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Clothes Reading: Sartorial Consciousness in Postmodern Fiction by Women

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CLOTHES READING: SARTORIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN POSTMODERN FICTION BY WOMEN

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Title: Clothes Reading: Sartorial Consciousness in Postmodern Fiction by Women

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This study examines sartorial statements and descriptions in texts by postmodern women writers Margaret Atwood, Alice Walker, and Maxine Hong Kingston. The texts are Atwood's novels *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and short story collection *In Love and Trouble*, Kingston's prose narratives *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, and her novel *Tripmaster Monkey*. The work defines the terms "fashion," "dress," "non-fashion," "anti-fashion," "traditional garments," and "costume." It situates its discussion at the intersection of mid-to-late twentieth-century American women's prose narratives, postmodernism, feminism, and fashion theory and history in order to determine the significance of and attitudes toward sartorial habits and the culture of clothing, including specific garments and hairstyles.

By engaging in the close reading of sartorial passages and by historically contextualizing garments and outfits chosen by characters and described and commented upon by narrators, the study shows that while clothing and its significance are highly contested issues, such issues have recently enjoyed a surge in academic attention. Clothing's significance in construction of identities cannot be overstated. The texts strongly demonstrate the implications of sartorial habits as they relate to age, gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality, and the study addresses the gap

in feminist literary research whereby matters of dress in my subject texts have not been remarked adequately and in some cases, not remarked at all. The research shows that Atwood's work is fascinated with the culture of clothing and yet conflicted about the consequences of that culture for individuals. Walker's work is keenly aware of sartorial significance as a sometimes positive and sometimes negative force, but one always to be reckoned with. Kingston, who is also keenly aware of sartorial significance, writes clothing as integral to constructed histories, nationalities, and gendered identities. The study concludes by considering the ways in which sartorial judgment is almost always directed at women and the garment industry's woeful treatment of women in factories. It introduces the anti-sweatshop activist movement and urges consumption practice that is informed and conscientious about labor issues.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: FASHION, FEMINISM, AND POSTMODERN FICTION

The purpose of *Clothes-Reading: Sartorial Consciousness and Postmodern Fiction by Women* is to examine the production and reception of knowledge regarding the culture of clothing in Margaret Atwood's novels *Cat's Eye* (1988) and *The Robber Bride* (1993), Alice Walker's short story collection *In Love and Trouble* (1973), and her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), and Maxine Hong Kingston's prose narratives *The Woman Warrior* (1975), *China Men* (1977), and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1987). In these works, authors describe clothing not only to set the scene and to create characters, but also to comment on fashion and dressing as cultural, social, and sometimes political practices. The texts are exceedingly aware of ways that social classifications regarding gender, age, and class are encoded into sartorial statements. As such, they reveal how their protagonists, for better or worse, negotiate social situations and hierarchies by working (or not working) their wardrobes, no matter how meager or abundant those wardrobes may be. The narrative visions of all three authors attend to the experiences of and attitudes toward sartorial constructions, thereby illustrating how clothing "makes the complications of social life visible" (Harvey 17).

I would add that clothing and the imperative to dress are themselves complications of social life. Issues of class, gender, power, performance, ethnicity, nationality, and anxiety all come into play in the culture of clothing, the presentation of the social self, and the reception of that presentation. Coming from a variety of social, ethnic, national, and geographic positions, women writers register a variety of sartorial attitudes and experiences. My intention is to tease out from my selected texts such

attitudes and experiences. My inquiry considers the symbolic and rhetorical values invested in different outfits through their genealogies. It also attends to the ways in which the narratives reinforce or subvert those values. I ask such questions as, from what cultural, historical, aesthetic, or political movements did particular sartorial significances originate or accumulate? How are gender, class, and ethnic and national identities constructed through sartorial traditions and subversions? How do the narratives effect semiotic shifts in clothing connotations? How does the writing of clothing reflect the performative qualities of dress suggested by Judith Butler? Do people in the novels use clothing effectively to enhance their own senses of self determination? At the same time, does the fiction critique the contemporary gender-charged nature of self-adornment and the exploitive tendencies of fashion production? These are all questions to be addressed in close reading of written clothing—clothes reading. As my literature reviews will show, the significance of written clothing has been examined to some extent in the case of Atwood, to a much lesser extent in the case of Walker, and practically not at all in the case of Kingston. My study, therefore, sets forth and reacts to previous criticism and fills gaps in a discussion that rests at the intersection of feminism, fashion, and fiction.

