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Publication details, including open access policy
and instructions for contributors:

<http://imaginationsglendon.yorku.ca>

Fashion Cultures and Media: Canadian Perspectives

December 28, 2018

To cite this article:

Sark, Katrina. "The Canadian Fashion Scholars Network." *Imaginations*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2018: Web (date accessed), pp. 7-13. DOI 10.17742/IMAGE.FCM.9.2.2.

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.FCM.9.2.2>



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THE CANADIAN FASHION SCHOLARS NETWORK

KATRINA SARK

Studying fashion culture entails examining representations, networks, mediations, imaginations, and scenes in their urban contexts. The Urban Chic book series, which I co-founded and have published in, develops a methodology of fashion culture as the foundational amalgamation of a city's fashion identity, history, industry, manufacturing practices, labour conditions, gender and identity issues, scenes, and media representations. Analyzing fashion cultures locationally requires an understanding of fashion and culture as complex frameworks that are multifaceted and contradictory and often challenge our (inter)disciplinary training as historians, theorists, literary and media scholars, and feminists.

As a feminist cultural analyst, I look at various types of cultural production across a range of media to examine representations of empowerment and power struggles. For instance, the growing representation of warrior women in mainstream cinema—for example, the action movies *Wonder Woman* (dir. Patty Jenkins, 2017) and *Atomic Blonde* (dir. David Leitch, 2017) have protagonists whose clothes, shoes, and accessories are mobilized and incorporated into their body as armour—takes on added significance at a time when the U.S., Canada, and the globe experience a resurgence of women's movements, protest, organizing, and political and social mobilization after the defeat of a female U.S. presidential candidate in November 2016—for example, the global Women's Marches that began in January 2017 and the #metoo and #timesup campaigns of 2017 and 2018. The

figure of Wonder Woman, as Jaclyn Marcus explores in depth in her article in this issue, has been claimed and re-claimed both by corporate capitalism and feminists alike. Wonder Women graced the cover of the feminist *Ms. Magazine*, was made the U.N. Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls, and then re-branded in Petty Jenkin's film in the gaze-friendly person of Gal Gadot. Marcus reads fashion and clothing in these mainstream representations through the metaphors of armour (denoting protective powers or even invincibility), as weapons (used for defense and offense), but also as codes of hyper-femininity in contrast to gender-defying strength and power narratives. It is also significant that these representations of empowerment in mainstream culture are still limited to white cis-women. Intersectional representations of empowerment through clothing and fashion (of people of colour, transgender protagonists, the LGBTQ+ community, Muslim women, Indigenous women, women with varying abilities, and others) are still very underrepresented, and are the topics of my forthcoming edited volumes on *Ethical Fashion and Empowerment* (in 2019) and *Fashion, Protest and Empowerment* (in 2020).

It was my interest in ethics and empowerment that led me to create the Canadian Fashion Scholars Network in 2014. A network, in today's digital world, implies instant access, connectivity, communication, exchange of ideas and resources as well as possibilities of creation and collaboration. The technological innovations of the past decade have made it easier to stay

connected through social-networking platforms and create online communication and research hubs that foster creative and academic collaborations. Technological innovation also makes it possible to create new networks relatively quickly and inexpensively, without relying on expert programmers or IT support. One can build net-



conversations. It is commonly accepted that communities are only as strong as the collective efforts of their individual participants. They require organizational leadership, as well as communal contribution and dedication. Professional and academic associations and organizations usually come together on an annual basis to ex-



Figures 1 and 2 Colour Block Party at the Montreal Musee des Beaux Arts with designs by local designers, and Montreal Fashion Week 2012, photos by K. Sark

works that spread widely and even globally in conjunction with other established networks and social media platforms.

Forming a community, by contrast, is more about bringing together people with common goals and needs, addressing these collectively and pragmatically. It requires time, effort, and planning, and, in lieu of available funding, a lot of creative thinking, fundraising and volunteering. First and foremost, community-building requires people to come together on a regular basis to establish connections and conversations in person. Neurologically, we are wired to connect and empathize with people, which is essential in community building and in finding creative solutions to collective goals, but this can only happen in the off-line world through non-mediated interpersonal communication, mutual understanding, common values and needs, collective brainstorming, and solution-based

change ideas that further knowledge, strengthen the field, and foster and sustain a sense of community among participants.

