

## Introduction

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# Feminism Confronts Fashion

Marjorie Jolles and Shira Tarrant

Fashion. We love it. We hate it. We debate it.

But why does fashion matter?

Beyond the clothes that line our closets or the photo layouts we flip past in glossy magazines, fashion is also the site of specific philosophical tensions. Fashion is symbolic, expressive, creative, and coercive. It is a powerful way to convey politics, personalities, and preferences for whom and how we love. Fashion encourages profound rebellion and defiant self-definition. Yet fashion can simultaneously repress freedom by controlling or disciplining the body, and by encouraging a problematic consumer culture.<sup>1</sup>

Fashion creates collective identity, but also restricts individual voice. Fashion provides ways to resist hegemony and communicate identity in the face of cultural and political pressure. At the same time, though, fashion is an integral part of this very conformist culture itself. In other words, fashion contains the potential for pleasure and subjugation, expression and convention. This book neither defends nor condemns fashion. Instead, these essays grapple with how fashion both enables and constrains expression in ways that are uniquely raced, gendered, classed, sexed, and bound to national and cultural histories.

Taking up this tension from a feminist perspective reveals how fashion—like power—is neither inherently good nor bad. What matters is how it is *used*. Consider sociologist Fred Davis's point that black lace at a funeral means something quite different than black lace on a negligee.<sup>2</sup> Or that wearing a pair of overalls in Manhattan evokes quite a different response than wearing overalls on a farm. What fashion *means* depends on context, but

also on whose interests it serves, what its audiences and practitioners bring to their engagement with it, and how it protects and transforms social divisions.

The problem is that fashion's liberatory possibilities are easily co-opted. Clothing manufacturer American Apparel pilfers support for sexual expression by turning a political ideal into exploitative billboards of its own. Or take the popularity of "green" style.<sup>5</sup> The belief that sociopolitical or ecological improvement can be achieved through alternative channels of fashion and style invites a potentially empty promise of empowerment-through-consumerism that is more emblematic of backlash than progress. We can try going DIY, but that comes with a set of problems, too.

Etsy.com, the hugely popular online emporium of handcrafted goods, provides a space for independent producers to sell their one-of-a-kind, hand-made wares to consumers. Etsy's mission is to "enable people to make a living making things, and to reconnect makers with buyers" in order to "build a new economy."<sup>4</sup> In promoting a DIY aesthetic, Etsy also advocates a certain feminist ethics in reconfiguring the relationship between production and consumption, emphasizing—rather than erasing—the humanity of labor.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the big chance to make hand-embroidered messenger bags *and* work outside an oppressive capitalist system, the problem, writes Slate.com blogger Sara Mosle, "is that on Etsy, as in much of life, the promise is a fantasy. There's little evidence that most sellers on the site make much money."<sup>6</sup>

Tossing our hands in the air and making a beeline to the closest Big Box, corporate-chained, sweatshop-supplied clothing rack does nothing to dislodge the status quo, either. That is the conundrum. Even if we attempt to reject it, none of us can opt out of fashion and style (or global capitalism) completely.

Living in an increasingly visually mediated and commodified world means that having one's own style is compulsory. It is a core component of self-expression and self-realization. We need look no further than our TVs for contemporary mythologies about identity, expression, and transformation as evidence of their cultural sway. Makeover shows of every type abound, whether the focus is on stylizing the corporeal body (*What Not to Wear*), the business (*Tabatha's Salon Takeover*), or the home (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*).<sup>7</sup>

Sociologist Anne Cronin describes this cultural mandate to self-express as an ideology of "self as project," in which consumerism and self-styling make possible the (historically masculine) Enlightenment ideal of personal authenticity.<sup>8</sup> Each of us engages with fashion and style whether we want to or not. We might not all read *Vogue*, but we still get dressed in the morning.

And once we're dressed, we carry with us into the day the sartorial significance of race, class, gender, sexuality—as well as issues of global politics,

domination, imperialism, exploitation, and free will. This collection of essays uses explicitly feminist lenses for analyzing this paradox of fashion and style.

