

# **Fashioning the Self**

Identity and Style in British Culture

Edited by

**Emily Priscott**

Independent scholar

**Curating and Interpreting Culture**



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This book is an original multi-author monograph with five chapters, each of which has been written by its individual authors. Each author has contributed a chapter based on their original research, developed in the field of their own specialism specifically for this volume.



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# Abstract

This book takes an interdisciplinary approach to examining the link between personal style and identity, moving across academic disciplines such as art history, English literature and cultural studies. Comprising five chapters by individual authors, this collection of essays explores the relationship between identity and style, both collective and individual. Each chapter is designed to address a specific interpretation of this broad subject, interrogating what people wear and why, and examining how style can relate to wider social systems to create a person's sense of themselves and their social position. Rather than focusing on one specific time-period or cultural moment, it moves through time and geographical boundaries to explore the relationship between different style practices and their social contexts, with each piece illustrating the tension between individual identity and external structures. It is a series of snapshots, a collage of different images which explores the radically diverse uses of style and its different meanings, highlighting its multiplicity within British society. The impact of colonialism and its legacy is a significant part of British culture and its heritage, which this collection reflects in its diverse choice of subjects, bringing into focus intersectional issues such as race, class and gender.



# Introduction

## Fashioning the self

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“On the subject of dress almost no-one...feels truly indifferent...it is dangerous...it has a flowery head, but deep roots in the passions.”<sup>1</sup>

Personal adornment is itself an aesthetic act, and as Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bulbolz Eicher have written, “all aesthetic acts are acts of speaking.”<sup>2</sup> As the sociologist and dress theorist Fred Davis has argued, individual style is a statement of self, but it is also a social practice, a form of visual communication with deeper meanings.<sup>3</sup> Style is a rich conceptual framework through which to view history and culture, a way of exploring identity and its relationship to both the self and society. While fashion is an external category related to capitalist commodity culture, style can be far more subjective. Yet its meaning is slippery; it can suggest an externally agreed upon set of characteristics that conform to received beauty norms, but it can also signify the opposite, a defiance of beauty standards in favor of self-expression. More often, it is a negotiation between the two. Style, like fashion can, as Vike Martina Plock has written, “facilitat[e] the analysis of modern subject identity...at once receptive and defensive towards external influences and pressures,”<sup>4</sup> with the relationship between originality and uniformity in personal style highlighting the tension between individual and group identity, internal versus external

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, “Dress,” in *Collected Impressions* (New York: Knopf, 1950) p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bulbolz Eicher, “The Language of Personal Adornment,” in *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*, ed. Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald M. Schwarz (New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Vike Martina Plock, *Modernism, Fashion and Interwar Women Writers* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 2.

influences.<sup>5</sup> This way of approaching the issue of style has inspired not only scholarly study but new work in the arts in Britain, including displays and installations at museums and galleries, which have generated enormous popular interest.

In 2018, the Victoria and Albert Museum staged its summer/autumn exhibition, *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, drawing huge crowds that queued both inside and outside of the main doors to see it. By the time it closed in mid-November, after being extended an additional two weeks, several hundred thousand people had viewed glass cases filled with artworks, photographs, jewelry, medical devices (such as plaster casts painted with decorations), jars and bottles that had once held cosmetics, but most of all with clothes—especially with a series of spectacular Tehuana dresses, shawls and skirts of intricate design that were collected and worn by the artist during her too-brief and pain-filled lifetime. The focus throughout was on illuminating the persona that Kahlo had created by such material means, while asserting her linkage to indigenous communities in Mexico. When offering a rationale for what had been put on show, co-curators Claire Wilcox and Circe Henestrosa wrote in “Fashioning Frida,” their Introduction to the exhibition catalog, “The symbiotic relationship in Kahlo’s life and work between her art and dress cannot be overestimated.”<sup>6</sup>

This link between style and identity has, in recent years, received a substantial amount of academic attention and enjoys far greater legitimacy in scholarly circles than it once did. It is no longer revolutionary simply to state that style expresses deeper aspects of the self: most people now know that clothing matters, be it fashionable or otherwise. As a field of study, dress is both fascinating and hugely significant. However, while we no longer have to defend the idea that style is a significant social phenomenon, it is how we use it that counts, and it provides researchers with a rich analytical tool through which to interrogate the past. As Davis notes, clothing and style signify far more than surfaces, and also more than the basic categories of class and social status, but can denote ideas about gender, sexuality, race and, in fact, “any aspect of self about which individuals can, through symbolic means, communicate with others in the instance of dress, through nondiscursive visual [...] symbols, however [...] elusive these may be.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, dress

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<sup>5</sup> Plock, *Modernism, Fashion and Interwar Women Writers*.