No such community existed in the field of fashion in Canada until 2014; the individual members or clusters of this community were present but fragmented across the country, not always communicating with each other, often not even aware of each other's work, and certainly not gathering in person on a regular basis to exchange ideas or to collaborate with other scholars and professionals from all across Canada.

My first experience working collaboratively and trying to establish a sense of community through research came when Susan Ingram (a contributor to this issue) and I decided to publish a book on Berlin fashion together, out of fashion research I conducted for Susan while completing my M.A. on academic exchange in Berlin.

Out of this productive collaboration grew a series of conference papers, articles, a book, and eventually a book series that began with our first volume *Berliner Chic: A Locational History of Berlin Fashion* (2011). The second book, *Wiener Chic: A Locational History of Vienna Fashion* (2013) was co-authored by Susan Ingram and Markus Reisenleitner, who is now the ed-



Figures 3 and 4 Montreal Fashion Week 2012, and Vancouver Fashion Week, 2015, photos by K. Sark

itor-in-chief of *Imaginations*. The third volume was *Montréal Chic: A Locational History of Montreal Fashion* (2016), which I co-authored with Sara Danièle Bélanger Michaud, a francophone Comparative Literature scholar, who contributed the “Symbols” and “Music” chapters and helped map out the French literature on Montreal fashion. I focused my research on the history of fashion in Montreal, the fashion collections and exhibitions housed at the local museums, the complex fashion economy, the vibrant fashion scene with incredibly talented designers, the intersections of fashion and film, as well as the emerging field and community of fashion and technology based in Montreal. Through this work, I not only gained a better understanding and appreciation of the Canadian fashion landscape but also recognized the need to connect and generate visibility for the tremendous work of others. During my research for this book, I

I founded the Canadian Fashion Scholars Network in 2014, while completing my PhD at McGill University in Montreal, in the hope of bringing together scholars, curators, and fashion professionals from across the country in order to build a scholarly community and encourage nation-wide collaboration and exchange. I soon discovered that while small and localized communities of fashion scholars and professionals had formed all across Canada, especially around universities, fashion schools, and fashion collections housed in museums, universities, and independent archives, there was no nation-wide network or collective interaction. In October 2014, I organized the first Canadian Fashion Symposium at the McCord Museum in Montreal. It featured the work of twenty-two scholars and curators from across Canada. The Symposium was open to the public and very well attended, bringing together francophone

and anglophone scholars, as well as many members of Montreal's vibrant fashion scene. The overwhelmingly positive response to this Symposium from all participants and attendees confirmed the collective need for this network, inspired further events and community-building efforts, and established the beginning of a new community.

The following year, in November 2015, we reconvened at the Museum of Vancouver for our second annual Fashion Symposium, where I also had the opportunity to curate and organize my first fashion show, entitled *Fashion Avant-Garde: Now and Then*. This time I collaborated with



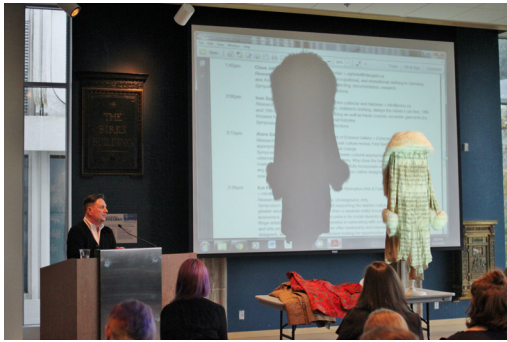
Figure 5 First Fashion Symposium at the McCord Museum in Montreal, 2014, photo by John Cruz

the museum, Vancouver's avant-garde, eco-conscious, and Indigenous fashion designers, and the renowned fashion collectors Ivan Sayers and Claus Jahnke. The historical and vintage couture pieces from Ivan's collection were complemented thematically, visually, technically, or conceptually by the new contemporary and innovative designs made in Vancouver. The fashion show juxtaposed the cutting edge of fashion design of today with older styles, as well as high tech and low-tech fashion trends and concepts. The show culminated with *Electric Heart*, an innovative design by Suzi Webster (the Vancouver-based artist and designer featured as the guest artist in

this volume, whose work deserves to be known across Canada), a work that visualizes and displays the transmitted heartbeat of the wearer (or their partner) through bluetooth transmission onto a LED screen on a tailored dress. The show was a great success and furthered our goal of fostering and sustain a community of scholars, designers, and organizers. That year, I also designed and launched our website and social media platforms, which I created to highlight the work of Canadian fashion scholars, their publications, exhibitions, programs, projects, and to assist in communication and collaboration.