"Fashion" is defined here, following Entwistle, who quotes Quentin Bell, as an historically specific system for the production and consumption of clothing and accessories which is characterized by a "logic of 'change for change's' sake'" (44-45). Fashion refers not just to haute couture but also to all manner of everyday dress and "street style," which are routinely considered by fashion theorists as part of the fashion system, which also includes clothing at all but the most extremely bereft levels of the socio/economic hierarchy. Fashion also pertains to clothing and accessories worn in all

social environments, whether they involve work, leisure, sports, shopping, or human rituals. "Dress," as a verb, refers to the selection by an individual of any material objects or accessories designed to cover and/or adorn the body for purposes of protection and social interaction. "Dress," as a noun, refers to the ensemble selected. Though this study is interested in the material as well as the symbolic properties of clothing, it is helpful to apply the linguistic analogy whereby fashion is the language, and dress is the individual speech act. Just as *parole* is to *langue*, dress is to fashion (Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* 8).

I use the term "non-fashion" to indicate a style of dress that signifies disinterest in fashion or style. A good example is found in Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. The protagonist's brother Stephen sports a soiled and tattered look that is carefully maintained in order to distance himself from boys he scornfully calls "fruity clothes horses" (237). "Anti-fashion," on the other hand, expresses a great deal of interest by aggressively denying or mocking that which the fashion system—read the establishment—currently offers as "in" or mainstream. Punk fashion was anti-fashion, but anti-fashion often and paradoxically becomes fashionable. Fashion and anti-fashion change quickly, which sets them apart from traditional clothing. "Traditional garments" are those such as saris because their impulse is toward continuity rather than change. Fashion historians point out that traditional garments do in fact change, but such changes are subtle and difficult for cultural outsiders to see. Finally, "costume" refers to styles of dress or outfits that attempt to mimic the look of another time, place, culture, gender, or profession.

Fashion and Feminism

While Atwood, Walker, and Kingston all write the above styles of dress into their fiction, they are also identified (sometimes problematically) as feminist, and because it is women—or men derisively labeled effeminate—who are sneered at for a preoccupation with clothing, feminism has a great stake in discussions regarding habits of dress and whether they are empowering or disempowering. Though academic feminism in the West is credited with opening spaces for the study of formerly marginalized cultural forms, it traditionally takes a dim view of self-adornment and clothing scholarship. Kaja Silverman refers to the "sartorial reticence of North American feminism," which is "part of a larger reaction against everything that has been traditionally associated with female narcissism and exhibitionism" (193). William Keenan's " 'Sartor Resartus' Revisited" notes "hostility generated by students of feminist theory towards fashion" in both the UK and the US (42). And Linda Scott's *Fresh Lipstick* traces the history of feminism's antipathy for fashion, locating it in current pedagogies of academics associated with the second wave. This situation is ironic, given that dress studies have been marginalized due to "prevailing 'masculinist' academic prejudices against 'women's subjects of which dress and the body appeared the most extreme" (Keenan 7). However, as the previous quotations, this study, and the narratives it examines attest, feminist scholarship is engaged in revising its approach to clothing culture and its effects on women's lives.

In her popular book *Feminism*, Susan Brownmiller writes, "Every wave of feminism has foundered on the question of dress reform" (79). Indeed, ever since the reform-inspired women's movement of the 1850s, American feminism has been divided by conflicting ideologies regarding what women—especially feminists—should wear.