<sup>6</sup> Claire Wilcox and Circe Henestrosa, “Introduction: Fashioning Frida,” in *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, edited by Claire Wilcox and Circe Henestrosa (London: V&A Publishing, 2018), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Wilcox and Henestrosa, “Introduction: Fashioning Frida,” *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up*, p. 16.

can work symbolically at micro levels of consciousness to express subtle codes, varieties and manners, as well as broader categories. Age, marital status and sexuality are all significant aspects of identity which, in earlier eras as well as today, personal style has been used to elucidate. Hope Howell Hodgkins's 2016 study, *Style and the Single Girl*, for instance, examines the relationship between singleness and dress in the novel from the 1920s to the 1970s, a period of intense upheaval in gender norms, of which fashion and style were important signifiers.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, dress is not only relevant to women's history and need not be ghettoized as a "women's issue." Academic interest in menswear, from nineteenth-century dandyism<sup>9</sup> to gay male subcultural styles,<sup>10</sup> has also grown over the past few decades, providing a rich background of literature on diverse sets of style practices, along with important interdisciplinary arts exhibitions, such as the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Fashioning Masculinities: The Art of Menswear* in 2022.

That the study of clothing can teach us about lives and cultures, the connections between how individuals both perceive and present themselves, and the historical contexts of their circumstances, has clearly been well established in the fields of dress and fashion research. While its value as a source was once denigrated, due to the traditionally subordinate position of fashion in both scholarship and the arts, the rise of design history, material culture and popular culture studies has, as Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett have written, "given a legitimacy to the study of fashion."<sup>11</sup>

However, the broad acceptance of fashion as a legitimate cultural source of knowledge in academic circles is only half the story and it seems that, elsewhere, the debate rages on. As Robyn Gibson, Australian arts educator and author of *The Memory of Clothes*, wrote in 2015, "Almost every fashion writer...insists anew on the importance of fashion. However[,] typical responses from outside the discipline boarder on cynicism, ambivalence or irony."<sup>12</sup> The source of this enduring squeamishness about dress, as Margaret D. Stetz has written, is apparently its "long associat[ion] with feminine preoccupations," often being

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<sup>8</sup> Hope Howell Hodgkins, *Style and the Single Girl: How Modern Women Re-Dressed the Novel, 1922-1977* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press), 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, "Fabricating Girls: Clothes and Coming-of-Age Fiction by Women of Color," *Humanities Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2019), pp. 122-134, p. 122.

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Shaun Cole, *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel* (Berg 3PL, illustrated edition, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin de Siècle to the Present* (London: I. B. Taurus Publishers, 2002), p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Robyn Gibson, "Introduction," in *The Memory of Clothes*, ed. Robyn Gibson (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2015), xiii-xvii, p. xiii.

“taken as a sign of vanity or insufficient intellectual or political seriousness,”<sup>13</sup> an enduring sentiment in some circles.

Though it was enthusiastically embraced by British museum-going audiences, even the V&A’s Frieda Kahlo exhibition was not without controversy, demonstrating once again that some cultural critics remain to be convinced of the wider significance of fashion and dress. Reviewing the exhibition for the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper, the art critic Jonathan Jones wrote disapprovingly of what he saw as a lack of attention to Frida Kahlo’s “blazing, visionary paintings[,]” which took “a back seat at the V&A to Kahlo’s clothes, makeup and iconic image.” He went on to decry what seemed an inappropriate effort to define Kahlo through the display of such ephemera, dismissing it as merely “a dead woman’s stuff[,]” and insisting, “I feel a far greater intimacy looking into Kahlo’s eyes in her paintings than I do wandering among 80-year-old clothes.”<sup>14</sup> According to Jones, moreover, the legitimate purpose of an art museum such as the V&A risked being compromised, when it was confused with a project of archaeology that involved digging up and placing on view Kahlo’s sartorial remains, however visually striking the result.

