

The Politics of Fashion in Contemporary U.S. Women's Movement

Abstract

In this paper, I argue that examining appearance norms, specifically those of fashion, is key to understanding how contemporary feminists conceptualize the political. I argue that through dress, contemporary feminists embrace and reclaim aspects of femininity and sexuality. To do so, I draw on theories from fashion, feminism and social movements and analyze data from a series of case studies and a content analysis of a popular feminist magazine. I argue that contemporary feminists attempt to create an oppositional fashion that rejects the beauty myth and reclaims femininity as empowering as a form of political protest. This is done through a style that resists a consumer culture, privileges individuality, and incorporates sexuality. I find that the move to politicize fashion within contemporary feminism raises a series of issues concerning the viability of the strategy and the defining of political in social movements.

She stands on the street posing for the Fashion Nation feature in Bust, a magazine geared toward third wave feminists. Her hair is streaked multiple colors and worn in a pony tail. Her homemade green dress has an overlay of dollar-bill printed material. On her feet are Converse tennis shoes and around her neck is a necklace made of brass knuckles. From her ears hang white plastic pistol earrings. (Bust magazine, "Fashion and Booty" a reoccurring fashion profile, Fall 2004:37, see illustration 1).

The current state of the U.S. women's movement is in constant debate. While some find evidence for its continuity in the persistence of organizations founded in the 1960s and 1970s (Katzensten 1990; Spalter-Roth and Schreiber 1995, Staggenborg and Taylor 2005), others see the lack of a nationally visible movement as a sign that the movement has gone into a state of decline or as Verta Taylor calls it the "doldrums" (1989). Adding to this sense of movement uncertainty, many feminists themselves debate whether or not the contemporary movement is engaged in making "legitimate" efforts at social change. Gatherings of different generations of feminists have taken nasty turns with name-calling on either side (see Gilmore 2005, Naples 2005). For those feminists who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, the current generation of feminists is seen frivolous and apolitical (Henry 2004, 2005). For feminists coming of age in the 1990s and the 21st century, older generations of feminists are viewed as insensitive to racial and ethnic issues and focused only on institutional change (see author 2005). Appearance is one area in which older feminists doubt the political efficacy of younger ones. Longtime,

activist Letty Cottin Pogrebin addressed young feminists at the 2002 Veteran Feminists of America conference by saying:

We were action-oriented in a public, political context. We had to challenge laws, change patterns, alter behavior. Being able to bare your midriff ... is fine as an expression, but it doesn't mean things are going to change (as cited in Gilmore 2005:97).

In this paper, I examine the politics of fashion within contemporary feminism¹ and in doing add data and theoretical insight to scholars who question the definition of political in social movements.

Feminist views on fashion range from adopting dominant dress codes as a political tactic to achieve goals, disavowing it as oppressive and patriarchal to seeing fashion as something that can be selectively incorporated and empowering (Scott 1994). In this paper, I discuss how contemporary feminists embrace and reclaim aspects of femininity and sexuality as a form of empowerment (see also Baumgartner and Richards 2004; Kreydatus 2006). To explore the idea of fashion and feminism, I draw on three theoretical frameworks and related key concepts, fashion theory and the concept of oppositional dress, feminist theory and the rejection of conventional and patriarchal beauty norms, and collective identity and tactical repertoires as articulated by social movement theorists. Drawing on a content analysis of *Bust* magazine and three community-based case studies, I argue that *some* contemporary feminists are creating and embracing an oppositional fashion that rejects the beauty myth, as articulated by Naomi Wolf (1991)² and reclaims femininity as empowering. By adopting a style that resists a consumer culture, privileges individuality, and incorporates sexuality, women profiled in

Bust along with the self-identified feminists interviewed seek to make dress and appearance a form of political resistance. 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. By exploring these dynamics I seek to expand social movement understandings of “political,” “resistance” and “protest.” I first discuss how various theories address contemporary feminist appearance and beauty norms, and then examine the relationship between feminism and fashion.

Social Movements, Protest and Fashion

Social movements at their core are oppositional in nature and social movement actors are seen as engaging in forms of resistance for the sake of social change. Social movement scholars have struggled with the notion of what qualifies as a social protest (Taylor and van Dyke 2004). Some have argued that it is opposition to the state that matters (Tilly 1991), while others have proposed that changing participant identities, culture and state policies are outcomes of a variety of activism (Meyer 2003, Staggenborg 1995). Whittier argues that political activism is legitimated on multiple levels “because inequality operates at the levels of individual subjectivity, culture and policy.”

(forthcoming: 16)

Drawing on Whittier’s multi-level analysis, I argue that dress as a form of political protest blends individual subjectivity and culture by signifying one’s membership in a group or subculture, in itself a political statement (Taylor and van Dyke 2004). In fact, “dress is a subculture’s most powerful means of communication” (O’Neal, 1999:141.) The importance of community building through oppositional dress has been

documented in both social movement and fashion studies. Marginalized groups in society such as African Americans (O’Neal 1999), members of techno culture (Szostak-Pierce 1999) and particularly youth (Holland 2004) use dress as a way to “make the community stronger, thus empowering its members” (O’Neal 1999:129). For example, white civil rights activists during Freedom Summer returned home having adopted the style of overalls and jeans of the poor Black Mississippians they lived and worked among (McAdam 1990). Gays and lesbians adopt rainbow colored clothing and jewelry as a way of signifying that they belong to a GLBTQ “family” or are “in the know” (Ward forthcoming 2008). Blee argues that participants in contemporary hate movements use insignias, tattoos and shaven heads as a forms of personalized political strategy (Blee 2002.)

