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**IMAGE  
AVAILABLE  
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# Clothes at Rest: Elements for a Sociology of the Wardrobe

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Saulo B. Cwerner was born in Brazil where he studied Social Sciences at the University of São Paulo. He has an MA in Cultural Studies and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Lancaster, England, where he is currently a part-time tutor. With published articles on the subjects of time, migration, and cosmopolitanism, he has also been writing on fashion, consumption, identity, and material culture.

There is a noticeable and significant gap in the vast literature on fashion and clothing across the social sciences and the humanities. Whatever the analytical focus or theoretical perspective employed, it is almost invariably taken for granted that clothes are being worn: they are viewed as existing outside, in the open, and *in movement*. However, for most of their useful lives, clothes are stored away, unseen, even forgotten: in short, clothes “spend” most of their time *at rest*. They are left in particular places, either readily available, at hand, or lost in the deep recesses of the wardrobe.

This article endeavors to redress this situation to some degree by looking closely at the wardrobe. The word “wardrobe” has two separate, although interrelated, meanings: it refers to the total set of clothes that

an individual person (group or organization) has, as well as to the constructed physical space where clothes are stored. I am chiefly concerned with the latter meaning here. Storage units for clothes and bodily accessories do come in various forms, shapes and sizes: dressing rooms, fitted or free-standing wardrobes, chests of drawers, ottoman chests, storage boxes, tables, etc. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will use the term “wardrobe” to refer to such diversity. However, although the wardrobe is more readily understood as a definite object, I wish to argue that it also commands a set of distinctive and identifiable *spatial practices*: forms of structuring, delimiting, and organizing clothes, as well as the social meanings and identities articulated by these forms. Therefore, singular wardrobes or wardrobe spaces will be understood as elements in a complex web of *wardrobe practices* that I wish to analyze. It is my contention that these practices should form a fundamental dimension of dress and fashion theories, one that has received scant attention so far.<sup>1</sup>

This article provides a tentative theoretical formulation about the meanings and spaces of wardrobes in everyday dress practices. I wish to show that the storage habits and procedures associated with clothes are intimately related to the meanings, functions, and identities activated by dress and fashion. The wardrobe articulates, both spatially and temporally, a set of material and symbolic practices that are fundamental for the constitution of selfhood, identity, and well-being.

### **Clothes Behind Doors**

In this section, I spell out some of the reasons why the wardrobe has been neglected by dress and fashion theories, and why we should take this most inconspicuous object seriously. In his analyses of the presentation of the self in public situations, Goffman spoke of “identity kits.” These, according to him, consist in various objects such as clothes and make-up equipment, but also “an accessible, secure place to store these supplies and tools” (Goffman 1965: 246). This insightful proposition, that the accoutrements of the self include spaces and objects that are not necessarily on display for others, has remained largely undeveloped in social and cultural theory. Identity, we are so frequently told, is what one carries around; it is related to what one *appears* to be. But many, if not most, objects and signs that people use in order to express social meaning and identities (individuality, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, sub-culture, age, and so on) *have* to be stored away somehow when they are not in use. Indeed, we live in an era when social and cultural identities have become complex, multiple, dynamic and, to some extent, strategic (Hall 1990). In such a context, people need a safely stored *pool* of identity tokens to choose from in their weekly, daily, and even hourly changes of self-presentation. Clothes and other body adornments, of course, are at the center of this pool.

The conceptual invisibility of wardrobes is best revealed by the fact that theories of fashion have focused almost exclusively on *why* people dress the way they do, while very little has been said about *how* they manage to get dressed in the first place. To put it in other words, the emphasis has been on the communicative aspect of clothes, with a veil of silence thrown over the taken-for-granted spatial practices that underpin the sartorial system. How people acquire clothes is a theme that has occasionally been discussed: shopping in department stores or second-hand bazaars, for instance, has a lot to do with people's identities and social positions. However, the relationship between fashion as a code system and the provision and circulation of clothes through various market-places, social networks, and individual households is still to be fully documented and theorized.

Theories of fashion have also insisted on the intimate relationship between body and dress. Craik, for instance, has written that "codes of dress are technical devices which articulate the relationship between a particular body and its lived milieu, the space occupied by bodies and constituted by bodily actions" (Craik 1994: 4). And Calefato has simply argued that fashion is nothing less than "the body's appearing in the world" (Calefato 1997: 71). But it is generally assumed that bodies are always already clothed, and that clothes only exist in so far as they are being donned. Craik's lived milieu is conspicuous by the absence of the wardrobe.