## Feminism and Fashion

Feminism—and feminists—have a bad rap when it comes to fashion. We're accused of being frumpy, unattractively braless, and inexcusably hirsute. Contemporary feminists who reject this characterization and attempt to bring sexy back sustain charges of being duped by the patriarchy into wearing provocative, self-objectifying outfits and mistaking this for empowerment. (Note both the Catch-22 and the assumption that feminists are women.)

Feminists' own ambivalent relationship to fashion and attempts to transcend the politically loaded project of creating personal style prompted philosopher Cressida Heyes to point out that "refusal on the part of the feminist subject to style herself in any way—to be uninvolved, neutral, or natural—is impossible."<sup>9</sup> More to the point, fashion has a long history as a source and resource for feminist discourse. Think, in no particular order, of Amelia Bloomer, leather chaps, myths about bra burning, politics of the Afro, and women's fight to wear pants at work. There are Hooters uniforms, rainbow flags, beauty pageants, shaved heads, bondage gear, boi styles, and high femme frills. Think sweatshops, Wal-Mart, outlet malls. Consider designer knock-offs and the workers who make them. As a vast commercial enterprise and the realm where imagination intersects ideology, fashion is never far from politics—no matter how hard fashion discourse tries to distance itself from the political by invoking its familiar keywords: fantasy and escape.

In Judith Butler's famous formulation of gender as a series of performative acts, she puts special emphasis on style as the very "language . . . for understanding gender," cautioning that to be styled is not the same as being "self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities."<sup>10</sup> Style functions not as a celebration of the self overcoming the social, but rather as proof of the self's fundamental sociality. Style includes the habits, practices, mannerisms, tastes, codes, and stances, all informed by implicit values, that make up the "lifelong project of giving shape to human existence," as author Ladelle McWhorter puts it.<sup>11</sup> Feminism is a powerful tool for decoding fashion's political meaning and for acknowledging one's embeddedness in these systems of meaning.

So we are suspicious about arguments that naturalize stereotypes about gender by marking femininity as artifice and masculinity as substance. *Fashion Talks* rejects conflating fashion with femininity. Furthermore, we find it curious that a multibillion dollar global industry can be a driving economic

powerhouse and simultaneously dismissed as a silly cultural accessory—as “just” fashion.

Just witness the connection talk-show host Don Imus made between black hair and sexual promiscuity when he referred in 2007 to the Rutgers women’s basketball team as “nappy-headed hos.” Journalist Jenee Desmond-Harris explains in *Time* magazine, “Just as blond has implicit associations with sex appeal and smarts (or lack thereof), black-hair descriptors convey thick layers of meaning but are even more loaded. From long and straight to short and kinky—and, of course, good and bad—these terms become shorthand for desirability, worthiness and even worldview.”<sup>12</sup>

In 2009, comic Chris Rock picks up these issues in his film, *Good Hair*, a positive sign that critical analyses of beauty, race, identity, fashion, and style are now flung onto the mainstream agenda. Clearly, fashion evokes the politics of beauty and along with it brings the complicated politics of sexuality.

We have a long history of trying to manage and organize our sexual fears and desires, and one of the ways in which this is done is through the vehicle of fashion as expression, and through fashion as a tool for social control. Feminism is committed to understanding these efforts at management and organization.

## The Essays

### *Section I—Dressing the Body: The Politics of Gender and Sexuality*

*Fashion Talks* begins with Astrid Henry’s essay, “Fashioning a Feminist Style, Or, How I Learned to Dress from Reading Feminist Theory.” Henry poses the problems with stereotypes that feminism has involved at best a dismissive disregard for the subject or worse, an acrimonious disdain for beautification of the body and stylized presentations of self. The author concludes that entirely different avenues are possible that remain true to both the expressive and political self.

Because feminism takes a critical look at constructions of *gender*, not only of women or femininity, fashion is a crucial vehicle for understanding men, masculinity, and sexual identity. In “Dressing Left: Conforming, Transforming, and Shifting Masculine Style,” Shira Tarrant takes up the mutability of masculinity and the ways by which fashion reflects this instability, or the constructed characteristics, of gender. Tarrant’s essay questions whether it is possible to successfully transform, subvert, or transcend stereotypes and rigid expectations about masculinity, manhood, and male sexuality given the context and impulses of consumer capitalism.