Dress serves to unite social movement participants and at the same time, make individualized political statements about the larger culture or society through the redefining of relationships (i.e. wearer and viewer) and understandings of power. As Gwendolyn O’Neal argues:

When individuals engage in impression management through dress for the express purpose of controlling interaction, the act is political. In many instances, when the message in the presentation is misunderstood or considered deviant, the propensity exists to intimidate or dominate (i.e. influence) the interaction. Thus, dress may serve as a political instrument for the purpose of influencing formal and informal relationships. As such, dress is power.” (1999:127).

For example, Herr (1994) finds the adoption of a paramilitaristic style, labeled terrorist chic, is a form of resistance for members and sympathizers with the IRA (Irish

Republican Army) signifying power and attempting to influence relationships. As Benstock and Ferriss assert, it is clear that “fashion often serves political designs” (1994:5).

If dress is such an important political component of oppositional cultures, movements included, then why hasn't it been taken more seriously? One reason is that fashion is traditionally linked to the feminine, a pursuit that engages mostly women (Benstock and Ferriss 1994, Holland 2004). Samantha Holland (2004) argues that fashion is seen as frivolous and anti-intellectual and historically women's dress was seen as a form of wasteful consumption. Despite the view of fashion as inconsequential, dress (defined as modifications to the body), has embedded in it signifiers of power and resistance (Johnson and Lennon 1999, O'Neal 1999). One of the most powerful ways to see the importance of dress is through the construction of anti-fashion or oppositional dress. Oppositional dress takes on mainstream society by rejecting, parodying, satirizing or neglecting contemporary appearance norms (Holland 1999). The reinvention or creation of an oppositional style has the ability to challenge all sorts of society norms including those of propriety, class position, sexuality, racial-ethnic and economic status.

One way dress is refashioned is through the reclamation of femininity and sexuality in U.S. feminism. Baumgartner and Richards (2004) in their article, “Feminism and Femininity: Or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Thong,” argue that girlie culture, one aspect of 21st century feminism, does exactly that – reclaim what past periods of feminism have discarded. Girlie culture revalues femininity and embraces “girliness as well as power” (Baumgartner and Richards 2004:59). They argue,

“Girllies’ motivations are along the same lines of gay men in Chelsea calling each other “queer” or black men and women using the term ‘nigga’.” (2004:61).

Key to understanding how fashion is political is the feminist theory concept of embodied politics. Contemporary feminists like their older sisters have continued to engage in the politics of fashion through the concept of embodied politics (Evans and Bobel 2005, Fixmer and Wood 2005) as a creative act of resistance to disrupt power (Collins 1991). Here the female body is a site of both oppression and resistance “where cultural expectations about gender are rehearsed but also, at least, potentially, manipulated and resisted” (McCarthy 2006:2). One form of embodied resistance is a process of reclamation that embraces femininity and sexuality. Judith Taylor (unpublished) defines the act of gender reclamation as recasting and taking ownership of group stereotypes rather than simply conforming to them (see also Bobel 2006, Chansky forthcoming). Therefore the body can become a site of resisting cultural norms through reclamation of femininity through fashion. These politicized statements not only serve to reclaim the feminine in a reinvented and empowered manner, but can also serve to establish “membership” in feminist space. I now discuss the ways in which feminists have approached fashion.

Feminism and the Politics of Fashion.

Scholars find that traditional beauty norms disempower women sapping their energy, time and money. While women can gain some limited (hedonic) power through dress, (see Levy 2006, Rudd and Lennon 1999), being seen as conventionally attractive through meeting societal beauty norms is ultimately disempowering. Holland in her study of women and dress found that many of her respondents concluded that to be

“traditionally attractive you have to be malleable and not independent” (2004:81).

Aligning with this view, some feminist critiques of fashion view feminine dress as primarily a form of enslavement, displaying women’s bodies for a male gaze, and giving them a false sense of power (McCarthy 2006, Rich 1994, Scott 1994). Part of this sense of enslavement is the idea that women are forced by social dictates to adopt certain fashions (Baumgartner and Richards 2004). For instance, Adrienne Rich argues high heels and feminine dress are in the same categories as purdah, rape, veil and foot binding (1994). This view was reflected in the 1968 Miss America pageant protest by feminists who threw objects of female “oppression” such as high heels, bras and girdles into a “freedom trash can.”

Many of the debates within the women’s movement focused on notions of political efficacy. Many scholars document how more liberal feminists, represented by such women as Betty Friedan, clashed with the younger and more radical feminists (see Blau DuPlessis and Snitow 1998, Jay 1999, Scott 1994, Siegel 2007) over the issue of appearance in the 1960s and 70s. Radical feminists often adopted a style that included jeans, loose shirts, no bras and no make up. This “natural” style was based on the political ideology that women were beautiful without unnecessary and patriarchal adornment or endeavors. Other feminists, such as Friedan, believed this political fashion countered the goals of the movement and described it as “scruffy” wondering why women would go to lengths to make themselves ugly (as cited in Seigel 2007: 85). For feminists like Friedan presenting oneself fashionably and attractively was a tactic mirroring the belief that the women’s movement was mainstream and fit within dominant society.