Though the postmodern spirit embraces active self-construction, a construction that includes and enjoys sartorial surfaces as slippery markers of identity, clothing and the consumption of clothing remain suspect. In her book *Adorned in Dreams*, Elizabeth Wilson, who uses the term "anti-fashion" to mean the attitude that considers fashion wasteful and frivolous, writes that fashion and anti-fashion ideals are related to opposed philosophies of authenticity and the more aesthetically-minded ideals of Modernism. According to Wilson, the idealization of authenticity, which mistakenly equates the plain and the useful with the authentic self, is opposed to the modern, which celebrates the fluidity of codes and the possibilities of play and subversion within those codes. There can be no synthesis of these two world-views, and Wilson expresses what the opposition means for fashion and feminism: "Is fashionable dress part of the oppression of women, or is it a form of adult play? Is it part of the empty consumerism, or is it a site of struggle symbolized in dress codes? Does it muffle the self, or create it? . . . [T]he thesis is that fashion is oppressive, the antithesis is that we find it pleasurable; . . . no synthesis is possible" (*Adorned* 231, 232). Thus, fashion remains a site of contention and postmodern ambivalence.

Fashion and Discourse

While Wilson's work maintains that the feminist division over fashion has gone largely unarticulated (a situation that is currently and quickly changing), she is also aware that one can locate a great deal of fashion consciousness and discourse within the pages of novels. The English novel has always been a site of dress critique, and, as new populations began to write their experiences in English, the novel widened and diversified its reflection of sartorial consciousness. In this way, the writing of clothing in

the novel becomes a specific and diverse site of the production of cultural knowledge about fashion and attitudes toward the ways in which people present their social bodies. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said sets forth a commonly accepted theory regarding the power of books as sites of knowledge production and dissemination. Said writes, "The idea . . . is that people, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes" (295). Though Said's topic is the power of the colonial text to write the colonial place and its subject, the idea that books create cultural knowledge still holds and becomes even more important as the global market makes wider groups of texts available to wider groups of readers. Fiction and the analysis of fiction in and out of the academy continue to produce knowledge just as they attempt to reflect reality. As a literary study, the following privileges "the deconstruction of image or product as text" (Brewer, qtd. in Wilson, *Adorned* 272). In doing so, it "dwell[s] on fashion images and their symbolic and communicative power" (Wilson 272) in order to consider characters' sartorial practices as well as narrative attitudes toward clothing in the context of postmodern aesthetics and ontological philosophies.

Though close reading of clothing may seem novel, philosophers, historians, cultural critics, artists, and feminists have been fascinated with practices of dress and adornment for a very long time. In 1575, Montaigne speculated about the origins of clothing and noted, as many since have, that human beings are the only creatures in nature who dress themselves (Kim et al. 15-17). Just as our languages set us apart from the animal kingdom, so do our clothes. Montaigne contemplated the nature/culture dichotomy, noting that clothing is clearly not natural. He knew, as Carlyle did, that man

"is by nature a *Naked Animal*" (Carlyle 4, emphasis original). Clothing of any sort, then, denaturalizes the body, and theorists from an astonishingly wide range of disciplinary approaches have worked to explain fashion as an intriguing and mysterious cultural sign system, which, unlike spoken language, carries enormously significant visual and material properties. Theorists and critics of clothing include dress historians (Taylor, Steele, Ribeiro, Wilson), economists (Smith, Veblen), anthropologists (Crawley, Schwarz), psychologists (Hurlock, Flügel), sociologists (Simmel, Crane, Entwistle), artists and art historians (Laver, Hollander), and literary/film critics (Swift, Carlyle, Hazlitt, Barthes, Silverman). Elizabeth Wilson writes that "fashion is difficult to theorize because it pertains to more than one set of practices, and cannot, therefore, be quite encompassed within a single discourse of academic 'discipline'" ("The New Components" 221). Lou Taylor's *The Study of Dress History* describes various methods of research and makes clear how complex dress studies are while confirming the impossibility of imposing monolithic theories that explain in total the phenomenon of human sartorial practice.