Renee Ann Cramer's essay, "The Baby Bump Is the New Birkin," grapples with the meaning of pop culture's obsessive attention to pregnant celebrity bodies, as seen through their maternity fashions. Ironically, while appearing to "celebrate" the fertile body with bump-hugging looks, the fashions (and media coverage) of pregnant celebrities exert power to naturalize and normalize a certain narrative of pregnancy and motherhood. Now, through highly visible and stylized reproduction, mainstream media once again puts forth unattainable standards that women are expected to achieve. Pregnant celebrity carries status and acclaim while sifting and sorting women into racially coded Good Girl and Bad Girl labels.

"Fashion as Adaptation: The Case of *American Idol*," is an innovative use of evolutionary theory by Leslie Heywood and Justin R. Garcia to understand fashion trends as adaptive responses to cultural change. Such adaptations can be retrogressive as well as progressive, novel or normal, as the authors observe with the example of *American Idol*, Season 8. In the finale, Kris Allen, with this more "traditional" style of American masculinity, beat out Adam Lambert, whose glam-rock masculinity signaled queerness and stylistic innovation that Americans ultimately did not find *Idol*-worthy. A feminist-evolutionary approach to the contest between Allen and Lambert—as manifested in their competing styles—can provide fresh thinking about fashion as a vehicle for making social change and a primary scene of ideological contests.

Denise Witzig's "My Mannequin, Myself: Embodiment in Fashion's Mirror" compares the way the self is positioned in two sites of fashion spectacle: the high-art space of the museum exhibit and the commercial, democratic space of the shopping mall. Witzig's framing of these two modalities for "doing fashion" points to the ways our relationships to fashion are simultaneously embodied and disembodied, real and idealized, projecting backward to the past through nostalgia and periodization by situating oneself as a consumer of fashion history, and gesturing to the future in the act of shopping. While the museum would seem more conducive to disembodied experience than the department store dressing room, Witzig notes several ironies. The shopper is permitted to revel in disembodied fantasies of an improved future self, while the museum-goer is frequently brought back to the body both through the sensual appeal of the work on display and in negotiating crowded public space. Witzig's analysis sheds fresh light on feminist debates surrounding specularity, consumerism, and so-called high and low culture.

In "Life's Too Short to Wear Comfortable Shoes: Femme-ininity and Sex Work," Jayne Swift analyzes how debates around femme style have shifted from the feminist sex wars of the 1980s and 1990s to contemporary feminist political divisions and debates about sexual agency in sex work and

neo-burlesque scenes. Poised in high-heeled shoes, Swift writes from the position of a queer femme sex worker, eager to forge more of a conceptual and political alliance between two subjectivities often kept both separate and silent in feminist discourse. Swift complicates feminist association of comfortable shoes with liberation, observing that wearing uncomfortable shoes in love, work, and politics enables an embodied understanding of the femininities and feminists often least visible in feminist political discourse.

In “Japanese Lolita: Challenging Sexualized Style and the Little-Girl Look,” Kathryn A. Hardy Bernal questions the competing interpretations of the Japanese “Gothic and Lolita” subculture and the distinctive so-called gothloli style that mixes youth, doll-like looks, and feminist defiance. This trend vividly evokes childlike innocence, but does so toward politically and sexually subversive ends. Bernal highlights how the gothloli plays into a fantasy of the sexualized girlish woman, but uses that very position—and its highly suggestive fashions—to stage a provocative form of cultural protest against rigid sexual and social roles for women. Existing on the edge of objectification and autonomy, the gothloli pose a fashion dilemma that reveals the inherent political tensions of sexuality.

*Section II—Fashion Choices: The Ethics of Consumption, Production, and Style*

The essays in Section II introduce fashion’s ethical dimension by highlighting the competing values that are invoked by style. Veiling, bridal gowns, and steampunk cosplay, for instance, raise important issues about the limits of our freedom to wear whatever—or to be whomever—we want. Paying special attention to the local settings and political conditions under which fashion choices are made, the authors in this section question the asymmetries of power and varying degrees of agency and restriction that are both reproduced and possibly transformed by fashion.