As the media picked up on the radical feminists' politicized appearance, the idea of a feminist uniform became a part of the popular culture. Fashion scholar Kate McCarthy discusses how women coming into feminism in the 1960s dealt with the matter of appearance:

One approach to this problem [the combining of fashion and feminism], of course, is to empower women to quit making such inscriptions on their bodies. Those of us who grew into feminism in the 1970s are familiar with this effort, often caricatured as mandates, to disavow lipstick, shaving, and ideally male sexual partners. (2006: 3)

As a result, all feminists were stereotyped as disavowing or ignoring fashion. This led New York Times fashion writer Ingrid Sischy to conclude that fashion will continue outside of feminism because feminists' views are "knee jerk and programmatic" (2007: 225). In sum, fashion has been a politicized issue among feminists, and between feminists and the larger culture. Radical feminist dress was disavowed by other feminists who felt it sent the wrong message and the larger public who saw it as evidence of the "man-hating" deviant identities of all feminists. Before I explore the ways in which contemporary feminists continue the tradition (and contests) of politicizing fashion, I first describe my methods and data.

Data and Methods

To examine the politics of fashion, I draw on three sources of data, 42 semi-intensive interviews at three case study sites across the United States, participant observation in feminist communities, and a content analysis of the feminist magazine, *Bust*.

As part of a larger project, I conducted case studies in the Midwest, East Coast and the Northwest. The cases were selected to examine regional variations in feminist activism and identities. Each location was also selected because of its role in past periods of feminism; the East Coast in the emergence of 1960s feminism, the Northwest for the Riot Grrrl uprising in the mid to late 1990s, and the often overlooked importance of the Midwest as site where larger urban trends are acted out later but with complex dynamics (Ezekiel 2002, Taylor and Rupp 1993). Because of much of contemporary feminism is visible in university settings, two of the case sites (East Coast and Midwest) are situated in college-oriented communities. To provide anonymity, I created pseudonyms for the colleges, interviewees and campus organizations. At the Midwest site (Woodview), the 13 interviews drew participants from the only visible feminist organization on campus. This group served as the center of a feminist community. At the East Coast site (Evers), the 17 interviewees were from a more diverse mix of progressive and feminist organizations. At the Northwest site (Green City); the 10 interviewees were from a variety of organizational and institutional contexts, with some having no organizational affiliations at all. The Green City interviewees were also predominately college graduates who were not involved in campus organizations. Two informants were also interviewed for background information on the communities. The interviews were open-ended, structured and lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours. The interviews at Evers and Green City were gathered through a snowball method (with some of the Green City respondents located through an appeal on Friendster.com, a networking Web site).

My sampling strategy was to interview self-identified feminists at all three locations and tap into their social and political networks. In all three communities

respondents were primarily white (80%) and predominately female (97.5%).³ Their ages ranged from 19 to 33 with some diversity in sexual orientation; 35% (14) identified as queer, 22.5% (9) as lesbians, 17.5% (7) as heterosexuals, 5% (2) bisexuals, and 20% either did not identify or created different ways to describe their sexuality.⁴ Many of the respondents identified themselves as middle class with 40% (16) identifying as upper middle class, 30% (12) as lower middle class, 7.5% (3) as working class, and 5% (2) as poor.⁵ My goal in this study was not to sample specific populations of feminists (i.e. by sex, race-ethnicity, class or sexuality) but to take a snapshot of a particular feminist community and its social and political networks. In addition, although I put no age limits on respondents, overall they were relatively young in age with the average age in the communities ranging from 20 to 26.

At the time of the interviews, the respondents considered themselves to be feminists and shared a basic definition of feminism and its goals. The interviews cover areas such as definitions of feminism; stories of becoming a feminist; views of third wave feminism, relations with second wave feminism, and goals for the organization, network or community. As a part of these interviews, dress as a political strategy was raised by many of the respondents and I documented in my notes what respondents were wearing and at times, queried them on their outfits.

Field notes from a variety of events comprise the second source of data. These included a drag king show in Green City, a meeting with first year students at Evers College, and three performances of the Vagina Monologues and several rallies and meetings held by the feminist group on Woodview State University's campus. I also spent time in community venues that were central to a feminist/progressive community,

such as feminist bookstores and coffee shops. It was at these venues, along with organizational meetings, e-mail lists and Web sites, that I gathered documents relevant to each community and documented the dress of participants. Using the Atlas/ti qualitative analytical software program, I coded all the material, interviews and field notes, into themes related to state of contemporary feminism including ideas about beauty, societal norms, and appearance.

The final source of data comes from a content analysis of the magazine *Bust* that runs a reoccurring section on fashion and carries a variety of articles and advertisements related clothing, jewelry, and general issues of style and fashion. I selected the magazine because of its visibility within feminist networks⁶ and its constant attention to fashion and dress. In addition, one of *Bust's* founders and the editor-in chief Debbie Stoller is often presented as a spokeswoman for contemporary feminism and feminist pop culture trends. The analysis was conducted over five years from the Fall 2002 to Oct. /Nov. 2007 issues with the magazine increasing its publications from four times a year to bimonthly publications in 2005. The magazine that runs with the tag line “For Women, with Something to Get Off Their Chests” was founded in 1993 as a feminist ‘zine (self-produced magazine). A standard feature of the magazine is called “Looks – Fashion and Booty” and profiled usually a woman⁷ who described her outfit in the copy. The feature is similar in each issue with women describing their outfits, where they got individual pieces, why they put them together the way they did, and how it made them feel. I coded each issue by analyzing the hair, outfit, race-ethnicity⁸, occupation, style descriptors used, the reworking of the clothing, and the adjectives in the copy. A total of 22 features were analyzed.⁹ It is interesting to note that the *Bust* feature profiled several women of color

(32%), more diversity than in the community case studies. Based on a triangulation of this data, I discuss the themes that emerge from this analysis and how fashion and feminism shape our notions of what is political in social movements.

