that allowed women to wear clothes formerly designated 'male' was important (Rolley 1990). Troubridge's more feminine sartorial choices still expressed her sexuality but in relation to Hall's hyper-masculinity. We also learned about how, Miki Vargas' twenty-first century photography project, *The Handsome Revolution* explored the projection of a masculine identity achieved partly through dress. Vargas proudly displayed masculine presenting women in the project and created a transformative affirming space for her subjects (Reddy-Best 2017).

While reading about the history of lesbian styles, I started to understand how my appearance evolved. I took this class in my senior year of college and, by this point, had strayed away from a hyper-masculine mode of dressing and sat more comfortably in my femininity. For me, femininity is not just dresses, skirts and pretty patterns; it is also the accentuation of my figure. I changed from wearing button-down shirts and bowties that I did not feel the best in, to wearing dresses and jewellery every day that I felt celebrated in. Seeing different women embrace their own sense of style and their queer identities throughout history allowed me to feel more comfortable expressing my identity through dress.

The highlight of the entire course was our final project. The assignment was to creatively portray our version of different themes and styles reviewed in the course. One theme my group chose was the mannish lesbian style of the early twentieth century. I volunteered to style and model this look for the project even though I no longer identified with this way of dress. Donning the slacks, button-down shirt and oxford shoes from the back of my closet for the photo shoot was liberating because it reminded me of who I was trying so hard to be. Wearing masculine or feminine clothing does not erase my lesbian or feminine identity, nor excludes me from my Black identity. Seeing the final images from the photo shoot of a smiling and happy Black lesbian woman (me) was very self-affirming.

The *Queer Fashion* classroom was more diverse than any other course I had taken. It was refreshing being surrounded by other students, queer or not, who were interested in the subject. Hearing the stories of fellow Black students, even Black queer women, during class discussions made the class an instant safe haven for my peers and me. Finally, I felt like I had a space to explore my blackness, queerness and femininity without judgement and among those with shared experiences. This class showed other struggling students and me that we had a community on a predominately white heteronormative campus. Furthermore, the people I met in our class did not prescribe to any stereotypes; they existed on their own as queer or as people of colour and stood strong in those identities. Minority representation in a class discussing queer history finally gave me the sense of

belonging that I always yearned for, the feeling that I have a voice in this community under all intersections of my identity, a voice that deserves to be listened to and affirmed.

### *Queer fashion: Discovering me (Austin)*

You might be wondering who I am. I am a Black, cisgendered male from Detroit. I graduated from college in 2018 with a degree in Business Administration focused in marketing. Not your typical student demographic for a *Queer Fashion* class. You might be thinking ... 'why did he take this course?' Let me tell you the story.

Throughout my college career, I developed an interest in the fashion industry while simultaneously becoming more comfortable with my sexuality and identity as a gay male. However, I knew nothing about my community's history. I grew up in a Christian Baptist household where being gay wasn't accepted. My parents enrolled me in a private Christian school where nothing was ever said about gay history because of the heteronormativity of the curriculum. The school's culture was that the students would bully you if you were openly gay. With those experiences in my past, I thought that the *Queer Fashion* class would be the perfect opportunity to learn more about fashion and the history of my community. The course also fulfilled my remaining requirement for the university's general education programme.

The first day of class was a little intimidating. I felt somewhat comfortable but also felt like a fish out of water. Most of the students were cisgender women in the Fashion Merchandising and Design programme. Yet the room was full of people that looked like me: Black and brown folks as well as larger-sized people. As a plus-sized individual, I thought that was really important to see in a fashion class because the industry doesn't particularly cater to all body types.

Throughout the semester, we had many discussions. One discussion that stood out to me was the course's gay sexual liberation component. We learned about how the LGBTQ+ community often connected with each other using sartorial signifiers when being gay was taboo. This conversation led to further discussion about how gay men interact with each other in present times via dating apps and the profile tagline of 'No Fats, No Fems, No Asians, No Blacks'. This was important to me because it highlights the experience of queer people of different races and body types. This line of thinking within gay male communities supports further 'marginalization of fat, femme and/or racialized queer bodies and identities within queer communities [...] that is, the white, masculine and muscular queer man who is understood and represented as being the right kind of Queer' (Conte 2017: 1). When I came out my sophomore year of college to my friends, some

individuals in the Black community treated me differently once I started living my truth. I learned that it's even harder for some Black queer men to find acceptance.

Another important section of the course for me was entitled, *The Power of Drag: Intersections of Race, Gender, Sexuality, Style and Performance*. This was when I really started to become proud of my queer history. Growing up, the school system only taught Black history for Black History Month, but there is so much about our culture that is not taught in school. This section of the course really demonstrated how much Black members of the LGBTQ+ community have contributed to popular culture. For example, the men and women of the Ballroom Scene of the 1980s influenced fashion and popular culture. This was a place in particular for Black, LatinX and trans people of the LGBTQ+ community to come together and express their identities in the runway categories of ball competitions. According to Marlon Bailey, 'houses provide a space for queer youth to feel supported' (Bailey 2011: 367). Furthermore, 'the balls resist these gender norms by gender-bending through both the outfits and the mannerisms of the queens and kings' (Buckner 2020: n.pag.). Personally, this course section had the most positive impact on my self-confidence.