And yet, wardrobe practices coalesce at those particular times during which individuals are typically not engaged in social interaction. The emphasis of fashion theory on the display of clothes has made it overlook various rhythms and times that determine people's dressing *and* undressing practices. To be sure, many theories have highlighted the temporality of fashion: its ephemerality (Lipovetsky 1994), transience, and obsolescence. Indeed, fashion has often been theorized *as* process (Sproles 1985), and Wargnier has more recently examined the various temporal aspects of strategies developed by fashion leaders (Wargnier 1995). However, the time-scales that have found their way into fashion studies are usually those of the fashion system taken as a whole: changes in styles, materials, practices over months, years, decades or generations. What is relatively forgotten is the daily routine and the intimate duration of choosing, changing, caring for, and disposing of one's own, and other people's, clothes. This is one of the main reasons why we should focus on the wardrobe as a set of *spatio-temporal* practices that condition our relationship with clothes. Indeed, the modern wardrobe not only testifies to the ephemeral character of fashion codes, but also articulates, in the living space of the home, some of the commanding principles (or ideologies) of fashion: choice, diversity, individuality, experimentation, *bricolage*.

To sum up, the emphasis on (almost obsession with) display, appearance, presentation, communication and movement has created a certain

bias in dress and fashion studies that effectively discriminates against clothes behind doors. The meaning of their still existence in the darkness of storage units is thus gravely overlooked and completely taken for granted. Is this also the attitude of ordinary people in their everyday lives? Do they take the private existence of their clothes for granted? Most people<sup>2</sup> seem to spend a great deal of their time arranging, sorting out, washing, transporting, storing, choosing, and trying on their clothes around their homes. They may sense that these activities are inseparable parts of the communicative function of fashion. It is time that these practices (and some of the identity tools associated with them) are rendered visible.

### **Consuming Clothes**

In the following sections, I suggest a number of theoretical tools for analyzing the wardrobe. My concern here is with situating wardrobe practices in relation to wider social phenomena, but also with relating these to diverse elements of dress and fashion theories. Wardrobe practices stand at the confluence of a number of modern social processes, without which we would not be able to understand people's relationships with their clothes.

My analytical framework consists of looking separately at a number of dimensions of wardrobe practices. Each of these dimensions is related to particular institutions that determine, in part, the meaning and materiality of dress and fashion. These dimensions are *consumption*, *organization*, *individualization*, *care*, and *imagination*. The wardrobe is a set of spatial/practical devices that articulates these dimensions of modern sartorial life in various ways. In other words, I do not wish to claim that there are standard, universal practices associated with the wardrobe. What I want to uncover are the defining dimensions of social sartorial life that are necessarily articulated by wardrobe practices. The mode of these articulations and the individual character of each of those dimensions obviously vary both across space and time.

First, the wardrobe is a central aspect of modern forms of *consumption*. Marx noted that wealth in capitalist societies is expressed by "an immense collection of commodities" (Marx 1976). Clothes are among people's favorite collectibles in modern society. Clothes have distinct biographies: they are born out of raw materials (which are often industrialized goods themselves) being worked upon by labor, tools and machines. As commodities, they are distributed (to shops or wholesalers) and displayed, before appealing to individual consumers, who then *bring them home*. The affluence of modern consumption bestows upon individuals and families an immensity of objects, which cannot be all consumed/used at once. Like water and food in most human societies, modern consumption patterns necessitate a set of storage practices and devices. Storage is an

essential aspect of consumption: by protecting and organizing them, it allows for the maintenance and circulation of objects through time. Storage practices reveal that the use value of commodities is more complex than their actual use might suggest. Stored clothes may remain “dormant” for years before their use is dictated by new circumstances.

Modern patterns of consumption are diverse. They reflect the various social commitments of individuals in everyday life and on special occasions. Dress, of course, is an important marker of status and identity in social settings, which means that the wardrobe must shelter the diversity of clothes and adornments that are used on a daily as well as on an occasional basis. The wardrobe is, on the one hand, a constant reminder of the rule of fashion over consumption. Much of what is *in* it is that which is sanctioned by the empire of fashion. On the other hand, the wardrobe is also a sign of the multiplicity and ephemerality of fashion and dress codes: it houses not only the up-to-date dress requirements, but also relics of the sartorial past. Because fashion is both diverse and temporary, the wardrobe also becomes a station for sartorial waste: it stores not only the clothes in which we dress, but also those that we almost inevitably decide to throw or give away. It is not surprising that *dejunking* is increasingly becoming a part of contemporary household consumption, “an almost spiritual movement in the USA,” even begetting a new generation of “clutter consultants” (Rice 2000: 46). Therefore, the wardrobe crucially helps to define one’s levels of charity and reciprocity, not to mention one’s reluctance to get rid of, and anxiety about getting rid of, old clothes.