Oppositional Fashion in Feminism

[Insert illustration 1]

So what is political about wearing a spandex dress made out of dollar-bill printed fabric, converse tennis shoes, a necklace made of brass knuckles and white pistol-shaped earrings? The outfit is fashion creation (wearing a homemade dress and jewelry) and at the same time a refutation of beauty norms (Converse tennis shoes versus high heels) and consumer culture (using dollar-bill printed material) with symbols of power and sexuality thrown in (a tight bodice with a brass knuckles necklace and pistol earrings.) This carefully constructed outfit illustrates how aspects of femininity have been reappropriated and combined with feminism to create a look that defines the wearer as different from other women. This feminine and feminist reclamation has its roots in other subcultures. As Chris Bobel discussing contemporary feminism explains, “Reappropriation as subversion is not new, certainly by what is notable here is the way it is so clearly reminiscent of Punk’s culture’s tactic of taking known artifacts (such as fish net stockings paired with baby doll dresses and combat boots) as a direct affront to ‘propriety’” (2006:331).

However, there is more happening here than the simple reincorporation of the feminine and a turn toward fashion. Many of the contemporary feminists in the three communities and those profiled in *Bust*¹⁰ use a consciously constructed look as a way to live out, on an everyday basis, their politics and ideologies. As such it becomes a signifier

and statement about their feminist beliefs. Taylor and van Dyke (2004) argue that political protest can be understood through the dimensions of contestation, intentionality and collective identity. Based on interviews, observations and content analysis, three themes emerge that incorporate these dimensions, the focus on individuality; sexualized dress, and the resistance of consumer culture. After discussing these themes, I then discuss the complexities of defining the political (and apolitical) using feminist dress.

Focusing on Individuality. One of the paradoxes of feminist fashion is that while this dress creates an intentional and oppositional collective style (vintage, funky, and DIY); it does so in a way that values individuality. O'Neal notes that oppositional subcultures on the margins often resist through clothing norms. While it may appear all members of a group are dressing the same, she argues that in fact what the members are doing is making a statement as to who they are as individuals (1999). By acting collectively, individual contemporary feminists reject the dominant standards of fashion and appearance while accepting the style of their communities and culture. For Jaclyn of Woodview, dress has always been an important component of her feminist identity. Jaclyn, who often dresses in eclectic style (i.e. pink striped stockings, black skirt and heavy metal belt with dramatic hair and makeup), said of her style:

But this is definitely how I feel the most comfortable and I like getting reactions out of people by my dress. ... But it's definitely a big part of my identity and being a feminist. Just not feeling like I have to conform to anything. ... I don't think I'm playing your normal femininity. I'm not really participating in that all the way and for me that's important.

Feminist fashion encompasses a variety of individual styles and the women profiled in *Bust* had a wide range of style descriptors including “70s scholar,” “Dyke-alicious,” “Art Nouveau punk,” and “Over the top glamour, 1950s thrift shop, and couture.” Important here is the presentation of a unique self. In the words of one profiled woman:

Be comfortable in your clothes. Wear it like you own it and not the other way around. Don’t be afraid to mix and match. And definitely never walk out of a store with the exact same outfit you saw in the window. (*Bust* Dec. /Jan. 2007: 33)

It is interesting to note that one Asian woman described her look as “Dragon lady disguised as Japanese bubblegum pop” claiming not only her individuality (complete with pink boa) but also reclaiming racist stereotypes of Asian women as something positive in her identity and appearance. (See illustration 2).

Key to these fashion statements are the concepts of intentionality and agency. Feminists in the three communities seek out aspects of feminine dress they wish to incorporate into their lives. This sense of agency allows them to “play” with appearance and fashion without completely adopting conventional beauty and appearance norms. For example, Maura, a self defined “fatty” from Woodview described in a publicly performed rant her quest to adopt a bit of femininity in the form of neon colored tights. She wrote:

So ... somehow in the past few days I became fixated on finding myself a pair of neon tights, easy enough one would think. After all, I’m a woman and there are millions of opportunities for me to consume my identity and pay people and corporations for it!

After finally finding tights that would fit in a maternity store, Maura, who is not pregnant, concluded:

So, for a recap – fatty tights spotted at the store for temporary fatties, or newly turned fatties who need to still feel like they have the same clothing choices as they had before they got pregnant. ... This is ridiculous!!! Exploit me capitalism!

I am your willing woman fatty and I want to buy my femininity in neon tights today! Where are you???? [Emphasis by author, rant obtained Oct. 1, 2007.]

In this rant, Maura illustrates a sense of agency in seeking out an aspect of feminine dress yet also offers a critique (and acknowledgement) of consumer culture.