This class was really the first time I could learn about my queer history and be fully proud of it. I was able to learn a great deal about the contributions and impact of the LGBTQ+ community on both fashion and mainstream culture. It also really strengthened what I want my purpose in life to be. This *Queer Fashion* course reiterated the importance of representation and self-confidence. Everyone should be able to live fully and confidently so they can do whatever they set their minds to (Figure 3.2).

### *New perspective: History, gender and intersectionality (Joshua)*

When presented with the opportunity to take a newly developed course entitled *Queer Fashion*, I was very enthusiastic. As an aspiring scholar of dress history, I assumed it would provide opportunities to study dress history from an LGBTQ+ perspective. Personally, I hoped to learn more about myself; as an individual who had come to terms with and explored his own queer identity a few years before taking the class. I also desired to find connections to people in the past that shared thoughts and experiences similar to mine. *Queer Fashion* did that, providing a sense of validity via historical context. Before taking the course, I had never learned about members of the queer community in any class (other than sporadic mentions of the AIDS epidemic). Sometimes, it felt as though LGBTQ+ identities were a relatively new concept, that I was part of a group that found its origins within the past 30 years. This bothered me; sometimes, it even made me question



FIGURE 3.2: Queer fashion student Austin Reeves explores the push-pull of identity through styling. Photograph courtesy of Autumn Pickney.

if something was wrong with me. *Queer Fashion* changed this feeling for me. Our learning about queer history and fashion began in the eighteenth century with discussions of molly-houses, macaronis and the practice of masquerade. Almost immediately, it became clear that individuals with queer identities have existed throughout history. Tracing origins related to one of my identities created a larger context in which I felt more grounded and valid. Rather than a relatively new concept, queerness finds its origins in the further away past, providing hundreds, if not thousands, of years of history to learn about, develop a deeper understanding of, and be proud of.

The course also provided me with a deeper context and understanding of my identity as a man as well as what masculinity means. Prior to taking the class, while educating myself about who I am in relation to my queer identity, I had also found material discussing topics related to the construction of gender. *Queer Fashion*

included discussions of masculinity and femininity, their relationship and historical context and the idea of stepping outside these binary ideas. An introduction to feminist and queer theories truly expanded my own understanding as it related to my identity. I also learned the importance of understanding the privilege associated with my identity as a white, cisgender man. Even queer-related topics or histories can be problematic as particular identities were also disenfranchised; one example would be dandyism. Despite the queer interpretations of dandyism by individuals like Oscar Wilde and Quentin Crisp, 'the male dandy does little to challenge a long cultural history of misogyny' (Cerankowski 2012: 232). Exploring this has continued to deepen my understanding of the privilege of being a cisgender white man, despite also being queer.

From this, I developed a deeper understanding of intersectionality. I had heard of and had a basic understanding of this concept prior to taking *Queer Fashion*; I served as a resident assistant for three and a half years, and this topic frequently came up during our professional development and training sessions. However, *Queer Fashion* aided me in the development of a better understanding. I am a queer, cisgender man; however, I am also White, Agnostic and an American citizen. All these identities intersect and interact with one another and form my unique life experience; it is impossible to remove an identity and discuss it individually without talking about how other identities impact it. In *Queer Fashion*, intersectionality was stressed, for example, when we discussed the style of Black women who were also queer, like famed blues singer Gladys Bentley who often wore a top hat and tails when she performed, presenting in a very masculine way. This opened the door to new discoveries as 'intersectionality itself is constantly under construction' rather than a finished, stagnant concept (Hill Collins and Bilge 2020: 15). Consequently, I was able to improve the facilitation of programmes in my resident assistant role. I also talked about how all of our identities are inherently connected. For me, it is impossible to separate my queerness from my gender, race, citizenship and the privileges afforded me.

### *Intersectionality: Acknowledging your privilege (Alexis)*

In my final semester, my advisor introduced a new *Queer Fashion* course into the curriculum. The first of its kind in the programme and at our university, I was excited to learn about fashion history through a new lens. Most instruction about historical dress is taught solely from the perspective of heteronormativity. Examining LGBTQ+ identities via fashion history was initially an opportunity for me to learn about gay aesthetics, camp culture and LGBTQ+ designer contributions. Yet over the semester, it turned into a much more personal and profound

experience for me as a Black, non-disabled, middle-class, heterosexual, cis-woman. This course and, more importantly, the space this course provided challenged me to reconsider my thoughts on diversity and representation in the classroom.