Section II begins with Jan C. Kreidler’s essay, “Glam *Abaya*: Contemporary Emirati Couture,” which grapples with the tension that erupts when fashion trends mix sexuality with modesty, and the mash-up when so-called modernity faces tradition. Kreidler takes readers to the United Arab Emirates where emerging trends in fashion reflect profound economic and social changes in the Gulf region. Among wealthy Emirati, Kreidler observes that veiling styles are becoming increasingly *haute*. Fashioning *abayat* in attention-getting, often overtly sexualized ways seems to throw into question what some consider to be the “true” meaning of veiling practices: to show modesty and deflect (masculine) sexual attention in heteronormative economies of desire. While significant in terms of understanding the range of global fashion and the varying ways in which gendered politics play out

on women's bodies, there is also much to be learned through attention to this paradox of simultaneously hiding women's bodies in ways that draw attention to female sexuality, women as gatekeepers of sexual desire, and presumed male sex-right access to women's bodies.

Evangeline M. Heiliger poses questions about social justice through consumerism in "Ado(red), Abhor(red), Disappea(red): Fashioning Race, Poverty, and Morality under Product (Red)<sup>TM</sup>." Heiliger highlights the making of the consumer in the act of consumption, noting the tension evoked when "shopping for social change" reinstates hierarchies among people and nations. Using the popular Product (Red) apparel line as an example of ethical consumerism in the sphere of fashion, Heiliger expands the meaning of "fashionable" in her reading of the ways Product (Red) makes shopping for a cause stylish. The cultural capital that accrues to the ethical shopper becomes an integral part of the success of (Red), drawing the first-world consumer simultaneously closer and farther away from the third-world Others, including the producers of (Red), whom her consumption acts are meant to support.

Catherine Spooner investigates the complex relationship between femininity and fur in "The Lady Is a Vamp: The Cultural Politics of Fur." Analyzing Cruella de Vil in both the original 1956 depiction in Dodie Smith's novel, *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, and subsequent iterations in film adaptations, Spooner finds that fur functions as a powerful symbol for non-maternal feminine wickedness, lust, and vanity. This symbolism extends beyond Cruella de Vil to contemporary icons of feminine and feminist style, as revealed by attitudes about fur and fashion, feminist discourses of animal rights, and debates over fur in the fashion industry.

Shifting from the politics of fur to the politics of weddings, Elline Lipkin poses important questions about Judeo-Christian marriage rituals. In "Something Borrowed, Something Blue: What's an Indie Bride to Do?" Lipkin grapples with whether we can fully jettison the heteronormative and patriarchal foundations of marriage just by calling our own wedding fashions and rituals "alternative." With the passage of legislation around the United States both legalizing and de-legalizing marriage rights for same-sex couples—along with powerful arguments against the normalizing force of marriage by numerous queer scholars—Lipkin's essay reminds us of the politics deeply embedded in how we literally fashion love.

Authors Diana M. Pho and Jaymee Goh investigate the production of hybrid identity through steampunk, a style that takes its cues from times past. Borrowing elements of Victorian fashion, Gothic romance, and even cyberpunk and sci-fi, steampunks find pleasure and novelty in making something new from something old. The elements that steampunks borrow, however, are saturated with meaning from their colonial origins. In "Steampunk: Stylish Subversion and Colonial Chic," Pho and Goh therefore question whether

steampunk can, in the present, fully override the past, or if the past remains with us, even in new combinations. In particular, Pho and Goh wonder about the vestigial impact of steampunk's colonialist influence on steampunks of color who are members of historically colonized groups.

In "DIY Fashion and Going *Bust*: Wearing Feminist Politics in the Twenty-First Century" Jo Reger argues that examining appearance norms, specifically those of fashion, is key to understanding how contemporary feminists conceptualize the political. Reger explains that through dress, contemporary feminists embrace and reclaim aspects of femininity and sexuality. Reger draws on theories from fashion, feminism, and social movements, utilizing content analysis of the popular feminist magazine *Bust*. Reger argues that contemporary feminists attempt to create an oppositional fashion as a form of political protest. This is done through a style that resists a consumer culture, privileges individuality, and incorporates sexuality. However, this resistance through fashion is made problematic with the commodification of style and the perception that dress is an inadequate (and therefore controversial) form of feminist activism. Reger concludes by discussing how contemporary feminists continue to present a form of social resistance written out on the body and expressed both communally and individually.