By prizing both collectivity and individuality through the construction of a contemporary style, dress becomes a way to create community through the construction of a feminist identity that seeks to unsettle dominant ways of seeing femininity.

Therefore, feminist fashion is both accommodationist by accepting certain community aesthetics, and resistant by refusing to completely abide by dominant femininity and fashion norms.

Sexualizing dress

Sexualized dress has long been a fashion staple; however it is growing increasingly more popular in the dominant culture. Stephanie Rosenbloom notes that Halloween has become a time for young women to “go bad for a day” with costumes that are more “strip club than storybook” (2006:1). Ariel Levy (2006) notes the same phenomena happening in women and girls’ everyday fashion with the “Girls Gone Wild” phenomena where woman bare their breasts or make out with heterosexual girlfriends in order to win a baseball cap and appear in a video. However, the move towards more sexualized clothing is more than a trend pushing women to present themselves for the male gaze. By politicizing sexuality as a part of femininity and feminism, contemporary

feminist fashion is unabashedly sexual. However, the focus of the gaze is turned inward with women expressing their sexuality for their own gratification rather than male approval. There are two forces behind the sexualization of contemporary feminist dress; reacting to perceptions of earlier feminists, and the reclaiming of one's own sexuality.

Many younger feminists perceive their older feminist sisters as being anti-sex (see Johnson 2002). As evidenced in the multitude of advertisements and features in *Bust*, being sex positive through the purchase of sex toys and an open discussion of sexual desire and dysfunction is a part of a contemporary feminist ethos (see author 2005).

Deborah, from Evers described her community's views on sex. She said:

We've gone towards a very pro-sex, pro talking about sex, making sex okay [stance and] acknowledging and validating other kinds of sexuality, other kinds of sexual expression and promoting women's sexual identity [by] allowing them to talk about pornography and pleasure and all these things.

Stephanie Gilmore (2005) argues that the struggles with conceptualizing and living out sexuality are not new. Sex and sexuality were debated issues in the second wave from the infamous anti-lesbian "lavender menace" in the National Organization for Women (NOW) to the claim by Radicallesbians that women should forgo sex with men for true liberation. Not all second wave approaches to sexuality were anti-sex, Gilmore notes, with NOW allowing ads for Playgirl and Venus at conventions and heterosexual members openly writing about their desire and "kinky sex wishes" (as quoted in Gilmore 2005:106).

Despite the diversity of 1960s and 70s feminist approaches to sex and sexuality, contemporary feminists respond as though the entire second wave was anti-sex. In

opposition to this perception, many contemporary feminists both in *Bust* and the communities incorporate a sense of sexiness into their dress. In the *Bust* profiles several of the women are dressed in ways that can be understood as sexual (e.g. fishnet stockings, camisoles, bustiers, short skirts and shorts). For example Jamie, a designer, was profiled wearing a pair of knee high boots, a see-through lace camisole, a pair of very short denim shorts, and white jacket tied with a bow at her neck. She said of her look, “I like to wear short shorts in the summer, together with a feminine blouse. It’s professional, but fun” (*Bust* April/.May 2005: 33). Others described their look with terms such as “flirty and feminine.” This sexualized way of dress, revealing the body and wearing lingerie as outerwear is done with a sense of play and is not a constant. As Kelsey, a young feminist in Johannesburg noted, “My friends never know what I’m going to look like, because one day I’ll be wearing baby dolls and the next, I’ll be wearing Doc Martens (*Bust* April/May 2007:42).

Scholars have argued that unequal sexual relationships between girls and boys can strip girls of their own innate desires and sexuality (see Tolman 2002). By playing with sexualized fashion, contemporary feminists incorporate sexiness into their appearances as a choice. Acting as subjects rather than objects of sexuality, desire and sex become powerful ways to state one’s empowerment. By politicizing dress, contemporary feminists seek to reclaim sexuality as something that belongs to them and not the viewer. For example, during a performance of the Vagina Monologues in 2002 at Woodview State University, several of the women painted the words “slut” and “cunt” on their bodies as symbols of their owning their own sexuality. This is not to argue that sexualized dress does not cause confusion or misinterpretation. Jamie, who sees her dress

as professional and fun might well be viewed as presenting herself as a sexual object to the larger society. In a similar vein, when Woodview students returned to do the Vagina Monologues in 2003, one of the organizers questioned whether or not writing “cunt” and “slut” on the performer’s bodies and clothes might be misinterpreted by audience members.

Resisting Consumer Culture. One of the main critiques of fashion is that it encourages women to consume goods, diminishing women’s economic status, and supports capitalism and host of other evils including sweat shop labor and unfair trade practices (Kreydatus 2006). One of the most evident ways oppositional fashion resists consumer culture is through buying clothes and jewelry as cheaply as possible. Frugal shopping is a mainstay of many of the women profiled in *Bust*. Almost all of the women profiled had bought various pieces of clothing and shoes at thrift stores, resale shops and street vendors. In addition, many report that they also shop at discount or “big box” stores such as H&M, Target and Kmart for their clothes. For example, a waitress and aspiring documentary filmmaker detailed where she had purchased her outfit:

I got the boots at the Salvation Army – on half price day – so they were like \$2.