In this recent disparagement of dress as the feature of an art exhibition, it is difficult to avoid hearing echoes of the long debate—a gendered debate, at that—between those (often, critics who were men) who have argued that attention to clothing could never be a serious or important matter and those (often, writers who were women) who have asserted the opposite. Readers can find it already in 1929, underpinning Virginia Woolf’s lecture-into-essay, *A Room of One’s Own*. There, the speaker told her audience, “But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial.’”<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein, Edith Sitwell’s most recent biographer, Richard Greene, devotes little space to discussing her highly individualistic appearance in his 2011 biography of the poet. Although his decision to focus primarily on her literary output might be welcomed as an over-due corrective to her often subordinate position in discussions of modernist literature, the picture it

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, “Fabricating Girls: Clothes and Coming-of-Age Fiction by Women of Color,” *Humanities Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2019), pp. 122-134, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Jones, “Frida Kahlo Making Her Self Up Review: Forget the Paintings, Here’s Her False Leg,” *Guardian* (UK), 12<sup>th</sup> June 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jun/12/frida-kahlo-making-her-self-up-review-v-and-a-london>

<sup>15</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 1929, p. 60 <https://gutemberg.net.au/ebooks02/0200791.txt>

paints is incomplete. This well-intentioned desire to situate Sitwell as a significant modernist poet as opposed to an eccentric clothes horse has resulted in an important reassessment of her literary reputation, but, as Chapter Four of this collection shows, Sitwell's flamboyant image was inseparable from her art, expressing the same decorative sensibility as her poetry.

Such self-conscious evocations of this disagreement over cultural values had also appeared in 2009, and could be seen throughout the British novelist and journalist Linda Grant's collection of essays, *The Thoughtful Dresser*. Grant deplored the fact that "Writing and thinking about clothes is generally relegated to the fashion pages of newspapers and magazines or to the scholarly works of the costume historians [. . .] Fashion is lightweight, trivial, and obsession with appearance the sign of a second-rate mind."<sup>16</sup> Eighty years after Woolf's observations, Grant still found it necessary to employ sarcasm to defend those (mainly women) who are "interested in fashion and might, quite wrongly, feel a little ashamed of this passion. Might fear that they are not going to be taken seriously [. . . unlike] our male counterparts who have mature and adult preoccupations, without which the human race could not survive, such as moving balls from one end of a grassy field to the other, with the aid of the human foot."<sup>17</sup>

Even today, this dispute remains far from resolved in mainstream, non-academic circles. For the *Times* (UK) newspaper on 18 July 2021, the Black British feminist author Otegha Uwagba, who has published on topics such as race and money, described a lifetime of having "feared being taken less seriously as a writer if I was perceived as being too fashion-conscious [. . . as] in some corners it is assumed that women who are overtly focused on fashion and how they dress must be intellectual lightweights"; whether consciously or unconsciously echoing Woolf, she wrote, "It also hasn't escaped my attention that it is fashion — an arena often categorised as a 'female' interest — that is frequently reduced to the level of mere triviality."<sup>18</sup> That she still felt it necessary to defend her interest in fashion and style speaks volumes about the ongoing precarity of the status of clothing as a "serious" matter among the British intelligentsia.

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<sup>16</sup> Linda Grant, "In Which a Woman Buys a Pair of Shoes," in *The Thoughtful Dresser* (London: Virago, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Grant, "In Which a Woman Buys a Pair of Shoes," *The Thoughtful Dresser*, pp. 10–11.

