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The depth of the surface: The meaning of fashion

Geez asked fashion blogger Minh-Ha Pham a few questions.

How do you define fashion?

The easy answer is that fashion is the material expression of identity. These material expressions are also understood to be culturally and historically specific. In other words, fashion is said to reflect particular cultural historical moments.

But one of the reasons Mimi Nguyen and I began the Threadbared blog is because we found this understanding of fashion to be pretty unsatisfying. It's not that we don't think fashion is a means of self-expression but that understanding fashion only in this way is limiting. Fashion doesn't just reflect identities; in complex and complicated ways, it also produces, secures, and sometimes disrupts our understandings of identities especially in relation to other ideas about modernity, civilization, and freedom. And of course how we understand what is modern or civilized or what constitutes freedom is tangled up in historical hierarchies of racial, gender, sexual, class, and religious differences.

Let me give an example. If we understand modes of dress (or fashion) as expressions of particular kinds of identity, then it's very easy to read, as Brooklyn politician Eric Adams does, sagging jeans as a material sign of delinquency or criminality. But what's missing in this reading is the ways in which pre-assigning social pathology to style is, in Foucault's words, making "the individual resemble his crime before he has committed it." Also missing is a critical understanding of how pathologizing groups of people based on their "look" has historically worked to justify, among other oppressive ideologies, racism and imperialism. I call this racial-sartorial profiling and have examined it in a variety of contexts in my blog and in my academic work.

Why do you blog about fashion?

I blog about fashion for the same reasons that all fashion and style bloggers blog – I love fashion! But, you know, when people are this effusive about fashion – particularly when women and girls are – they're immediately trivialized as superficial by people who, I would argue, have themselves a superficial understanding of fashion. The negative association of fashion with facade, with the surface of the body, with appearance, and with capitalist consumption, is frankly annoying to me. And not just because it assumes that a love of fashion and intelligence are mutually exclusive characteristics.

What really bothers me about the trivialization of fashion is that it denies the cultural, social and political economic

significance of facades, surfaces and appearances. Also, it ignores how the discourses, histories and uses of fashion and fashion consumerism have both informed and interrupted imperialist, racist, sexist and classist actions by people and by governments. In other words, it dismisses the significant role fashion plays in producing and making sense of the world we live in.

To my mind, this is Threadbared's reason for being – to explore and understand all of these things that are glossed over by the easy dismissal of fashion as nothing more than someone's (feminine) obsession with presenting their physical attractiveness to the world.

Where does fashion fit in with a concern for social justice?

One of my favorite books about fashion is Nan Enstad's *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* (Columbia University Press, 1999). I constantly go back to it in my work and in my thinking. Enstad's book explores this amazing labour history of 19th century working women and the ways they used fashion and romance novels, in her words, "to lay claim to dignified identities as workers ... [and] to claim formal political status." It's a wonderful example and reminder of how cultural practices like dressing fashionably have long been a part of political praxis. This is a lesson that still needs to be learned. There are too many people – academics included – who continue to think culture and politics are mutually exclusive spheres of life.

What's your favourite piece of fashion? Of fashion advice?

No fashion advice. I don't really believe in it. If pressed, I guess my advice is don't listen to advice. Wear what you want. Wear what makes you feel like you.

Favorite piece of fashion – now, I totally believe in that! A piece that I'm really excited about right now is my Future Classics full-length dress in gray jersey. It was designed by a fairly new designer from London, Julie Wilkins, who's also a vocal and visual artist. The back of the dress is cropped so that it's sort of an open back, but open from the bottom. I put it on and it just makes me smile.

Minh-Ha Pham is an academic whose work focuses on the phenomenon of democratization in fashion and the fashion media complex. She blogs at iheartthreadbared.wordpress.com. Lately, she has been loving the word "confound," as in (to paraphrase Tim Gunn): It confounds me why adult women (are expected to) compare their bodies to those of models who may not have even completed puberty yet.