I’ve had the skirt for like four years; I think I got it in Italy. The belt I’ve had since I was 13. The red shirt is from the 40s; a friend’s mother gave it to me. The jacket I bought in a flea market on the Lower East Side for \$1. I got the tights in Italy too. The bag I got at a yard sale. (*Bust* Winter 2002:27).

It is tempting to see this trend towards frugal shopping as simply the outcome of students or young women starting their careers purchasing what they can afford. While this might be the case for many of those profiled, it is important to note that many of the

women also wore individual pieces of clothes that ranged from \$80 to \$350, illustrating how thrifty shopping is more than an economic necessity.

Many of the items purchased in thrift or discount stores were then reinvented as part of the DIY ethic. As Bobel notes, DIY grew out of punk culture and the notion that making something oneself is a rejection of mainstream capitalist consumerist society. DIY is not a new phenomena and not solely limited to clothing. Ricia Chansky notes that the current trend in doing needle works (i.e. knitting, crocheting) is a reaction to the standardization of goods and is a trend that can be seen historically throughout U.S. culture, notably the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (forthcoming: 6).

In *Bust*, women altered their clothing in a variety of ways that ranged from adding more decorations (i.e. rhinestone or crystals) to remaking clothing so that it fit their bodies better. Chansky writes:

Additionally, in a time when many women are actively trying to work against culturally regimented ideals of feminine beauty and have healthy body images, the act of creating one's own clothes is a way to have funky, expressive clothing that fits well despite the limitations of mass produced clothing that tends to be made for specific body sizes and shapes. (forthcoming: 5.)

Two of the profiled women, one a jewelry designer and the other an illustrator described how they reinvented their clothing:

Jo: I made the jacket from the satin of an old 1930s wedding dress. The embroidery depicts the story of P.T. Barnum, who had a traveling circus in the

1800s. He was famous because he created a fake merman – half ape, half salmon.
(*Bust* Aug. /Sept. 2007:37)

Janet: The Hello Kitty shirt I got from Target, I just cut off the neck. Luckily I fit into a children's size large. (*Bust* Dec. '04/Jan. 2005: 39)

A third way in which consumer culture is resisted is through the selection of vintage clothing. One reason is that vintage clothing is often available at thrift and resale shops and is economical and easily altered. For example, one woman, a burlesque performer, noted:

I have an awful habit of collecting 1950s underwear; my closets are stuffed with the most insane lingerie. It's hard to find a bra in double-D that's pretty these days but back then it was a common size. (*Bust* Oct. /Nov. 2006:37).

However, the focus on vintage goes beyond availability and frugality. The purchasing of vintage fashions can be seen as a rejection of the constantly changing nature of fashion by focusing on a particular period of dress. Many of the women when asked to describe their styles described them as from different periods such as 1920s flappers, “’70s proggy-rock bands,” early Lucille Ball (1940s and 1950s) or in the fashion of 18th century women.

For some of the interviewees, the impact of globalization and sweatshop labor on women's work is a concern. Bailey noted that community members tried to avoid clothing known to be made in sweatshops. Deborah, of Evers, noted how labor activism and feminism merged for her. She said, “So much of the anti-sweatshop activism has started to look at women in the global industries and women in capitalism and I would really like to see labor activism that I am involved in go more in those directions.”

In sum, through thrift shopping, reinventing clothing, and adopting vintage styles, the feminists profiled in *Bust* create a politicized form of embodied politics identifiable to other feminists that reject some of the consumerist aspects of fashion. However, for each of the ways in which dress is made feminist, through individuality, sexuality and anti-consumerism, there arises a series of concerns that resonate with social movement scholars' debates over defining "political protest" within social movements. While scholars can focus on intentionality, contestation, and collective identity construction as core aspects of protest, questions outcome and efficacy remain troubling (see Taylor and van Dyke 2004).

Politicizing Fashion

The refashioning of appearance through feminist ideologies has multiple outcomes. When a way of presenting oneself is associated with a movement it can act in a positive manner by drawing together community (Staggenborg 1995). It may also act in a negative manner by stereotyping or labeling the movement in a way that dissuades potential members.. In the earlier periods of feminism, the "natural" fashion (e.g. no makeup, unshaven bodies and peasant shirts with jeans), was picked up by the media as the uniform of all feminists and came to be viewed as a series of stereotypes (e.g. ugly, man hating, lesbian) that still resonates and repels some women from the movement today. Feminists also deal with stereotypes fearing that to adopt a fashionable appearance means to disavow "true" feminist activism. Jennifer Allyn writes of the tension between feminism and fashion:

...I felt a part of a new generation of feminists. We wanted to make room for play in our lives – dyeing our hair, shaving our legs, dressing in ways that made

us happy – without sacrificing a commitment to political activism. (Allyn and Allyn 1995:144).

In addition, dress as protest is not politicized equally in all feminist communities. For some interviewees situated in conservative environments, dress and fashion were dictated by societal beauty norms and dress and appearance did not become a part of the intentional “toolkit” of cultural protest” (Swidler 1986). For example, Kyra, who was a student in the politically and socially conservative environment of Woodview, talked about how fashion made her doubt her ability to find a partner who would accept her as she was. She said of women who embrace conventional standards of beauty:

Well, I think it's fine if they're doing it and they're not taking other patriarchal ideas that go along with them. But to be honest with you when I start worrying about lipstick and makeup and that kind of stuff I start to feel bad about myself so I don't do it. For the most part I don't wear makeup. I wear it when I go out on the weekends sometimes But I worked at [a beauty supply store] and it's a horrible place to work because all you see are all these things to make you more beautiful and you're like “Well before I worked here I didn't think there was anything that wrong with me” and I quit. I quit for a lot of reasons and that was one of them. I went up to him [the manager] and I'm like “Does this place make you feel like shit about yourself?”