<sup>18</sup> Otegha Uwagba, "Otegha Uwagba: 'I Love Fashion—So Should I Be Taken Less Seriously?'" *Times* (UK), 18<sup>th</sup> July 2021. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/otegha-uwagba-i-love-fashion-so-should-i-be-taken-less-seriously-5zmcvk89b>

And yet the use of dress as way of defining aspects of British identity has never been more openly on display, given the opportunities that new forms of social media now offer. Indeed, the creation, curation and circulation of images of dressed bodies across multiple online platforms has provided one answer to a problem articulated nearly twenty years ago. As Chris Weedon noted in a 2004 essay on “Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Black British Writing,” “Identity is an important issue in contemporary Britain where there are ongoing struggles to redefine both ‘Britishness’ and the nature of a desirable, culturally diverse society.”<sup>19</sup> Its importance is now greater than ever, due to political factors such as the complexities of Brexit and public responses to fresh waves of immigration. Deciding for oneself what it means to be British, giving that claim visual expression through what one wears and posting the results publicly, can now be accomplished quickly and with relative ease via Instagram and its ilk. If, as Weedon has suggested, “identity [. . . is] a process, constituted at least in part in and through cultural production[,]” then dress is among the most accessible forms of cultural production through which to initiate the process of constructing identity externally, and social media has become one of the major ways to disseminate whatever has been created.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, the Internet has by no means been the sole vehicle for this or even the chief one. In their 2017 study of two international cities, *Fashion and Everyday Life: London and New York*, Buckley and Clark have emphasized the significance of the urban scene and its streets, arriving at the conclusion that “fashion is an (increasingly) integral part of everyday life in the long twentieth century[,]” for “as visual spectacle and material object” it has “offered the potential for the extraordinary to occur [. . . ] thus enabling transformation in appearance and identities.”<sup>21</sup> Buckley and Clark remind readers, moreover, that in cities such as London, “substantial social and cultural shifts occurred which challenged the location of power and created new narratives of gender, race, identity, sexuality, national identity, age and generation,” all of which produced “overlapping subjectivities,” shaped “the lived experiences of individuals[,]” and, therefore, influenced how they chose “to dress, style and fashion themselves.”<sup>22</sup> One need not travel to the V&A Museum to see a

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<sup>19</sup> Chris Weedon, “Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Black British Writing,” in *Black British Writing*, edited by R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey (Houndmill, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 74.

<sup>20</sup> Weedon, “Identity and Belonging in Contemporary Black British Writing,” *Black British Writing*, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> Cheryl Buckley and Hazel Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life: London and New York* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Buckley and Clark, *Fashion and Everyday Life: London and New York*, p. 5.



display of distinctive and often eccentric dress being used to forge a public persona. Due to the greater turnover of retail clothing in the age of “fast fashion” and the affordability of goods manufactured abroad by underpaid workers, London and its environs can sometimes seem like a veritable parade of *fashioned* British identities, fully realized yet simultaneously in flux.

### Approaches and Sources

This collection of essays reflects the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of fashion studies: art history meets Edwardian drama, popular newspapers and modernist poetry, reflecting the far-reaching significance of dress as a method of historical inquiry. The sources used here are not material, but textual; they do not concern the material reality or substance of clothing itself, but the textual significance of dress as a social and cultural marker, making a contribution to a well-established method of using novels, plays, poetry and paintings as sources of fashion history. This approach is not without its criticisms; in her 2000 study, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Social Theory*, Joanne Entwistle addressed what she saw as the failure of fashion studies to consider the bodily experience of wearing clothes, or, as she expresses it, the “totality of the dressed body in everyday life.”<sup>23</sup> By using only textual sources that ignore the body’s role in the lived reality of dress, Entwistle argues, fashion theorists have sometimes shied away from the experience of dress as a “situated bodily practice”<sup>24</sup> in favor of a more abstract approach. This apparent dismissal of the body from dress and fashion studies is indeed ironic; however, the textual approach also has its merits, and simply provides the opposite (but, as the authors in this volume would assert, an equal) approach to the subject, a means of examining the social and cultural meanings of different styles through representation rather than lived reality.

As Lou Taylor has argued, the social significance of clothing is multi-faceted, providing what he calls “a powerful analytical tool” for diverse academic disciplines.<sup>25</sup> The eclecticism of this collection is proof of this: the wide scope of geographical locations and time periods, ranging from eighteenth-century colonial Jamaica to post-war London, demonstrates the deep significance of dress, style and fashion across barriers of time, place and culture. Likewise, the diversity of sources used indicates the extent to which style and fashion have saturated different levels of society. Using literary and artistic sources is

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<sup>23</sup> Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. xi.

