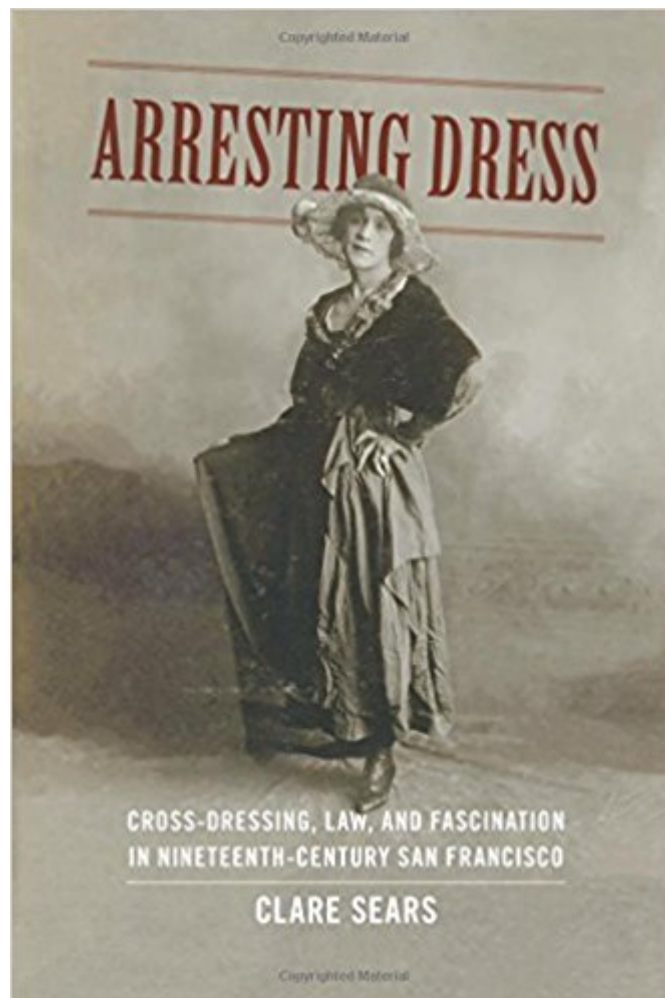




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# **Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, And Fascination In Nineteenth-Century San Francisco (Perverse Modernities: A Series Edited By Jack Halberstam And Lisa Lowe)**





## Synopsis

In 1863, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors passed a law that criminalized appearing in public in "a dress not belonging to his or her sex." Adopted as part of a broader anti-indecency campaign, the cross-dressing law became a flexible tool for policing multiple gender transgressions, facilitating over one hundred arrests before the century's end. Over forty U.S. cities passed similar laws during this time, yet little is known about their emergence, operations, or effects. Grounded in a wealth of archival material, *Arresting Dress* traces the career of anti-cross-dressing laws from municipal courtrooms and codebooks to newspaper scandals, vaudevillian theater, freak-show performances, and commercial "slumming" tours. It shows that the law did not simply police normative gender but actively produced it by creating new definitions of gender normality and abnormality. It also tells the story of the tenacity of those who defied the law, spoke out when sentenced, and articulated different gender possibilities.

## Book Information

Series: Perverse Modernities: A Series Edited by Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe

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## Customer Reviews

"*Arresting Dress* is an outstanding archivally based and theoretically potent intervention in transgender history. Clare Sears offers fresh insight into how individuals targeted by cross-dressing law manipulated gender boundary logics to make public claims or evade unwelcome scrutiny. Clearly written, vividly documented, and vigorously argued, this book explores how policing gender conformity had far-reaching impacts." (Nayan Shah, author of *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West*) "Don't let the subtitle of *Clare Sears's*

important new book fool you into thinking this is a narrow investigation of an obscure law in a small city a long time ago. It's filled with big ideas about bodies and spaces and norms, about the generative as well as disciplinary function of the law, and about the historical transience of gender categories as well as the persistence of transgendering practices. Sears's powerful analytical framework allows her to connect the exclusion of gender nonconformers from the public sphere with similar exclusions of raced and disabled bodies, while her crystal-clear prose and compelling archival stories never let the reader get lost in the weeds of excessive theorization. A great book for undergraduates and specialists alike." (Susan Stryker, author of *Transgender History*)

"[A] slim yet comprehensive look at how an 1863 law against appearing in public dressed as a different sex invited a regime of surveillance upon "problem bodies." The book covers a lot of ground." (Peter Kane SF Weekly)

"[A]s the first in-depth examination of cross-dressing laws in an American city, the book is a valuable contribution to gender studies. It demonstrates convincingly that societal discomfort with difference in gender-expression was historically tied to societal discomfort with other sorts of difference. Both led to the marginalization of "problem bodies." (Lillian Faderman *Women's Review of Books*)

"Arresting Dress gives one much to think about beyond its well-argued and convincing conclusions. This is what I consider a good book — a scholarly endeavor that causes one to think about how one might look at evidence, arguments, and conceptualizations in different ways.... Arresting Dress is highly recommended, both for the conclusions it draws and for the further thinking and research it encourages." (Peter Boag GLQ 2016-01-01)

"Arresting Dress is an impressive work of history, based in deep archival research, written in engaging prose, woven with smart analysis, and complete with wonderful images from primary sources... that bring the text to life. Never over-theoretical, the work is both approachable for undergraduates as well as useful for specialists. As such, it deserves to be read and assigned widely." (Emily Skidmore *The Journal of American History* 2016-03-01)

"In her compelling historical account of a multiplicity of cross-dressing practices and their incorporation into certain cultural venues and proscription in others, Clare Sears demonstrates the ways in which stabilizing gender and sexuality was central to state-making projects of that time.... [T]he result is a book well worth reading." (Tey Meadow *American Journal of Sociology* 2016-03-01)

"Sears's book is important because it historicizes cross-dressing and cross-gender behavior in ways in which it never has been before. Indeed, it is the sort of interdisciplinary study that is often attempted but rarely executed with such interpretive precision.... Despite such scholarly intersections, however, the book is remarkably accessible. A stimulating read for undergraduates, specialists, and general readers." (Adam Q. Stauffer *Journal of American*

Studies)"There is much to admire in Sears's analysis of this topic, especially in her persistent and convincing analysis of how cross-dressing laws interacted with racial politics at the time—two topics that seem unrelated at first glance. Overall Sears gives a nuanced, sensitive and intelligent reading of a little-known law and its vast consequences for the culture of the city and the nation." (Ariel Beaujot *Histoire sociale / Social History* 2016-05-01)"What is especially admirable about Sears's text is the depth and breadth of her interdisciplinary archival research that draws together a variety of processes and relations that demonstrate the fascination and outrage with forms of cross-dressing. This is equally well-balanced and supported with an application and articulation of a variety of theoretical perspectives that make this a valuable book about belonging, othering, bodies and dressed appearance, not just historically but with relevance today." (Shaun Cole *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 2016-12-12)"Sears deftly uses a variety of well-placed illustrations (newspaper clippings, political cartoons, posters, and photographs) to explain and expand her arguments. She also, in a surprising twist in view of her emphasis on the prevalence of cross-dressing, successfully challenges the popular notion of frontier San Francisco as a 'wide open'; permissive town." (Nancy C. Unger *Canadian Journal of History* 2016-12-20)

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