The wardrobe is also an object of consumption itself, as part of modern home furniture. As such, the various forms of the wardrobe are determined by the values and needs that regulate the use of furniture in general in the house: functionality, aesthetics, positioning, harmony, among several other aspects of contemporary interior decoration. Wardrobes not only house fashion, but they are also objects of taste and fashion in the house. Above all, however, wardrobes should be seen as a technological form of organizing clothes and adornments in the home. The next section examines this crucial dimension of wardrobe practices.

### **Reasonable Wardrobes**

The wardrobe is, perhaps, a leading example of the modern *rational organization of space*. It translates the need for storage into a series of classifications, the result of which is the increasing rationalization of the domestic space. It is an important feature of a contemporary material culture characterized by order, practicality, and design. The modern wardrobe consists of an amazing range of devices, including dressing rooms, closets, alcoves, free-standing or fitted wardrobes, boxes, baskets, ottomans, trunks, chests, tallboys, cabinets, cupboards, shelving systems,

drawers, commodes, dressing tables, shoe racks, valet stands, tables, hangers and rails. All these objects are related, in one way or another, to the domestic transportation, storage and display of clothes, as are mirrors and, to a lesser extent, suitcases, trunks, handbags, and backpacks.

These objects and devices greatly influence the way we experience modern sartorial space. From large dressing-rooms to the smallest storage box, the wardrobe organizes the space of the bedroom by creating smaller chunks of empty, usually enclosed space. In eighteenth-century Paris, the wardrobe often was a secondary room (often called *hovel* or *bouge*) adjoining the bedroom, a place for storage, rest and for even performing one's toilet (Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991: 64). Clothes were usually placed in large chests. Purpose-used closets became more widespread towards the middle of the eighteenth century, while chests slowly disappeared: "in place of the traditional means of storing, done without sorting, by simply piling things together, the closet substituted a more logical and methodical system" (Pardailhé-Galabrun 1991: 107).

The wardrobe has, therefore, become a space of ordering: small drawers for socks and underwear, larger ones for sportswear, large shelves for jumpers and sweaters, rails for the vertical storage and display of shirts, jackets, suits, dresses, skirts or coats, racks or pockets for shoes, boxes or ottomans for linen. Like filing cabinets in modern offices or the pharmacist's tiny drawers, the bedroom wardrobe simultaneously reflects and enables the system of sartorial classifications. For this purpose, it creates artificial surfaces, walls, and enclosures, as well as alternative spatial devices such as rails, hangers and hooks. Contemporary storage devices constitute, to a large measure, building-blocks that allow various combinations. Stacking, piling, and hanging constitute the dominant elements of a logic of the wardrobe.

The obsession with order and space management may appear to many nowadays as a relic of a long-gone modern age, replaced by a postmodern penchant for playfulness and individual experimentation. The world of contemporary household storage does not seem to pay lip-service to that opinion. There has been a surge in the number of companies offering domestic storage services and products ranging from advice to planning, seasonal storage, and furniture. A number of 'closet consultants' have begun to tackle people's daily problems with space organization. One of them, Dawna Walter, of the London-based firm The Holding Company, sums up the rationalist philosophy of the wardrobe:

People are analysing their lives. They're taking stock. You can waste so much time *not* being organised. It might take two hours to sort out your wardrobe, but that will save you 10 minutes a day you might normally spend looking for stuff. It is important that you are in control of your possessions rather than them possessing you (Blanchard 1999:76; original emphasis).