<sup>24</sup> Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Social Theory*, p. xi.

<sup>25</sup> Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 1.

a well-established approach to dress history and offers a fascinating insight into the “cultural meaning of clothes,”<sup>26</sup> highlighting prevailing discourses and attitudes as well as providing details of dress itself. As Taylor has suggested, literary and artistic sources provide dress historians with a deeper understanding of “the past through [their] coded signaling of gender, culture, politics and social stratum,” exemplifying what Ann Buck has called “dress in action.”<sup>27</sup>

Fine art, for instance, an obvious source for dress historians, may provide researchers with vital visual details of dress style that have otherwise been lost,<sup>28</sup> while novels, poetry and plays can help to “pinpoint period socio-economic issues”<sup>29</sup> as well as evoking detailed visual images. As Buck tells us, “[...]where dress is used to express character and illuminate social attitudes and relationships, the novel can give more. It then shows dress in action within the novelist’s world.”<sup>30</sup> The same goes for other, non-literary textual sources such as letters, diaries and autobiography, all of which are used here to further illuminate the significance of cultural depictions, offering personal insights into writers’ subjective responses to dress.

## Chapters

As Davis notes, while we are not simply “passive recipients” of our social markers, we are influenced and conditioned by “strong collective currents” which help to shape our sense of self within society, and which, in turn, fashion feeds off.<sup>31</sup> In a broad sense, then, the essays in this collection concern the tensions between the individual self and its social context, while considering the subtler ways that dress can denote identity and meaning. While these essays are intentionally eclectic, each uses clear case studies, situated within distinct contexts, to explore the theme of style and identity across time and place. Building on existing work in this field by researchers such as Buckley and Fawcett, Davies and Ribeiro, this collection interrogates what people have worn and why, examining how dress and style have worked within social systems to “fashion” a person’s sense of themselves and their social identity.

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<sup>26</sup> Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor, *The Study of Dress History*, p. 91.

<sup>30</sup> Ann Buck, “Clothes in Fact and Fiction, 1825-1865,” *Costume*, 17 (1983), p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 16-17.

Within an intersectional framework, each essay represents a link between style and its deeper ties to social identity categories. Rather than focusing on one specific time period or cultural moment, this volume moves through time and place to explore the relationship between different style practices and their social contexts, with each chapter examining specific tensions between individual identity and external structures. What results is a series of snapshots, in both close-up and panoramic visions—a collage of different images illuminating the radically diverse uses of style and its wider significance, highlighting its multiplicity within British culture. The impact of colonialism and its legacy is a significant part of British culture and its heritage, which this collection foregrounds in its diverse choice of subjects, bringing into focus issues such as race, class and gender identity. Given this legacy of British imperialism, it is essential to expand the definition of British identity beyond the borders of the British Isles; by taking this approach, this collection aims to challenge narrow, parochial definitions of British culture and to explore the role of colonialism in constructions of style and the self, a vital move as we continue to reckon with the legacies of Britain's imperial past and its role in the slave trade. As a colonial power with far-reaching global territories, Britannia's attempt to "rule the waves" has had consequences that must be explored and interrogated.

As Buckley and Fawcett remark, fashion and style can both "transgress" and "reinforce dominant modes of representation,"<sup>32</sup> a theme which this collection explores through case studies of both elite and popular style practices. By placing these chapters side by side, we not only see the far-reaching significance of dress as a cultural source, but a series of contrasts and intersections between elitist and dissident styles. Yet the relationship between the two is not as clear-cut as one might initially assume. While, in Chapter One, for instance, we find an elite class of creole planters using fashion as a means of asserting their sense of racial and class superiority within a colonial context, Chapter Four explores a very different type of elite dress culture through a case study of the aristocratic modernist poet and eccentric Edith Sitwell. Although her class privilege and sense of aristocratic hauteur situated Sitwell firmly at the top of the social scale, her status as a spinster, combined with her lavishly eccentric dress, did little to reinforce the dominant dress codes of her class. Likewise, Chapters Two, Three and Five all, implicitly or explicitly, consider this distinction between elite and popular styles, featuring, respectively, case studies of everyday dress codes in colonial Sri Lanka, working-class female fashions in the Edwardian drama *Tilda's New Hat* and dress and Jewish identity in post-war Britain.

