

ENTREVISTA COM REGINA ROOT

AN INTERVIEW WITH REGINA ROOT

Regina A. Root (raroot@wm.edu) is Professor of Hispanic Studies at William & Mary, the historic university in Williamsburg, Virginia. She is an international expert known for her work on fashion, textiles, and Latin American cultural production. Her award-winning work has been touted by reviewers as pioneering in the area of Latin American material culture: *The Latin American Fashion Reader* was the first book to take a broad look at the influence of Latin American culture on global fashion trends. Her book *Couture and Consensus: Fashion and Political Culture in Postcolonial Argentina* has been revised and translated into Spanish as *Vestir la nación*. *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, co-edited and co-authored with others international experts, presents an overview of the field's history, methodologies, and current debates. Root's work on sustainable design practices and global innovations in the industry continues to open new areas of research. She has edited and co-edited special issues of *Fashion Theory* on *Ecofashion*, *Latin American Fashion Now* and *Brazilian Fashion* and volumes like *Pasado de moda: expresión cultural y consumo en la Argentina*. In recent years, she has been working on a tapestry project and teaching in the areas of cultural heritage and policy. She is particularly fond of teaching about the nineteenth century, a foundational moment in Latin American cultural history.

In the interview, Regina Root talks about her academic trajectory and researches; the geography of fashion and dress studies; the relation between fashion and politics, among other themes.

Acervo. *We would like to start by asking you about your career as a researcher and Professor and how you first got interested in studying fashion and dress.*

Regina Root. Growing up in the Canary Islands, I was deeply influenced by shifting cultural messages, particularly during the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the 1970s. A new influx of tourism made for uncanny juxtapositions between the traditional black mourning dress often worn and bikinis – or even nudity – on the beach. I wasn't yet aware of what fashion could mean – scholars may not have been aware either – but these early moments have always stayed with me. Coming back to live in the United States meant understanding new social and dress codes. I could hardly understand it.

Once at the university I began to work with exiles from other conflicts and dictatorships and these relationships impacted me profoundly. I was also interested in women's issues and feminism. I couldn't understand why our world couldn't get behind the tenets of liberty and freedom for all. And whenever I opened a fashion magazine, from whichever country I could find one, the idea of fashion revealed this revolutionary potential even if it also seemed to duplicate power structures. Fashion could forecast the next season, the next idea, and chart spaces for hope. Amidst all the objectification and issues I see with the wastefulness of fashion, then and now, the idea of the wearer's agency seemed to hold for me a lot of promise.

Early on in my career I began to link the theories of body, dress and culture to seemingly unrelated concepts like censorship and fiction. These seemed like unlikely partnerships. Doing this kind of research was a hard sell in the 1990s – to professionals in the field who didn't think that Latin American fashion merited study because we were only entering a more pronounced global age, to publishers who wouldn't commit to the idea that there was a serious intellectual audience to engage, and to design schools which emphasized the components of dress without the archival research necessary to bring craft into intellectual conversation.

The best thing I ever did was to write every fashion scholar I could identify in Latin America in the 1990s, when university websites and email accounts did not prevail as they do today. This was time-consuming but created the first important community of scholars and led to *The Latin American Fashion Reader* and connections that still guide us and continue to grow. I edited and co-edited special issues of *Fashion Theory*, with the first titles on *Ecofashion*, *Latin American Fashion Now* and *Brazilian Fashion*. In the early 2000s, folks would ask me why I was so interested in sustainability when it had nothing to do with fashion! By 2008, when the *Ecofashion* volume came out, we were in a watershed year for sustainable design initiatives and the rest is history.

Rita, around this time you made the transatlantic version of *Fashion Theory Brazil* happen, a project we all deeply admire. And Maria do Carmo, your work in the National Archives will long resonate in fashion studies, which needs this sustained kind of conversation. These are among the exceptional moments to celebrate, unique gifts that all bring to our field of study, to ensure peace amidst the wars of the world.

All work presents its challenges and opportunities. Growing the field sometimes means doing less research of one's own and that is hard. Hopefully institutions will honor the important work that has forged community and built new paths for research.

Ah! If only I could start all over again, knowing what I know now!

Acervo. *Could you, please, comment on the geography of "Fashion Studies" and "Dress Studies", that is to say, how are these areas being developed globally and how does Latin America fit within it? To what extent is the field still tributary to Anglo-Saxon approaches?*

Regina Root. The way we map fashion studies and dress studies does not always intersect. And yet we need this tension in order to make new connections. In Spanish there's an expression that says "El mundo es un pañuelo" or "It's a small world". What is the equivalent in Portuguese? The truth is that fashion studies and dress studies need each other.

While remaining true to our disciplines, many scholars now seek the interdisciplinary. That's a good thing. I'm one of those people, however, who believes that it's alright for us to be inconclusive (as the field is new and we must be honest). We are in the midst of narratives galore, from the autobiographical essay to informal field work, but in order to grow as a field we must be cognizant of the scientific process, the probability of duplication, the variables to keep in mind. In this regard, fashion studies will stand alone no matter where it's done. And then we can truly begin a new level of the conversation.

It may always be challenging to bridge the divide between languages and cross-cultural approaches. Distinct markets drive publishing models and the evolution of design schools.