**Figure 1**  
Hanging shelves and the  
flexible, mobile exploration of  
space.

**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARDCOPY**

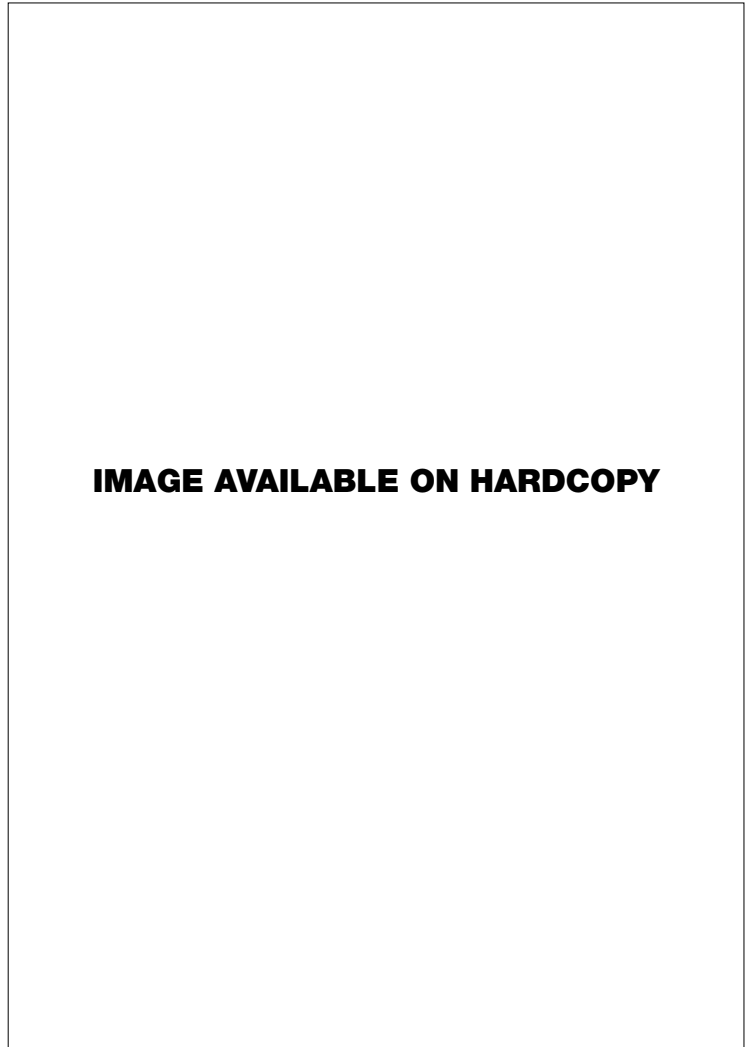
And Ivan Levy, who opened the first UK store of San Francisco-based California Closets in October 1999, summarizes the method: “It’s about simplifying your life—creating storage space you never knew you had” (ibid.). The wardrobe’s conquest of domestic space has also meant the spread of flexible and mobile storage devices such as hanging shelves, usually made of soft materials such as canvas.

Despite the spatial intimations of much of modern design, the wardrobe defines a certain spatiality for storage practices that is not necessarily obeyed. In fact, people’s everyday wardrobe practices are much more chaotic than furniture designers might expect. Putting clothes away is a



**Figure 2**

The "rail and blanket" method:  
simplicity in improvised  
(dis)organization.



time-consuming activity, and clothes are often left on floors, beds and other items of furniture, or they may be stacked randomly within the wardrobe, defying its methodical space. The resulting chaos may express ideals of freedom, casual style or lack of interest. Therefore, if the wardrobe is the method to keep clothes organized and *at hand*, its actual use also turns it into a space of darkness and forgetfulness. How many times have we experienced the discovery of a piece of clothing long deemed lost? But whatever is behind many people's unruly wardrobe practices, this generally perceived chaos can only be understood against the background of the wardrobe's normalizing power. Indeed, storage experts have explicitly condemned this general lack of space management and

sought to “discipline” our chaotic actions: “Get out of the habit of shedding worn clothes on a chair, or worse still, the floor! Put clothes away—they will last longer and look better . . . A closet’s contents need disciplined editing; be ruthless in getting rid of clothes you don’t wear” (Owen and Gorton 1998: 64).

### **Personal Enclosures**

The third major dimension of the wardrobe is its use as an efficient vehicle of modern *individualization*. The bedroom has become, at least in more affluent societies, the refuge of the personal self, and clothing has been instrumental in fashioning this personality. In this process, the wardrobe has become a depository of the signs and images that have largely defined the self throughout the years, constituting a kind of sartorial biography. As bedrock of intimacy, identity, and memory, the wardrobe developed into an *alter ego* of modern personae. Most people would not mind others poking into their fridges, cupboards, or display units, but would find it intrusive if they ventured into their wardrobes uninvited. Wardrobes enclose not only clothes, but the personal biographies associated with them. Unlike many other objects in the home, clothes are usually for personal consumption, helping to track the individuality of each of the members of the family (which is a fundamental stage in the general process of societal individualization). They could also be easily read as particular biographies that emphasize significant moments and dimensions of the life-course: birthdays, engagements, various relationships and rites of passage. In the wardrobe, clothes turn into fossilized memories of a person’s past.