But while studies in dress have a long and complex history, they are also noted for being marginalized in the academy. Taylor quotes Dr. Samuel Rush Meyrick and Charles Hamilton-Smith, who in 1821 "wrote that costume history was burdened with 'the intemperate and hasty charge of carrying with it the inferiority of not being worthy of consideration of a man of letters'" (2). Indeed, it is conventional in academic writing about clothing to begin with a sort of apology or explanation pertaining to the perceived triviality of the topic, and in a discussion regarding ethnographic studies, Taylor quotes anthropologist Ronald Schwarz, who wrote in 1979, "clothing is a subject about which

anthropologists should have much to say yet remain mysteriously silent . . . Descriptions of clothing are so rare in some texts of social anthroplogy . . . that the casual reader might easily conclude the natives go naked" (195). However, the influences of feminist, postcolonial, and ethnic studies, and what Vincent B. Leitch calls "the triumph of cultural studies," has resulted in a surge of cross-disciplinary studies that includes several cross-disciplinary clothing studies.[1] This surge is part and parcel of the turn to postmodernism in scholarship that Fredric Jameson calls "aesthetic populism," a turn that creates new, exciting, and more credible spaces for the analysis of fashion, including fashion in fiction. Furthermore, postmodern studies are fascinated with issues of identity and surfaces, both of which pertain to dress.

Within this epistemological climate, one can notice a flurry of academic publication regarding dress and fashion. Just a few examples include Gilles Lipovetsky's *The Empire of Fashion* (1991); Benstock and Ferriss' *On Fashion* (1994); Joan Entwistle's *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (2000); *Diana Crane's Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (2000); William Keenan's *Dressed to Impress: Looking the Part* (2001); Malcolm Barnard's *Fashion as Communication* (2002); Johnson, Torntore, and Eicher's *Fashion Foundations: Early Writings on Fashion and Dress* (2003); Burman and Turbin's *Material Strategies: Dress and Gender in Historical Perspective* (2003); David Kunzle's *Fashion & Fetishism: Corsets, Tight-Lacing & other Forms of Body-Sculpture* (2004); and Küchler and Miller's *Clothing as Material Culture* (2005). In what seems to me a brave and surprising move, Ali Guy, Eileen Green, and Maura Banim, the editors of *Through the Wardrobe: Women's Relationships with Their Clothes* (2001), discuss their

contributors not only in terms of their academic positions, accomplishments, and publications, but also in terms of their personal sartorial styles and how they feel about the business of having to present themselves as clothed bodies within the precincts of the university. Given the current out-of-the-academic-closet attention to fashion, it is certainly important, perhaps even vital, for literary criticism to lend its voice to a widely diverse, rigorous, and fascinating discussion.

In "Accounting for Fashion," Anne Hollander notes that "the hunt for meaning in cultural trends focuses on clothes more than ever in these self-conscious days, and current clothes are now found to be emotionally loaded in ways that only stage and screen costumes once were" (105). The use of costumes as visual signifiers on the stage and screen is well-known, but we also know that novelists have also always dressed and accessorized their characters so that clothing in prose fiction is "emotionally loaded" as well. The extra-significance of "written clothing" as opposed to real clothing is emphasized by Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System*. Written during Barthes' structuralist period, *The Fashion System* attempts to exhaustively describe and define an enclosed system of signifiers within two French fashion magazines. Fashion magazines address a much different rhetorical situation than novels, so Barthes' method here does not fit novelistic analysis; however, his discussion does speak to the extra-significance of written clothing, which carries more connotative meaning than real clothing because it is relieved of material conditions and contingencies. According to Barthes, " 'Real clothing is burdened with practical considerations (protection, modesty, adornment); these finalities disappear from 'represented' clothing, which no longer serves to protect, to cover, or to adorn, but at most to signify protection, modesty, or adornment." Later in

the passage, he writes, "only written clothing has no practical or aesthetic function: it is entirely constituted with a view to signification" (8). In the context of fiction, Hollander acknowledges the significance of written clothing when she writes, "novelists and poets have always considered the resonant meaning in everyday dress" (105), a resonance that becomes amplified in the everyday world of the novel.

