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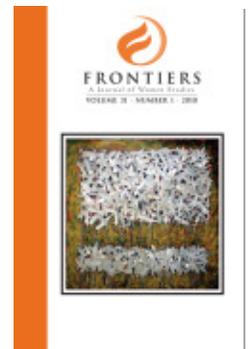
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Feminist Currents

Eileen Boris

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Feminist Currents

EILEEN BORIS

As the 2008 presidential campaign was hitting its final months, the dressing (up) of Sarah Palin and her family dominated the blogosphere. Pundits had already had a field day poking fun at Hillary Clinton's multicolored wardrobe of pantsuits, but the revelation that Republican operators had gone on a \$150,000 shopping spree at Neiman Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, and other upscale stores to glamorize the small town "pit-bull in lipstick" brought the scorn and ridicule directed at the fashioning of politicians, especially women in public, to new heights. Sure, Bill Clinton's and John Edwards's three-figure haircuts somehow became symbols of hypocrisy, while the price of John McCain's shoes merely reinforced his out-of-step image, and Barak Obama seemed thrifty in contrast, with his identical sets of Chicago-made Hart, Schaffner, and Marx tailored suits. Michelle Obama, in contrast, could be forgiven for her colorful displays of designer originals because first ladies are supposed to become fashionistas. We lamented the neglect of her smarts in all the attention to her body. But, as Iván Murillo observed in an e-mail response to *Frontiers*, "We still cover women's clothing in our social discourse. Part of the reason is that there is more variety than the traditional 'suit and tie' that we associate with our (male) politicians. Another part is that it is an easy—and accepted—entry into the subject's life and positions."

Such sartorial controversy encouraged the question for this issue's "Feminist Currents"—as did my personal and professional interest in the politics of appearance, including the interplay of cultural, social, economic, and—within such restraints—individual factors that lead to dressing the part (whatever the role). I posed the question:

Do clothes make the woman? What is your personal relationship to clothing? What constitutes feminist positions on clothing? Why is it that when we talk about women in public—especially notable women—we engage

in the politics of appearance? Why did we talk about Hillary Clinton's pantsuits and Sarah Palin's designer clothes in the last election?

Replies came to *Frontiers* through our e-mail address (frontiers@asu.edu) and as postings to our Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=28584178375>). During the same time, a group of feminist scholars and policy thinkers engaged in a discussion about "high heels," and some agreed to share their comments for this column. We also received messages from Minh-Ha T. Pham and Mimi Thi Nguyen, who shared posts from their blog "threadbared" (<http://threadbared.blogspot.com/>), which I highly recommend for fashionable cultural criticism.

Your replies loudly showed that the old divisions persist—between girls just want to have fun and girls oppressed by the beauty industry; between the frumpy academic and the playful remaking of one's body as statement or just for the heck of it; between the slave to fashion and the enraged by fashion. NYU's Pham, assistant professor and faculty fellow in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis, expresses this split as "Mind over Malls," asking in the "threadbared" entry that she shares with us, "Does Academia Hate Fashion?" But you managed also to puncture such dichotomies with personal reflections that so distinguish feminist discourse.

Some lamented how cultural constructions of womanhood through clothing hide who we really are, but that available styles and objects restrain our choices. This position came through powerfully in a poem, "Images of Myself," that women's studies independent scholar and community education specialist Karen Henninger posted to our Facebook page. (Go there to read the poem, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=28584178375>.) She could try out many outfits that exemplified cultural stereotypes or social roles, including Barbie, slut, and porn star; biker, hippie, and artist; or church lady, princess, and professional. Such ensembles might fit her, but they fail to express her. Instead, she offers an arresting image of breaking through such constraints, as does the sun emerging into the natural world. Elise Hendrick wrote to us on Facebook from Germany, "It has never ceased to amaze me that the fashion industry . . . is still around. The entire thing strikes me as an elaborate prank. This is an industry whose business model is based on telling us how horrible we look in the things they encouraged us to buy just a year ago." She would rather shop for books than clothes. She confesses to having thirty pairs of shoes, not out of what we might name some Carrie Bradshaw or Imelda Marcos obsession, but "because it takes me about two weeks to discover that the shoes that seemed so comfortable in the store actually are tearing my feet to shreds and forcing my metatarsals into truly bizarre configurations."

A parallel discussion on high heels emerged this summer among a network of feminists, of which I was a part. Igniting the thread was Barbara Bergmann, a distinguished feminist professor emerita of economics from the University of Maryland, who takes no hostages when it comes to advancing women's equal rights. Bergmann sparked a lively exchange by observing: "High heels have made a big comeback, bringing with them much suffering. Lately Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama (who have to do a lot of standing up) are sporting them, and they are now so obligatory that Sonia Sotomayor had the cast on one foot built up so she could put a spike heel on the other foot. If footbinding is a feminist issue, so should this be." She suggested that maybe a "feminist group with an anti-high heel agenda" should run an ad campaign on buses, leading another commentator to suggest public bonfires (like the freedom trash can at the Miss America pageant of 1969, from which the bra-burning rumor came?), done while wearing our best sneakers. Cynthia Harrison of George Washington University's Women's Studies Program confided:

Every spring in my undergraduate women's history course, usually the last session, I bring in the latest *New Yorker* or *New York Times Magazine* . . . to show some of the appalling ways women are pictured in the ads, some for clothes but not always. . . . When men appear in fashion photos, they are almost always showing skin only of their hands, neck and faces. I joke (ha ha) to my students that it would be great if some time a group of women got together and protested both women's fashions and the way women are used in ads and in life—like, say, a feminist movement? Talk about the waves closing over our heads and our disappearing without a trace. (My feminist students dress the same way as the rest of the women.)