Open the wardrobe and what we see is a kaleidoscope of colors, textiles, and forms, all packed together along the three axes of space: color barcodes, denoting the self and its identities. For fashion’s sake, it would be ideal if everyone’s wardrobe could simulate a typical shop window. Thesander analyzed the rise of the display window with its mannequins, noting that dresses are deemed to look much better on a figure that displays them the way they would look in real life than they do on hangers (Thesander 1997: 74–7). A huge dressing-room full of mannequins might then be the ideal way of storing our clothes!

The modern wardrobe is the space where the multiplicity of contemporary identity unfolds. The various roles that people perform in daily life, their tastes, needs, and sense of belonging to social and cultural groups: these are instantly activated as soon as the wardrobe doors or drawers are opened. The wardrobe houses secrets and belongings that largely define who people are. If fashion and dress are conceptualized in terms of language and communication (Lurie 1981; Davis 1985), then wardrobes must be seen as the individual vocabularies that underpin that system.

### The Private Lives of Clothes

The wardrobe must also be seen as the *art of caring* for one's clothes and adornments. Clothes are not simply abstract elements of a system of meanings and communication. They are primarily material objects that possess material lives or biographies. Wilson has reminded us that fashion is not only about language and communication: "it is also tactile, visual, it is about touching, surfaces, colours, shapes" (Wilson 1992: 14). One can crucially add that it is also about smell and hearing. Clothes indeed create a number of *sensescapes* that are fundamental for their communicative role. In order to *signify* a sign must be in good shape. That is, the signification of dress and fashion is intimately related to the materiality of clothes. This is such a basic fact of life and is rarely taken for granted.

A number of activities in the home are associated with caring for one's clothes: washing, ironing, sorting, folding, and storing, among others. Fashion is not only about body, dress, symbol, and appearance; it also involves a complex process of domestic management. These practices coalesce around the wardrobe as both the destination and the origin of clothes that are worn inside and outside the home. Therefore, I wish to include *all* these activities in the category of wardrobe practices. The materiality of fashion also calls for differing levels of knowledge about the care of clothes. This knowledge, which is fundamentally gendered in modern societies, conceives of clothes almost as "living things" that need to be nourished and protected from various environmental factors. Light, shade, humidity and temperature are among those factors that affect the "lives" of clothes, and that are passively, or can be actively, mobilized in their daily (re)production.

Fashion theory has systematically neglected this dimension, which is actually very important in the way that (gendered and aged) subjects relate to their clothes. The intimacy of this relationship is another of the many facets of the wardrobe. It is in its spaces that we are able fully to feel the softness and smoothness of different fabrics (not surprisingly, often using our cheeks as the major sense organ). It is there that we can impart our favorite smells to the clothes that we wear, disguising the washing-powder smell with that *pot-pourri* left in the wardrobe. It is also in the silence of the bedroom that we can hear the gentle, almost imperceptible noises of our clothes when we try them on. Literature and film, in this case, have taken the lead over the social sciences to show how much people care for their clothes.

### Dreaming Wardrobes

Wardrobes are also a peculiarly popular site of *imagination*. A whole series of activities coalesce around the wardrobe. In popular culture, for instance, the wardrobe is a favorite hiding-place: from children's

hide-and-seek games to the cinematic fascination with people who trespass on others' bedrooms and hide in the wardrobe when they suddenly come back. The wardrobe is also the privileged site of dressing and undressing. These are among the first full adult skills learned by children. Dressing also begets an intimate form of sociability among members of a family, close friends and lovers. The wardrobe mediates between fashion and body by positing a particular site for sexual discovery. Mirrored wardrobes, for instance, are perhaps as close as modern furniture has got to bridging the gap between identity and narcissism. Dressing, undressing, and changing clothes, at once personal and social activities, cannot fail to communicate the intimate relationship between dress and sexuality. It is not surprising that wardrobes so often symbolize a very modern ambivalence, signifying at once a hiding-place *and* a place of liberation.