Because the "resonant meaning" of clothing is so prevalent in fiction, fashion historians often turn to literary texts for documentation regarding not only visual detail but also social attitudes, subtleties, and realities of dress in everyday life. For instance, Hollander's *Seeing Through Clothes* includes a section on dress in realistic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Aileen Ribeiro's *Dress and Morality* is absolutely permeated with literary citations, and Taylor's study notes, "Novels can give perceptive and helpful accounts not just of the actuality of period dress, . . . but can also provide a special form of emotional insight into behavior patterns which make up what John Harvey terms 'the complication of social life made visible'" (92).

But while dress historians make much of literary fashion statements, literary critics typically overlook such discourse as mere description, unless a garment achieves symbolic status—Hester Prynn's scarlet letter and Faith Brown's pink ribbons are of course a couple of American literature's most famous and much-discussed examples. But worked up into a literary symbol or not, clothing often suggests a great deal of significance. In *Dressed in Fiction*, Claire Hughes notes, "attention to dress provides, of course, only one way of looking at a text, but it is surprising that so few literary critics have taken the trouble to give such attention in a systematic fashion" (5). The word "systematic" is key here, because while there are few extended studies of dress in prose

fiction, there are a great many journal-length articles that consider clothing within the context of single texts, authors, and sometimes periods. Classic realism, naturalism, and modernism draw the most discussion in short pieces regarding literary clothing. For instance, many feminist critics have analyzed the importance of dress in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, a novel that "makes fashion central" (Benstock, Ferriss, and Woods 213). Systematic studies remain rare, however. They include Ribeiro's *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England*; Jennie Batchelor's *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*; Hughes' *Henry James and the Art of Dress*, and her work mentioned above, which considers selected nineteenth and early twentieth-century realist novels within the traditional English canon in order "to show how an author's employment of dress and its accessories can illuminate the structure of that text, its values, its meanings or its symbolic pattern" (6). Hughes notes that white dresses are "the most insistent dress-note throughout," which calls to mind another book-length study of fashion in fiction: John Harvey's *Men in Black*. Because Harvey is more interested in black as a color imbued with myriad changing historical and political nuances than the fashion aesthetics of literary pieces themselves, he consults a wide range of art, fashion plates, memoirs, and other historical documents. He is a literary specialist, though, and relies heavily on novels, particularly those of Dickens, because novelists' "famed skill is precisely in reading the inner meaning of externals," and their work "may still register better than other sources facts of the large spiritual politics of the time that were reflected in the inner and outer person together" (19).

Harvey's book spans close to a millennium of Western Civilization and closes appropriately with a chapter called "Black in Our Time." Harvey explains that his analysis of black in our time departs from a focus on literary texts because photographs and films have taken over the task of making style visible. Even so, his discussion of black in the twentieth century refers to novels by Kafka and Pynchon. While Harvey is correct to note the importance of film as visual media recording visual culture, his attention to prose fiction indicates that, even so, clothing is still an essential element of many a novelistic vision. In addition, his selection of Pynchon's postmodern texts brings me to the point that while one can locate a handful of book and dissertation titles that focus systematically on fashion in literature, I am aware of only one book-length study that features a contemporary postmodern author who writes in English: Cynthia Kuhn's *Self-fashioning in Margaret Atwood's Fiction.* Because of this dearth, my extended study of the culture of clothing in post-modern novels by contemporary authors will add to and facilitate discussion that links two remarkably significant cultural practices—the production of texts and sartorial selves. My dissertation will also advance the analysis of the ways in which fiction presents and critiques cultural knowledge regarding the theoretically fragmented and fluid nature of postmodern identity.

Fashion and Postmodernism

Because of its ambivalent nature, its complicity with constructed notions of identity, and its penchant for parody and play, fashion is very often postmodern in spirit. According to Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (7-15), postmodern forms challenge and collapse the boundaries between art and life, art and theory, elite and popular culture. Postmodernism loves to tip its hat to the past, but