The third Fashion Symposium took place at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto in October 2016, with twenty-seven Canadian participants presenting their work on fashion. It was the largest gathering to date and included new and returning scholars, fashion curators and archivists, textile and fashion professionals, designers, and, as always, graduate students. Alternating the locations of the annual symposia between eastern and western Canada allows new participants to discover the network and to present their work. So far, we have been extremely fortunate to be hosted by Canadian museums that have fashion collections, fashion exhibitions, and a mandate to attract new and younger audiences, that are not only interested in art but fashion as well. That year, I collaborated with Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim on compiling a *Bibliography of Canadian fashion* to help fashion scholars in Canada do their research and to map out the growing scholarship in this field.

In September 2017, we returned to Montreal, where we were hosted by the Montreal Fine Arts Museum, with a special presentation by curator Thierry-Maxime Loriot and a tour of his Jean-Paul Gaultier "Love is Love" exhibition. We also got a tour of the studio subTela fashion and



Figures 6 and 7 Second Fashion Symposium at the Museum of Vancouver with Claus Jahnke, Ivan Sayers, and Suzi Webster as presenters, 2015, photos by K. Sark



Figure 8 Third Fashion Symposium at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, 2016, photo by K. Sark



Figures 9 and 10 Fourth Fashion Symposium at the Montreal Musee des Beaux Arts and the tour of the Jean Paul Gaultier Love is Love exhibit with curator Thierry-Maxime Loriot in 2017, photos by K. Sark

technology labs at Concordia University, organized by Barbara Layne and Joanna Berzowska. That year, we began to collaboratively conceptualize ways to showcase and represent the work of the members of the network at national and international conferences, to promote and circulate existing publications, and to generate new publication venues for new research. I introduced our *Events* page, which I update regularly with announcements of events, exhibitions, and workshops all across Canada, and our *Call for Submissions* page, which includes calls for chapters and volume submissions, including this special issue of *Imaginations*. I also created a page to showcase our students' work and projects that they designed in our fashion courses. With the growth of the network and the website, I decided to actively shift focus towards creating more platforms for fashion publications in Canada.

Our fifth anniversary Symposium took place in September 2018 at the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta, in collaboration with the newly relocated Royal Alberta Museum in downtown Edmonton. Both institutions house incredibly rich collections of clothing and textiles pertinent to Canadian history. Julia Petrov, the Curator of Western Canadian History at the Royal Alberta Museum and a

contributor to this issue, showed us rare and important pieces of clothing from her fashion collection. We also got a special tour of the Anne Lambert Clothing and Textile Collection housed at the Human Ecology Department. Many of the participants that year have contributed to this fashion issue of *Imaginations* and other collections and volumes I am currently editing.

Since its conception five years ago, the Canadian Fashion Scholars Network has grown substantially in participation, collaboration, exchange of ideas, creative projects, and now publications. Our *Resources* page now includes a *List of Fashion Schools*, both private and public, in Canada. Our membership continues to grow each year, attracting scholars, students, curators and fashion professionals working on Canadian fashion in and outside of Canada.

Next year, in September 2019, we will be hosted by the School of Fashion at Ryerson University in collaboration with the Textile Museum of Canada in Toronto. I look forward to expanding the network to include the new generation of students in the graduate programs at Ryerson and other universities in the GTA, and to collaborating with the Ryerson Centre for Fashion Diversity and Social Change.



Figures 11 and 12 Anne Lambert Clothing and Textile Collection at the Department of Human Ecology at the University of Alberta, 2018, photos by K. Sark



Figures 13 and 14 Toronto Fashion District, 2014, photo by K. Sark and Claus Jahnke's collection, Vancouver 2015, photo by K. Sark