In addition at Woodview, many of the interviewees talked about sexualized dress as “club wear” worn by women only interested in attracting men and not done for political reasons.

Politicized playing with fashion can also be problematic. Even when feminists understand dress as political, making sure others understand your political identity becomes a complicated game. As Bailey, a student on Evers' liberal campus described these complex dynamics:

I'll go from getting all decked out for a party in a short skirt and glittery eye shadow just because that was fun to the baggy jeans, to something that's more dykey to more femme, you know what I mean? Just... a real fluidity. ... It absolutely is a game - just sort of "What am I going to identify as today?" and "How am I going to express myself today?" And I think there are people who are ... very, very, very much aware especially on this campus that clothing is political because it connotes a gender identity. You know? And so it's interesting. It can be extremely empowering to say I'm going to go all over the place and look at how much I can switch and look - I can identify as everything. But it can also be really, really suffocating because if someone sees me on a Saturday night with my boots drinking and dancing, then they might not take me seriously the next day when I'm you know just wearing jeans and a shirt and I'm ready to you know talk about something. Because people do make assumptions and if someone in class is wearing a certain outfit that you know is from the Gap or whatever then there are certain political assumptions that are made like "She doesn't care about sweat shops" or the fact that her jeans are tight. And so on the one hand it's empowering but at the same time because we've made clothing political, we assume that everyone is making it political and so if somebody's wearing something we make these certain assumptions about their identity.

In addition with sexualized clothing, many contemporary feminists construct a pro-sex collective identity that creates a boundary between themselves and older feminists and often feel judged for their more sexualized appearance. Sally from Woodview said:

I think a lot of people, maybe older women feel alienated or they feel like “Why are you doing this or why are you presenting [yourself] in this way? You're over sexualizing yourself.” You know, like carrying the little Hello Kitty purses - being infantilized or being infant-like or something.

Politicized dress then has ramifications that contemporary feminists deal with in their everyday lives, illustrating the complexity of creating collective identity through fashion. For Lana from Green City, her woman symbol ring was a political element of her everyday appearance. She said:

Lana: I've worn it for eight years and I get comments on it all the time. ... I'm just like “wow” that a lot of people notice it and they make a preconceived notion of me because ...

Jo: What do they assume when they see that?

Lana: [Pause] Well I'm sure all sorts of things but probably something gay-related or you know “don't fuck with her.” ... I was at this conference for work and I was wearing my ring and this woman came up to me and she's like “That's really brave of you to wear that ring here” and I was just like “What are they going to do, fire me?”

Lana's refusal to remove her ring despite the potential negative interpretations of the people around her illustrates the power of intentionally redefining relationships

through fashion. Lana's story also illustrates another conundrum of the politics of feminist fashion. Lana's efforts are largely individualistic and are not backed by a large number of women working in proximity to her utilizing the same form of resistance. Much of what contemporary feminists do through fashion is what I term "individually collective." By this I mean that although they often seem to operate as individuals, they do so by drawing upon collectively define symbols or aspects of the movement. The women's symbol ring or the rejection of a certain expected feminine look have a larger collective understanding even though they are deployed by individuals throughout the course of their days or lives. Yet, on a day to day basis their feminist identities are challenged by the lack of a supportive (and knowing) community.

Another issue with viewing feminist fashion as political is the way in which oppositional fashion trends are often commodified and absorbed into the larger culture. One example would be the way in which tattoos moved from being statements by sub- or countercultures to being common fashion statements in the mid to late 1990s. Feminist trends are also commodified. For example, the handcrafted look is available through a variety of clothing lines as well as the "vintage" look. While these are fashion trends without political statements, they do diffuse the political meaning in similarly appearing clothes. Messner (2002) points out how feminism itself has been commodified through commercials for products such as Nike which exhort women to "Just do it" as a form of true empowerment. Also complicating the politics of feminist fashion is the way in which crafting has become a capitalist endeavor for many young feminists. Feminist or progressive crafting fairs are common around the country and magazines such as *Bust* run regular features on how to do certain crafts. Debbie Stoller, the editor in chief of *Bust*, is

also the author of several books on knitting with feminist-oriented titles such as *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook* and *Happy Hookers: Stitch and Bitch Crochet*. When crafts, created as aspects of feminine resistance, are sold to those who both do and don't identify as feminist, the political impact of the act of crafting can become diluted.

Conclusion and Discussion

Dress is a significant component of how we perceive, interact and judge each other (Johnson and Lennon 1999). Contemporary feminists use dress as a way to create community linkages and identify likeminded individuals. As Emily of Woodview simply stated, "I think the more conservative a person looks than the less likely I am to think that they may believe the things that I do." By arranging their appearance based on reclamation of the feminine, contemporary feminists are intentionally creating oppositional statements that support a broader feminist identity.

