

# Introducing the *Journal of Folklore and Education*

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Folklore—those arts, stories, and traditions shared within groups—inherently involves teaching and learning. This great informal pedagogy passes along the large and the small bits of traditional knowledge that underpin our lives within our various dynamic cultural groups: our beliefs about the cosmos, how we raise our children and practice our professions, what we wear everyday and on special occasions, how we cure hiccups. The *Journal of Folklore and Education* seeks to merge more closely the fields of folklore and education in the belief that engaging in the study of traditional culture enhances self-knowledge, awareness of cultural assumptions and points of view, authentic connections to the local, and critical inquiry.

Teachers and faculty in a variety of learning environments—from classrooms to museums, freshman composition to social studies—will find pedagogically centered inspiration in these pages. The writing that follows challenges us to reconsider the many extraordinary parts of students' everyday lives as portals to discovery and learning engagement. The *Journal of Folklore and Education* seeks to highlight through peer-reviewed articles (lesson-building content) and classroom-ready activities (discussion prompts, worksheets, and ideas for further inquiry) the unique expertise that each person in the room—both student and educator—brings to many topics and research questions.

The theme for the inaugural issue, *Dress to Express: Exploring Culture and Identity*, was inspired by the work of colleagues at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage who created an extensive documentation project and youth access program, *The Will to Adorn: African American Diversity, Style, and Identity*. Our *Dress to Express* theme, like *Will to Adorn*, supports young people in the study of dress and adornment as cultural markers—aspects of visual culture through which people communicate their self-definitions, the communities with which they identify, their creativity, their history, and their style. We explore how educational standards are embedded in the reading of diverse “texts” that must be evaluated within specific and situational contexts—“texts” that might look like a scarf, tattoo, or hair braid. We also, perhaps, begin to trouble too-easy definitions of diversity and culture.

## How can you use *Dress to Express* in your teaching?

This issue of the *Journal* presents a variety of ways to tap the theme *Dress to Express* that are just the beginning. Consider other ideas to spark additional topics, for example:

- \* What are the economics of dress, which range from the family budget to the global fashion industry and includes the recycling of clothing, from hand-me-downs to international industries?
- \* Where do clothes come from and where do they go? Answering these questions involves science, agriculture, environmental studies, design, math, business administration, advertising, and mass media.
- \* What is the relationship of costume to performance? How are costumes designed, cared for, and worn? How have costumes changed across time?
- \* What makes clothing and adornment objects of memory and nostalgia as well as identity? Interviewing people about their memories of special clothing can provide inspiration for writing nonfiction, poetry, and drama.

Dress and adornment embody both the most personal and the most public ways in which we create and express identity. Clothing shields us from heat and cold and protects our modesty, yet its cultural significance goes far beyond basic necessity. Dressing is a daily experience that creates the boundary between the intimate self and the wider world and requires knowledge, techniques, and aesthetics that are not often acknowledged yet hold complex meaning. Children love to play dress-up. Preschoolers choose backpacks that represent gender, favorite superheroes, or beloved characters. Teens avidly follow fashion fads. Brides negotiate the dueling powers of mass marketing and ritual traditions to ensure they are appropriately attired. Fans wrap themselves in team colors, fictional characters' garb, and pop musicians' styles. Occupations require specific types of dress. Families select clothing in which to lay out loved ones who have died. Even angels are portrayed clothed in Western art. Today young people are arbiters and creators of rapidly evolving styles of dress and adornment that drive much of the clothing industry as well as personal style innovation through social networking and mass media.

The cultural significance of dress and adornment extends across time to all situations, the most casual to the most formal. Wearing the "wrong" thing can cause embarrassment or offense. We must weigh utility as well as beauty and consider the mores of our cultural groups when dressing. A poor costume can spoil a performance. Clothing, hairstyles, and accessories in paintings and photographs reveal vital historical and social clues. Assimilating to new communities can mean altering our appearance. The semiotics of dress reveal information that strangers as well as family and friends decode.

The Journal's features suggest topics and directions for the study of dress and adornment that enliven teaching and learning in any setting. Subjects range from decoding dress and adornment in historical and contemporary photographs to learning to document and interview peers and elders in school and community, from classroom activities to theoretical approaches. Authors include folklorists, anthropologists, K-12 and higher education faculty, artists, and museum educators who present model projects, hands-on student activities, worksheets, theoretical concepts, and "idea portals" for easy adaptation. We believe that cross-fertilization among K-12, university, museum, and community-based educators improves pedagogy for all. Although varied, the contributions have in common the aim of giving voice to young people through ethnographic explorations of self, community, and the world.

Within these topics, we notice how paying attention to *sartorial expression* offers an inviting portal to the rich topics that educators must address in their various disciplines. Because dress and adornment carry such deep, complex meaning, they present exciting opportunities for learning across disciplines and age groups. Decoding, documenting, analyzing, and interpreting research on clothing and adornment is engaging and adaptable for any age or setting, teaches important literacy skills, calls upon all the senses, employs a variety of media and modes of inquiry, and renders diversity uniquely and authentically.

Sar-to-ri-al (adjective) of or relating to tailoring, clothes, or style of dress.

We hope that this issue presents our audience a number of different points of entry to *Dress to Express* that prove rewarding, and we want to hear from you! If you adapt any of the activities found in this issue or use ideas as a springboard for a new project, please tell us. We are interested in continuing discussion and featuring student work in future issues that will share lessons learned. Tell us, what does *Dress to Express* mean in your classroom?