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<sup>32</sup> Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity*, p. 7.

Chapter One of this collection focuses on the society of white creole planters in eighteenth-century colonial Jamaica,<sup>33</sup> and the use of conversation pieces as signifiers of status, of which clothing was an important part. Concentrating on objects of material culture, such as portrait paintings and fashionable dress, Chloe Northrop analyzes the construction of a British identity on the part of an image-conscious creole class, highlighting the relationship between taste, style, manners. In this essay, Northrop discusses the ways in which style can function as part of a system of oppression to promote the ideology of colonial supremacy. Through the eighteenth-century portraiture of Philip Wickstead, she examines the relationship between creole planters and what they regarded as the metropolitan center of elite British culture. By dressing themselves in fashionable clothes, the creole sitters in Wickstead's conversation pieces aligned themselves with British taste and material culture, using their garments to shape a conspicuously British identity in colonial Jamaica.

From here we travel to colonial Sri Lanka where, in Chapter Two, Ramesha Jayaneththi discusses the link between dress and Sri Lankan identity politics. Jayaneththi examines the significance of fashion as a cultural, historical, social and political phenomenon, tracing transformations in both elite and popular dress and fashions within a colonial context and looking at the role of style and aesthetics in different phases of colonial rule. As part of Sri Lanka's material culture, everyday dress could be utilized for different political purposes. As well as reinforcing the values of colonialism, national dress also became part of the symbolism of anti-colonial nationalism, playing a role in the processes of decolonization itself. In this chapter, Jayaneththi brings to the fore the relationship between dress and Sri Lankan national identity through distinct dress codes, both from the perspective of colonial rulers and nationalist rebels, while also considering the significance of both elite and populist styles. She also weighs the role of cultural artefacts, such as paintings and statuary, in the creation of these dress codes, and illustrates Buckley and Fawcett's argument that fashion and style can both "transgress" and "reinforce dominant modes of representation."<sup>34</sup>

These first two essays both utilize examples of elite cultural representations, such as Philip Wickstead's conversation pieces and images of Sri Lankan sculpture, to open up the question of the relationship between dress and

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<sup>33</sup> See David Lambert, *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity During the Age of Abolition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Cheryl Buckley and Hilary Fawcett, *Fashioning the Feminine: Representation and Women's Fashion from the Fin de Siècle to the Present* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), p. 7.

national identity, with the first chapter focusing on white, upper-class styles, and the second on the imposition of British colonial dress on the populace of Sri Lanka and subsequent nationalist resistance. While the women of Wickstead's portraits are represented as part of wider family groups, gender is an implicit theme of Chapter One, with women's status within the eighteenth-century family denoted through formal poses and dress styles. Chapter Two also explores the ways in which some women used Western dress in post-colonial Sri Lanka to assert a new kind of female identity, independent of orthodox religious doctrine or colonial authority. Nevertheless, this fashion for mini-skirts and trouser suits, though free from overt colonial power structures, also represented a continuation of Western influence.

Gender and class move to center stage in Chapter Three, which takes us to Edwardian England in the form of a critical Introduction to the 1908 one-act play *Tilda's New Hat* by George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds). In her critical essay, Petra Clark explores the play's intersecting themes of fashion, gender and class, presenting it as a fascinating case study of female identity in Edwardian society, while also looking at its reception. Included as part of the chapter is the transcript of the play which, with its dominant themes of fashion and class, is itself a creative and critical essay on Edwardian attitudes to identity and style, despite being little known by scholars and theatre audiences today.

*Tilda's New Hat* offers a feminist perspective on working-class Edwardian women's style, and it provides Clark with a distinctive case study through which to elucidate two very different approaches to fashionable dress in the central female characters of Tilda and Daisy. A neglected, if not all-but-forgotten, work of Edwardian drama, this play foregrounds discussions of dress as a significant mode of self-expression for working-class women of the period, with Tilda herself representing a flamboyant type of Edwardian femininity.