When contemporary feminists refashion both feminism and fashion through the creation of politicized dress, does this bring about desired social change. Deborah Siegel (2007) argues that the political is only dealt with in personal terms in contemporary feminism. So then what changes do these micropolitics of dress create? In a larger sense the question becomes what is power this context? Is power conceptualized narrowly as self esteem and self confidence? For Jaclyn, claiming femininity brought her strength. She explained, "It's my gender identity. ... I feel the most confident when I'm dressed like this." Or is power conceptualized as choice (i.e. agency or intentionality)? Interviewees and women profiled in *Bust* repeatedly speak of the power of choice, the ability to choose how you are presented in the social world. For example, the woman described in the introduction said, "I'm also wearing earrings with guns, because white

plastic pistols hanging from your ears definitely lets people know you're dangerous.”

(*Bust* Fall 2004:37). Power is then something that can be incorporated into dress.

Dressing in a sexually provocative manner can also be interpreted as connecting power and sexual desire, reclaiming not only the feminine but the sexual.

Yet, when one returns to the critiques of fashion by 1960s and 1970s feminists and Naomi Wolf's argument of the beauty myth, one must question whether or not young women and men are playing into dominant ideals of appearance. Refashioning feminism in the form of DIY, vintage and thrifty dress takes energy and time, even if it does not take large sums of money. In addition, when symbols of power are incorporated into dress are they simply reproducing masculine ideas of power? Pistols, whether they are earrings or actual weapons, have been traditionally associated with masculinity and masculine power (McKellar 1996). Therefore, the efficacy of these contemporary refashionings is questionable whereas the presentation of them is clear. Yet it is clear that in the 21st century, young feminists create a culture of resistance in a hostile environment similar to their foremothers in previous periods (Rupp and Taylor 1990).

This paper combines theoretical viewpoints seldom used together, feminist, fashion and social movement theory. Yet dress is one of the most important aspects of a cultural “toolbox” that feminists use. The concepts of oppositional fashion and embodied politics are important tools in understanding movements that engage in “lifestyle” politics. Adding these concepts to a social movement vocabulary can open new directions of study challenging the way in which we define “political protest” as well as understanding the dynamics of tactics, innovation and Commodification. Movement actors seek to make change in a variety of ways ranging as Whittier (forthcoming) notes

from the individual, to the cultural, to the political. By narrowly defining the political as focused only on policy efforts, scholars miss the opportunity to see how the micro political functions within social movement contexts. The commodification of feminist fashion (and feminism itself) illustrates the attractiveness of these messages of empowerment and individuality even though the process saps the political strength of such tactics.

An examination of the external movement context also helps explain how movements define the political as specific movements. Whittier argues that as repression from the state shifts in form, so does the resistance from social movements. The contemporary women's movement is made up of a generation of feminists that has seen the constant chipping away of the policy and legislative gains of earlier feminists. Title IX, reproductive rights, sexual harassment, workplace protections are all subject to constant backlashes since their legislative or policy inceptions. When the traditional political avenues of making change are not available, I argue that young feminists turn to another arena for making change – culture - drawing upon what Bourdieu labels “habitus” (1990). Fashion addresses in significant cultural ways that manner in which we understand femininity and masculinity in society. When women begin to alter their expected presentations of femininity, it has cultural significance. In examining the ways in which feminist fashion is being constructed by some young feminists it is clear that a feminist identity is being asserted and ideologies, such as sexuality are being elaborated. In addition, the body becomes the location where larger issues are elaborated (i.e. sweatshop labor and anti-consumerist values) and connections to other social movements are made. In sum, despite the debates about the state and politics of contemporary

feminism, my data indicates young women and men are presenting a form of social resistance written out on the body and expressed both communally and individually, dynamics of social movement protest that are informative to scholars and important to activists.

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Illustration 1: Looks Feature, Bust magazine, Fall 2004:p.37



Illustration 2: Looks Feature, Bust magazine
Dec. '04/Jan. 2005: p39



Endnotes

¹ I use the term contemporary feminism here to describe feminism in the early 21st century. I do not use the term third wave feminists because of the considerable debates over the wave model in feminism. By using the term contemporary I am locating this analysis in a particular time period without entering into a debate over whether or not this constitutes a “new” or distinguishable period of U.S. feminism. My goal in this paper is to simply discuss what feminism in the early 21st century looks like.

² Wolf argues that women are psychologically disempowered by the demands of conventional beauty norms and images of beauty in the larger society.

³ The sample does include, however, respondents who identify as genderqueer, undecided gender or transgender.

⁴ Those include combinations of labels such as “Queer/ Homosexual/ Lesbian” or more looser categories such as “fluid” and “lesbian to queer.”

⁵ 17.5% either used a combination of class to describe themselves (or their parents) or chose not to identify class.

⁶ Almost all of my interviewees had either read or heard of *Bust* magazine.

⁷ Only two men were profiled in the Fashion Nation feature in this five year period and one person, the lead singer for the Toilet Boys, featured was identified as a transvestite in a fan website.

⁸ I visually coded the race-ethnicity of the featured person and examined the copy for any other indicators. I realize that this is problematic but it allowed me to gain some sense of the racial inclusiveness of the feature.

⁹ Four issues of the magazine – three from 2003 and one from 2005 – are missing from my collection.

¹⁰ Because of their inclusion in a magazine that focuses on feminism and links feminism and fashion, I am assuming that the people profiled are feminists even though the limited copy does not identify them as so. Even if some do not choose to identify as feminists, they are being presented in a magazine as feminist fashion models.