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## **CSW Update Newsletter**

### **Title**

UCLA's 2011 Queer Studies Conference

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8nr5d4fq>

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### **Publication Date**

2011-11-01



UCLA's 2011

# QUEER STUDIES CONFERENCE

*Fashion, Identity, Performance, and Culture*

**T**HE QUEER STUDIES CONFERENCE 2011, a two-day event organized by the UCLA Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Program, succeeded in creating an intellectually stimulating, aesthetically pleasing, and singular experience. The organizers of this year's conference chose to focus on concepts, practices, aesthetics, and ideas about fashion from the LGBT perspective. This focus gave the conference attendees a wide selection of interesting presenta-

tions that dealt with issues of race and ethnicity, socioeconomics, gender performance, pop culture, exploitation, desire, style, and sublimation; it also provided a vast array of stimulating imagery during the presentations and the accompanying fashion show, Queerture. Because the LGBT experience is not limited to gender, class, race, ethnicity, or nationality, the scope of inquiry is hugely diverse and dynamic. By choosing queer fashions as the starting point, the conference provided the

occasion to feature presenters, panelists, and artists that could weave together the various cultural, political, and economic aspects of the LGBT experience and queerness, anchored by a highly visual medium. This platform created an opportunity for conference presenters to show not only the ways in which queer culture has infiltrated and influenced mainstream and pop culture, but also how the LGBT community creates resistance to those very same mainstream ideologies

through individual and collaborative expression by way of fashion and performance.

It may seem contradictory to point out how queer fashions can both influence and subvert mainstream Western cultural norms at the same time; however, it is the acceptance of the space between binaries that make LGBT studies such an interesting and pertinent area of inquiry. The presenters and panelists at the conference dealt with topics ranging from the image and performances of pop stars like Lady Gaga and Nicki Minaj to LGBT activism through fashion and new media. In his presentation “Gone Campin’: The Campy Paradox of Nicki Minaj,” Uri McMillan, Assistant Professor in the Department of English at UCLA, looked at how Minaj is constantly navigating seemingly unrelated, and often paradoxical, influences and performance cultures. He adeptly showed how Minaj’s image could be read as a version of “camp,” a genre generally produced and predisposed to well-educated, white gay men, and how this image breaks with other black performers by neglecting the use of authenticity in her performance and image—essentially, she is constantly creating alter-egos and using “fakeness” as an integral part of her image and performance. McMillan finds Minaj an interesting case study for the influence of queer culture into pop culture because, as he notes, “Nicki Minaj’s audience is much more diverse than, say, Lady Gaga’s.” Because of this, in addition to Lady Gaga’s full initiation into the queer community, Minaj’s ambiguity

allows her the ability to move through disparate performance cultures and communities with more fluidity and wider influence.

In another presentation by Ajuan Maria Mance, Professor of English at Mills College, the subject of community building through gender performance and fashion in public spaces was addressed. In this case, Mance did not investigate a pop culture phenomenon, but instead focused on the “Girl Ball” and “Boy Ball” scene in queer communities, mainly African American and Afro-Caribbean, where highly structured performance and competition “balls” are organized and competitors dress as the opposite gender according to the themes predetermined by the organizers. What Professor Mance noticed recently in this community was the inclusion of transmasculine performance in addition to the more traditional male-as-female performance. She also noted an increase in participation of this kind of performance through the Internet, primarily via YouTube, by young African American men and women. One of her points in the presentation was how these balls, through the competitions and performances, show “gender as put on...gender as wearable.”

The panels and presentations continued throughout Friday and Saturday and included a wide variety of topics, including two plenary sessions. These sessions showcased presentations like “Always True to You Darlin’ in My Fashion: Queer Masculinity and Disciplinarity” by Karen Tongson, Associate Professor of English and Gender

Studies at USC; “Papi Time: Guayaberas and the Fashioning of Brown Butch Temporality” by Deborah Vargas, Assistant Professor in Chicano/Latino Studies at UC Irvine; “From Posing Straps to Strapping Poses: Making Masculinity Fashionable in the Post-War Era” by Michael Bronski, Senior Lecturer in Women’s and Gender Studies at Dartmouth College; and “Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal” by Jack Halberstam, Professor of English, American Studies, and Ethnicity and Gender Studies at USC.

The conference ended on Saturday night with the final performance: Queerture, a fashion show that hybridized queer and couture fashions. Art-directed by Tania Hammidi, the designs exhibited in the show ranged from avant-garde to everyday street wear. The fashion show included designs from Michael and Hushi, Sent Packing, Debonair and Studs Clothing, Jimmy Au’s, and Micha Cárdenas. Each designer showcased their stylings with the help of professional and amateur models from the LGBT community. Peppered throughout the traditional strutting-down-the-catwalk show were performances and presentations that invited the audience to think about the importance, performance, and geography of fashion. Aaron Valenzuela, a Studio Art graduate student at UC Irvine, performed a piece in which for more than 30 minutes he layered more and more articles of clothing on himself from a giant pile of garments in the center of the stage. Tania Hammidi presented the fashion illustrations of three extremely

Photos on top left/right and bottom left: courtesy of Queerture's Facebook page;  
bottom right from video of event on Jacampa81's YouTube channel

talented graduate students, Maria Leung, Karen Dhillon, and Lindsay Fackrell, who independently from each other have designed garments that blur the lines between gender-specific clothing. Additionally, many other creative forces contributed in the successful look, sound, art, and intellectual content of the show. A detailed listing of all of the people who contributed to the show can be found on Queerture's Facebook page.

The predominant theme of the conference was that choosing how one goes about representing oneself every day can be a form of cultural resistance, as well as a form of community building. The blurriness of gender and sexuality can be expressed through fashion to a wide audience of diverse individuals. The person who chooses to do this should be considered extremely courageous, because challenging an ideology—in this case the gender binary—can be a dangerous activity. What made Queerture and the 2011 Queer Studies Conference such a special event was the autonomous zone it created, where the opacity of gender and sexuality was not contested, but celebrated with visual representations and outward expressions through fashion—not to mention an abundance of sartorial eye candy.

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