Building on the theme of individual aesthetics and identity, Chapter Four explores the link between style and singleness in interwar Britain, using the poet Edith Sitwell as its central case study. As Hope Howell Hodgkins has written, the received image of single women changed significantly after the First World War, becoming closely allied to fashionable dress and modernity.<sup>35</sup> Yet in this age of "surplus women," Sitwell built a reputation as a "formidable spinster," making a theatrical display of her own singleness which seemed as much a part of her sensibility as her poetry. While female poets, novelists and painters were encouraged to cultivate stylish, photogenic publicity profiles,

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<sup>35</sup> Hope Howell Hodgkins, *Style and the Single Girl: How Modern Women Re-Dressed the Novel, 1922-1977* (The Ohio State University Press, 2016), p. 52.

Sitwell adorned herself in flamboyant costumes, fashioning an image that reinforced her uncategorizable uniqueness and subverted the standards of normative femininity. Using the personal diaries and correspondence of her wide circle of literary friends, this chapter examines the ways in which Sitwell's outlandish sense of style reinforced the perception of her as an eccentric spinster.

Chapter Five foregrounds the notion of the British Jewish *flâneuse* in the aftermath of the Second World War. Challenging the notion of the *flâneur* as essentially masculine, Margaret Stetz builds upon Lauren Elkin's 2016 study *Flâneuse* and, from a feminist perspective, turns to Linda Grant's collection of essays, *The Thoughtful Dresser* (2009), to reveal how British Jewish identity has been expressed through the relationship between women's shopping and urban culture. While shopping has traditionally been coded as a superficial female pursuit that links women to materiality and consumer culture, Stetz affirms Grant's claim that its aesthetic aspects, and the ability of clothes to transform one's identity, serve as a means of observing and participating in the urban scene. As Grant suggests, moreover, shopping and fashionable dress have been necessary social instruments, especially in the twentieth century, for Jewish women in Britain whose right to feel themselves part of the nation has often been contested and challenged.

Chapters Three, Four and Five all feature women's testimony about clothes, either theirs or other women's, in real or fictional settings. While Tilda's flamboyant feather hats and flashy jewelry align her with the gleefully gaudy end of Edwardian womenswear, Edith Sitwell's style is far more of an anti-fashion statement. Linda Grant, on the other hand, discusses her own style, and that of the novelist Anita Brookner and clothing retailer Catherine Hill, in the context of their Jewish identity. Recalling a single red high-heeled shoe among the discarded footwear on display at the museum at Auschwitz, Grant experiences an overpowering desire to purchase a pair of flamboyant, impractical pumps in order to assert her own identity through what she wears, and to fashion her body as a visual statement in the British urban landscape, in a way that cannot be ignored.

Each of these protagonists views clothing primarily as a means of pleasing herself; yet, given their radically different backgrounds, this means different things to each of them. All, however, rebel against their mothers' ideas of how girls should dress, from Tilda's gentle, teasing conflict with her mother (a clear case of generational difference) to Sitwell's dramatic defiance of early-twentieth-century dress codes and Grant's rejection of her mother's ladylike, New Look glamour in favor of the bohemian, eccentric chic of the 1970s. Recalling the increasingly Western-influenced styles of Sri Lankan women in Chapter Two, and standing in stark contrast to the elitist conformity to

colonial ideals discussed in Chapter One, these latter chapters give a central place to women's experiences of dress. The horrors of the Holocaust, so central to Grant's discussion of dress and her sense of identity as a British Jewish woman, are juxtaposed here with the depictions of enslaved men and boys in Wickstead's conversation pieces; though presented as marginal figures at the edges of these polished society portraits, they demand our attention and hold our collective gaze.

In this collection of essays, we see how style has functioned through time as an expression of self, both through individualist self-expression and as a wider representation of identity in response to social and political developments in British history. Embracing topics as various, yet significant, as eighteenth-century portraiture, Sri Lankan dress culture, Edwardian working-class glamour, early-twentieth-century modernism and post-Holocaust Jewish *flânerie*, *Fashioning the Self* offers an eclectic approach to contemporary fashion studies. We hope that, by foregrounding issues of gender, class, ethnicity and race in these diverse contexts, this collection will contribute to the wider understanding of fashion and style as significant markers of identity, rich with both personal and political meaning.

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