But there is another, perhaps more important, sense through which wardrobes are vehicles for the imagination. If fashion is about self-expression and identity formation, then the wardrobe symbolizes the processual nature of the effort: to create or present a self is a laborious and ambivalent process. The wardrobe reveals one's sartorial limitations and, as a consequence, the arbitrary nature of fashion and dress codes. But it also enables one's creativity and struggle to overcome the "tyranny" of fashion.

It has been said that fashion codes are, in the main, rather ambiguous. Davis wrote that their meanings are always context-dependent, and suffer from a degree of "undercoding," with an absence of reliable rules (Davis 1985: 24). Meanings are, in other words, "based on the perception of specific choices (or absence of choice) as to material, colour, cut, newness" (Harvey 1995: 12). At the wardrobe, the individual orchestrates the dressing of her/his body; but, because the meanings of clothes are both shifting and ambivalent, the wardrobe is the site of intense experimentation with body and dress.

Because the wardrobe is a kind of clothing library, it could be regarded as the guardian of free thinking as far as dress is concerned. In its privacy, it provides the elements for numerous permutations away from the expecting eyes of the public. Crucially, the wardrobe is the site of hidden cross-dressing. It is the place of domestic carnival; in short, it is a liminal space. There, rather than acting as passive recipients of trickled-down codes and meanings, people are the agents of their sartorial culture. By picking from various items of clothing stored in the wardrobe, they behave like *bricoleurs*, experimenting with bits and parts, and forming renewed packages for body and self.

### **Conclusion, or, Putting It All Away . . .**

In this article, the wardrobe was revealed as a crucial place for the understanding of the dynamics of dress and fashion. A great number of

**Figure 3**

Discard or restitution?  
Wardrobe doors as a liminal  
space.

**IMAGE AVAILABLE ON HARDCOPY**

activities coalesce around the space of the wardrobe. These *wardrobe practices* are part and parcel of the process whereby clothes come to *signify* particular meanings in the public realm. Fashion and dress theory must incorporate an understanding of whatever happens in the intimate spaces of the bedroom, where our clothes are laid to rest so that they can see another day. I have suggested an analytical framework for the study of wardrobe practices. This framework focuses on the spatialities and temporalities that are embedded in those practices, and these are intended to

highlight some of the routine, taken-for-granted aspects of the fashion process. Once the theoretical import of wardrobes is restored, what are its methodological implications for the study of dress and fashion? In other words, how, then, should we empirically study the wardrobe?

The most favored ways of tackling the issue of domestic space and material culture have been interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. People are thus asked to describe their relationship to those objects in a diversity of ways. Illuminating as they may be, they are still not the “real thing.” Some researchers have tried to observe directly what people do in their homes (for instance, by videotaping domestic activities); but this method is obviously fraught with problems in the case of wardrobe practices. One could alternatively look at items of popular culture (films and soap operas, for instance) and look at popular representations of the wardrobe and the practices to be found therein. And similar results could be drawn from analyses of wardrobe furniture as they figure in, for instance, shopping catalogs and home furnishing magazines. These could also reveal interesting design features as well as the place of the wardrobe within discourses about interior decoration. All the methods described above are useful, but have limitations. The best way forward, perhaps, is to combine them productively.

Empirical studies of wardrobe practices are needed in order to specify the determinations that affect the way that particular people, or social and cultural groups, relate to clothes in the intimacy of their homes. I have provided a general framework for the study of wardrobes and for analyzing their relationship to other aspects of modern societies, as well as their impact on the fashion process. But there is a lot still to be said about the particular ways through which categories such as gender, age, ethnicity, and physical ability, are affected by and, in turn, affect wardrobe practices.

## Notes

1. This article is concerned exclusively with domestic wardrobes. Therefore, the practices that it sets out to analyze are those to be found in the enclosed space of modern households. Despite the enormous diversity in household structure that exists in contemporary societies (I am thinking mainly of the “West”), the range of wardrobe practices can still be analyzed according to a common set of principles. Thus, economic inequalities, for instance, which are reflected in housing conditions, do have an impact on the variability of people’s relationships with clothes and fashion. However, the analytical scheme suggested in this article has been conceived in such a fashion as to allow for various determinations (of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, and physical ability, among others) to be brought into the picture in the context of empirical studies of wardrobes.

2. I do not wish, at this stage, to suggest unwittingly that wardrobe practices are anything other than gendered, among other determinations. I do occasionally comment on these aspects in the article, so my use of the word “people” should not be interpreted as relying on a concept of an indeterminate and undetermined subject.

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