Another participant in this discussion wondered if the wearing of high heels was like foot binding; did that make foot binding a lesser horror? What constitutes feminist Orientalism—the fascination with foot binding, veiling, and female genital operations? Some have countered this attitude of disdain toward other cultures with attention to restrictive practices in the West, like high heels and designer vaginas. Thi Nguyen, who teaches in Asian American studies and gender and women's studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, shared a blog she originally posted on "threadbared" that should make us take pause over the question of knowability. Drawing upon the important work of Berkeley Women and Gender Studies chair Minoo Moallem, Nguyen claims, "We cannot necessarily know from how a woman ties her headscarf what the shape of her politics might be, even though clothing clearly does matter politically. And second, we might commit further vio-

lence (refusing her complex personhood, for instance) in assuming that we can.” From Malaysia, transplanted U.S. southerner Cindy Childress, who went to the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, argues in a Facebook posting, “In Southeast Asia, the public is the political because every sign is coded into this conversation about what kind of nation this is and who is legitimate within it. Clothes make a woman a certain kind of woman to the outside observer.”

What about the sexiness of high heels? Many participants in the thread admitted that they appreciated when women dressed to look good. Attacking such shoes, even though they are bad for most women’s backs and feet, just makes feminists seem antisex, according to other respondents to Bergmann’s claims. A number commented on the variability of shoe practices, as women would walk the streets in sensible shoes and slip heels on at work. I indeed remember carrying shoes in a bag over a decade ago while trudging through Helsinki, the standard practice in many places with inclement weather. Some reinforced the equation of heels with power, with some women wanting added height in the courtroom and others so secure of their achievements that they wore flats to awards ceremonies.

We have complicated reactions to the fashion industry and the advice programs that crowd the airwaves. The director of women’s studies at Southern Illinois University, M. Joan McDermott, confesses as part of the thread that the cable show *What Not to Wear* gets under her skin: “What makes me nuts is my addiction to a show that makes me scream.” She identifies with contestants but fears being like them:

Many of the women in these wardrobe makeovers have “before” wardrobes like [mine], so I deeply resent the makeovers. I had a conversation with one of my women’s studies graduate teaching assistants about the show. She swore the show was empowering, because Stacy London and Clinton Kelly always encourage women to accept their bodies and will advise a woman to “dress the body that you have.” This is true. Also true is that the makeovers almost always entail “draw attention to the slimmest part of your body” (which turns out to be under the bustline) and “elongate the leg” (yeah, you guessed, high heels) . . . My worst nightmare is being nominated for the show.

According to Shira Tarrant of California State, Long Beach and Marjorie Jolles of Roosevelt University, editors of the forthcoming *Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style*, fashion serves as a terrain from which to challenge as well as reinforce the “constraints of hegemonic dominance.” They call for a feminist analysis that “reveal[s] the gender politics in fashion yet avoid[s] conflating fashion with women.” Such work would generate “new knowledge about pa-

triarchal power, transnational politics, circuits of production and consumption, and issues of masculinity, trans and queer identity” to “reveal how fashion is fun, powerful, and risky.”

The making of womanhood through dress thus offers creative possibilities as well as terrors. Childress boasts, “I am a feminist who collects cocktail dresses and books, and I am always aiming to be the best dressed woman in the room, but also the most intelligently spoken.” Pham celebrates fashion, scoffs at the assumptions behind Ms. Mentor’s rules of dress at conventions, and proclaims “love of fashion, shopping, and self-adornment.” She defends fashion blogging as an arena for “making cultural discourse a public, quotidian, and near-instantaneous activity.” For Barbara Winkler, the director of women’s studies at Southern Oregon University, who responded by e-mail, dress has less cerebral meaning. Her body has become “a ‘canvas’—expressing my love of color and form, stating to the world ‘this is who I am,’ especially when it is somewhat subversive of the norms. In this I am an artist and subtle culture warrior.”

Winkler expresses the complex relationship to clothing that many of us share. “As a feminist and formerly working-class girl who has ‘made it’ (to some degree) in academia,” she confesses, “I, like other upwardly mobile women, dress much better than I need to, as if I want to ‘prove’ to myself and others that I am ‘good enough’ for my job and new class status.” This motivation, she notes, “is not particularly liberating.” But when she can “undermine stereotypes about older women, women professors, feminists,” as well as other attributes, such as “heterosexual, married, a mother,” now that makes clothes worth making time to display—and talk about. Winkler, no less than our other respondents, underscores the ways that feminist intersectional analysis—taking account of class, race, age, sexuality, region, and other factors—shapes our conversation.

2010 QUESTION

As I write this question, the fate of health care reform is still up for grabs. We do not know what the final bill will look like or what the outcome will be—or whether getting the people’s business done will trump the misinformation and noise of this summer. What stakes do women have as women in the politics of health care? While scholars have uncovered the workings of gender in the shaping of medical research and delivery, here we want to collect personal experiences and prescriptions for change from feminist perspectives.

REPLIES

You can respond in two ways. You can post your answer on the *Frontiers* page on Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=28584178375> or you can e-mail your reflections, from thirty to three hundred words, to frontiers@asu.edu no later than September 1, 2010. In your subject line please type “Feminist Currents.” Unless you notify us otherwise in your e-mail, your response signifies that we may paraphrase your thoughts, quote directly from them, and use your name and affiliation.