This course explained how minorities have greatly impacted fashion and culture as we know it. The course content included scholarly works, culture-defining films and queer fashion history. We also covered dress and identity, the relationship between gender expression and appearance, and gender and race inequalities in society. For many students, it was their first time learning about people with whom they identified, which was a rare and precious opportunity for those focused on fashion merchandising and design – a discipline dominated by a homogenous group of individuals. I looked forward to every class period; the discussions were a highlight. It was the most diverse place on campus I had ever been in, encompassing various backgrounds, races, sizes, ages and majors, where students of varying views and backgrounds found common ground. The course broadened my viewpoints on topics I have always felt a strong connection to, such as critical race theory (CRT) and the theory of double consciousness. CRT is a theoretical framework that examines depictions of race relations within cultures. It explores how systemic racism informs cultural perceptions of race and how people present themselves to counter bias (Crenshaw et al. 1996). According to W.E.B. Du Bois, the theory of double consciousness is the sensation 'of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others' (Du Bois 1903: 3). In some cases, this can cause extreme harm to the self-worth of those in minority groups. They tend to take on the beliefs or biases of the dominant culture and contribute to systemic racism within their own communities.

The introduction of queer and feminist theories broadened my viewpoints to include issues of gender expression and homophobia in the Black community (Jagose 2009). To learn more, I researched Blaxploitation films from the 1970s to the end of the twentieth century. I focused on how queer characters dressed compared to the uber-masculine main characters. I analysed the appearance of 23 characters. I found that dress was used to convey cultural messages of gender expression for the Black queer and heterosexual males. The visual representation of queer characters prompted, for me, complex cultural meanings regardless of how long or how brief the audience saw them. The images or symbols displayed by their dress and appearance are then 'encoded into the cultural framework' in which people form beliefs, opinions and learn social structures (Harris and Mushtaq 2013: 4). Queer characters were portrayed as sexual pariahs, one-dimensional jesters, opposing the ideal sexually desired, macho, leading man; further contributing to the othering of queer folks.

As a Black woman, I have always felt I brought a diverse perspective to every course I took, every group project I was a part of and every class discussion.

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My view was black and white in a literal sense. I was constantly aware of my intersectionality, but only as Black and female. I saw this as the short end of the stick for both race and gender. My existence itself was a protest to the injustices I felt in every interaction; I felt it was my place to challenge those who may have opposed me based on my identities. Constantly on the defence, in my mind, I thought I knew everything about diversity and inclusion. It was not until after reading Katrina Rolley's writing on the dress and identity of Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge, and listening to my classmates, that the idea that my intersectionality included privilege occurred to me (Rolley 1990).

The concept that I held any privilege was so foreign to me. Privilege is inherent; without actively engaging in it, I would never have been aware of how it informed my life. I was ashamed of the sudden realization that I, a cis-hetero woman, who considered herself an ally, was not aware of the hardships experienced by my queer counterparts. I have never been judged or feared for my life when it came to how I dressed and who I chose to love. I had never thought about holding hands, hugging or displaying affection in public. I had never had a second thought when mentioning a boyfriend at work or thought about the assumptive questions about who people may find attractive. Heterosexuality was the default, and I never noticed because it fit into my life perfectly. Acknowledging my privilege was at first jarring but one of the most expansive experiences for me in the class. The discussions and openness lent tremendously to my growth as an ally. A tough class period for me was when I offended a trans person with my outdated language. While discussing the reading, I used a term and was unaware of the weight it held for people in the room. This interaction would have been negative in any other space and ended without a clear understanding on both sides. The instructor used this moment to teach us how learning and unlearning are both important and take time. I was given the grace to make mistakes and to learn without fear of being wrong, and many times, I was. I now have the basic building blocks to better support and advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. I am aware that though this class profoundly impacted me, it had an even greater impact on those represented. I will never be able to understand fully, but I must continue to learn and share with those who will never be able to experience this class and the growth I had because of it.

### *Call to action*

The student perspectives shared here illustrate how impactful a queered fashion classroom can be for many reasons. These student voices are a testament to how the diversification of the fashion curriculum can create transformational spaces that expand knowledge and provide an affirming space and room for critical

discourse. While I had hoped this *Queer Fashion* course would appeal to students who identify as LGBTQ+ and their allies, I was pleased to find that the classroom became a haven for students of colour, both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual cisgender. Granted, it took the perfect storm; a gay man with the desire and opportunity to propose a course about *Queer Fashion* and the willingness to complete the substantial extra labour to do so. Aside from a course about queer fashions, styles and bodies developed by Kelly Reddy-Best at Iowa State University, I am unaware of any other semester-long curriculum related to queer fashion offered by our field in the United States (Reddy-Best and Goodman 2020). While many fashion programmes have some type of dress and culture or diversity class, which may mention sexuality or gender, there remains a significant opportunity to understand LGBTQ+ identity and experience further using a lens of fashion (Reddy-Best and Mamp 2018). As indicated from the student perspectives, adding a *Queer Fashion* course to the curriculum can provide an affirming, safe and transformative space for students.

## NOTES

1. For the master course syllabus, see: <https://team.cmich.edu/sites/MCS/Shared%20Documents/FMD/FMD280.pdf>.
2. For further discussion of my experiences developing *Queer Fashion* over five years, see: Mamp, M., Elia, A. C., Bernstein, S. T., Brewer, L. A. and Green, D. N. (2018), 'Engaging labor, acknowledging maker', *Dress: The Journal of the Costume Society of America*, 44:2, pp. 133–51.  
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