Finally, in "Stylish Contradiction: Mix-and-Match as the Fashion of Feminist Ambivalence," Marjorie Jolles asks "what a feminist looks like," and gets her answer in the popular trend of mix-and-match. Jolles detects traces of a contemporary feminist celebration of personal contradiction in the ways modern American femininity is performed in fashion. Drawing from popular and public culture, Jolles finds that this contemporary feminist reconfiguration of the self as collage has been absorbed in mainstream fashion rhetoric, whereby women are encouraged to mirror their inner heterogeneity with exaggeratedly eclectic looks. Taking a critical look at contradiction as something to be used rather than just celebrated, Jolles asks readers to consider what political and material contexts might be shaping contemporary notions of the feminine and feminist self as inherently split, ambivalent, and contradictory.

Together, the essays in this book make clear that fashion is both a tool of agency and source of constraint. In addition, fashion is, crucially, about time. Fashion is both temporally self-aware ("new for spring!") and historicized, marked by time ("those legwarmers are so '80s!"). As Fred Davis observes, "the very same apparel ensemble that 'said' one thing last year will 'say' something quite different today and yet another thing this year."<sup>15</sup> The success of fashion is that it strikes the right note between familiar and new—fashion evokes nostalgia, fashion celebrates innovation.

Uniforms, fads, fashion icons, and creative cues shift over time. The Vivienne Westwoods and Jason Wus, the RuPauls and Lady Gagas of the



world will come and go, and there will always be a new fashionista, It-designer, or style icon to herald new trends. What remain intractable and politically pressing are the bigger issues at the heart of this collection that the icons and iconoclasts of a particular moment represent: globalization, cultural imperatives of self-expression, dilemmas of sexualization that trade on racial and gender politics, co-optation and cultural appropriation, and visual rhetorics of social change. These essays provoke critical thought about the cultural and political life of fashion while challenging binary assumptions that force us to pick a side when it comes to issues of consumption and production, tradition and modernity, sexuality and innocence, novelty and normalcy, authenticity and irony, autonomy and conformity, and embodiment and ideas. *Fashion Talks* uses twenty-first-century trends and styles to grapple with the philosophical paradox between freedom and expression, conformity and constraint: political tensions that are captured by fashion, yet transcend it.

## Notes

1. See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) and Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O. J.* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); Angela McRobbie, "Bridging the Gap: Feminism, Fashion and Consumption," *Feminist Review* 55 (1997): 73–89; Marianne Conroy, "Discount Dreams: Factory Outlet Malls, Consumption, and the Performance of Middle-Class Identity," *Social Text* 54 (1998): 63–83; Anne M. Cronin, "Consumerism and 'Compulsory Individuality': Women, Will, and Potential," in *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, eds. Sara Ahmed, et al. (London: Routledge, 2000), 273–287.

2. Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 8.

3. See, for example, Theresa M. Winge, "'Green Is the New Black': Celebrity Chic and the 'Green' Commodity Fetish," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 12, no. 4 (2008): 511–524.

4. Etsy.com, "What is Etsy?" <http://www.etsy.com/about.php>.

5. It is worth noting that roughly 96 percent of Etsy producers/sellers are women, whose average age is 35. The majority of sellers are college-educated, middle-class, and married. Sara Mosle, "Etsy.com Peddles a False Feminist Fantasy," *Slate*, June 10, 2009, <http://www.doublex.com/section/work/etsycom-peddles-false-feminist-fantasy>.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Shira Tarrant, "New Blouse, New House, I Need a New Spouse: The Politics of Transformation and Identity in Television Makeover and Swap Shows," in *Fix Me Up: Essays on Television Dating and Makeover Shows*, ed. Judith Lancioni (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 2010), 171–181.

8. Cronin, "Consumerism and 'Compulsory Individuality,'" 275.

9. Cressida J. Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 134.
10. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139.
11. Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 190.
12. Jenee Desmond-Harris, "Why Michelle Obama's Hair Matters," *Time*, September 7, 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1919147-1,00.html>.
13. Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, 6.