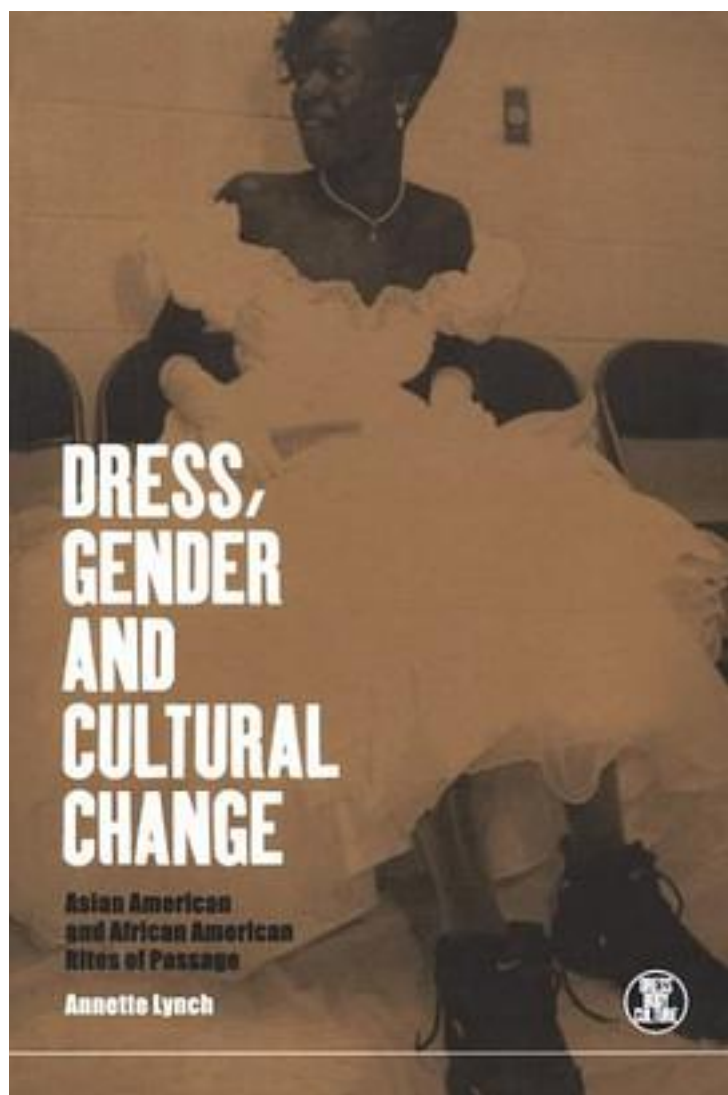


Dress, Gender and Cultural Change



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While African American dress has long been noted as having a distinctive edge, many people may not know that debutante balls - a relatively recent phenomenon within African American communities - feature young women and men dressed, respectively, in conventional symbols of female purity and male hegemony, and conforming to gender stereotypes that have tended to characterize such events traditionally. Within the Hmong American community, mothers and aunts of teenagers use bangles, lace and traditional handwork techniques to create dazzling displays reflecting the gender and ethnicity of their sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, as they participate in an annual courtship ritual. This book examines these events to show how dress is used to transform gender construction and create positive images of African American and Hmong American youth. Coming-of-age rituals serve as arenas of cultural revision and change. For each of these communities, the choice of dress represents cultural affirmation. This author shows that within the homogenizing context of American society, dress serves as a site for the continual renegotiation of identity - gendered, ethnic and otherwise.

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