Acervo. *You are one of the forerunners in studying Latin America by relating fashion to politics. Could you, please, tell us more about the research which originated this particular interest?*

Regina Root. *Couture and Consensus* began as the first book-length study of fashion and politics in Argentina. A lot of scholars used the structure of my 1997 dissertation, which was an earlier and different version, to help the field evolve.

Given that we were beginning the Latin American independence bicentennials in some nations, in 2010 I was invited to become the President Ad Honorem of Ixel Moda, Latin America's first fashion congress held in Cartagena, Colombia. This was a time of civil conflict and millions of internal displacements in Colombia and we carried in our hearts much hope for peace and resolution. It was powerful to contemplate the innovations of fashion design from the very spaces in which Simón Bolívar dreamed about political independence and the creation of new legacies that would transcend borders. These borders were as much metaphoric as they were national.

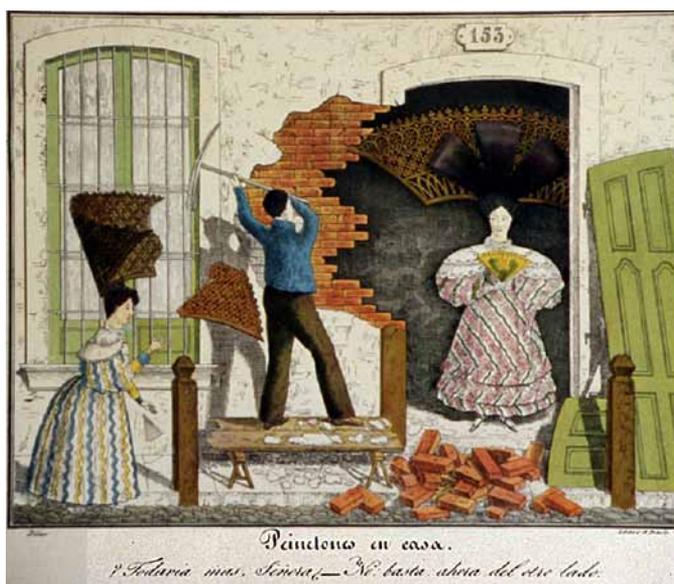
My most heartfelt achievement as a member of Ixel Moda was to bring together design schools throughout Colombia and the Americas to address community, craft and

employment. Our work attracted thousands of participants and governments in the region sent representatives. We sought to create laboratories through which designers, industrial professionals and scholars could think through fashion studies, employment and inclusion. The runways were great too!

Acervo. *Your analysis of women's political use of dress in postcolonial Argentina is very rich because it draws attention to the political complexities and specificities of social relations in the country in the nineteenth century. It is amazing how an item such as the hair comb, for example, can have so many different meanings. How do you explain the role of women in the public sphere in that country, in the context of Latin America, in the aforementioned period.*

Regina Root. Women's fashions have historically been treated as ornamental and superfluous. In Latin American fashion of the nineteenth century, the register often fell silent despite a few noteworthy studies. I spent countless hours in library archives, museums and personal homes, studying various artifacts and texts.

The most unexpected work to come out of this time I lived in Argentina in the mid 1990s was the work on uniforms and women's hair accessories. Today scholars take my findings for granted and these have informed others studies.



"Peinetones en casa". Satirical cartoon by C. H. Bacle. In: *Trages y costumbres de la provincia de Buenos Aires*. Courtesy of Biblioteca Nacional, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The postcolonial peinetón to which you are referring was as exaggerated and outrageous as it looked! Measuring almost one meter by one meter, even official government bulletins of the period felt it important to ask women to stop being so noteworthy. Women may not have

had civil rights. However, their dress didn't stop them from asserting their rights. What's not to love about that story?

Acervo. *You are one of the editors of The Handbook of Fashion Studies, published by Bloomsbury in 2013, a book that is a reference for the area. Could you tell us a bit more about the idea that originated the book, which inform the reader on theories and methodologies proper to the "Fashion Studies" field?*

Regina Root. We are witnessing the first interdisciplinary and globalized wave of fashion studies. *The Handbook of Fashion Studies* (Bloomsbury, 2013) aims to reach an international consensus on the terminology we use and the thematic threads guiding current research. This book dedicates one of its chapters to Latin American fashion. This is a very exciting time to be working in fashion studies.

Acervo. *How do you see the pathways to the studies on fashion and dress in the near future and what topics and perspectives do you think are undervalued by field researchers at present?*

Regina Root. History, gender, sex... Justice, wellbeing, spirituality... Knowledge, public art, textiles... Our field is as much about education as it is understanding the theoretical underpinnings of lived, largely human, experience.

Designers and design scholars understand invention and the creative process, ready to force the margins to the center and dwell there. At the same time, this spirit of innovation is being usurped by business schools and others professions in search of practices to reimagine themselves. That's fine but it's not the same thing. Fashion studies thinks through cultural significances and silences with rigor and care.

Some questions for us to consider might be: Are we satisfied with the way things are going in our world? Where do we find spaces to dream? Why do my pants not have pockets? When does our field not care to act, as with the aging body? What are the scholarly traps in which we seem to keep falling?

I hope the readers of *Acervo* will contact me and let me know of their findings. It has been such a pleasure to talk with both of you!

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