such tipping is “not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (4). The postmodern spirit values what Hutcheon calls “the ex-centric” and therefore tends to displace that which or those who occupy the center of dominant culture. Fashion is clearly amenable to all of the above mentioned qualities, though Hutcheon ignores it in her list of postmodern forms. Clothing is a literal boundary between art and life as it metonymically marks and constructs the social presentation of the living body. Though considered by most as a form of popular culture, it occupies spaces from the most elite museums to the biggest and most reviled of big box chains, thereby collapsing the elite/mass culture divide. Haute couture and sub-cultural styles always come off as bizarre and eccentric, but such eccentricity often manages to make its way into the cultural mainstream (albeit in a toned-down version), thereby de-centering that which held sway before. Fashion is also obsessed with the past and loves to parody historic forms as well as combine them into new creations of pastiche, although I would argue that sometimes fashion’s borrowing from the past is indeed nostalgic. Whether it’s being ironic or nostalgic, fashion obtains “the important postmodern concept of ‘the presence of the past’” (Hutcheon 4). According to Hutcheon’s very complex definition, fashion is eminently postmodern.

Wilson has also identified current fashion as reflective of the postmodern spirit. Referring to the relatively recent change in fashion cycles whereby a plurality of styles exists at any given time, she writes,

> Its eclecticism and oscillation is part of its ‘postmodern-ness.’ Its irony and cynical self-parody also seem very postmodern, its knowingness about its own performance. Thus the ‘confusion’ that so puzzled fashion writers

> in the 1970's, the apparent ending of the orderly evolution of one style out of another, is explicable once it is seen as part of postmodernism.
>
> ("These New Components" 223)

Wilson stresses the way in which fashion is implicated in the postmodern construction of identities, both individual and collective. She notes postmodernism's discussions of fragmented identity, which is "of interest to dress" (8) because clothing can be used to create a sort of coherence of being—what I would call the put-together persona, or in more negative terms, the held-together persona. This idea is very nicely illustrated in a passage from Atwood's *Life Before Man*, in which the protagonist Elizabeth is in a state of depression because, though her husband is attending to her needs, she is mourning the suicide of her lover. A disembodied third-person narrator tells us,

> She is not in. She's somewhere between her body, which is lying sedately on the bed, . . . wearing a black turtleneck pullover, a straight black skirt, a mauve slip, a beige brassiere with a front closing, and a pair of pantyhose, the kind that come in plastic eggs, and the ceiling with its hairline cracks. (4)

"Not in," Elizabeth seems as disembodied as the narrator, an all-voice who needs no clothes. The plastic egg, which must be cracked to get to the pantyhose, and the ceiling cracks reflect Elizabeth's fragmented state. The pantyhose encase her legs just as the all-black-on-the-outside but not-coordinated-on-the-inside outfit creates a visual sense of wholeness that she clearly does not experience on a psychic level. Note that a turtle-neck

and a straight skirt are certainly constrictive sorts of garments. The outfit is seemingly all that holds her together at this point.

Just as postmodern identity is discussed as fragmented, it is also discussed as fluid. Wilson notes that whether clothing's "fluidity . . . offers an alternative to the stagnant fixity of 'old-fashioned' ideas of personality and core identity," or it is contrarily used to "fix identity more firmly," we can still understand it in the context of constructed identities ("These New Components" 9). This sort of thinking recalls Judith Butler's very influential post-structuralist work *Gender Trouble*, which considers sexual identity as "an *effect* of discursive practices" (24, italics original). Dressing is a discursive practice, and though Butler does not discuss clothing, the cover of her book depicts a brother and a sister both wearing dresses, thereby disrupting conventional modes of constructing gender through dress. Through an extraordinary analysis regarding the ontological theories of Lacan, Kristeva, Foucault, Irigaray, Cixous, and others, Butler determines that problems regarding lack of personal agency expressed by discursive theories of ontology can be addressed through knowledge of the discursively-produced nature of our selves. Such knowledge is emancipatory because once we understand the discourses through which we are subjected, we are better equipped to pick and choose the qualities we want as we construct and perform our identities. Fashion writers who like fashion would agree here. Rather than considering fashion as a repressive force that creates passive victims who blindly act within its thrall, we can consider it as a constructive, contradictory, and subversive force to be "used and abused" as we negotiate our way through a very complex, competitive, and capitalist culture.[2]

On the other hand, the ambiguous nature of fashion denies a too simplistic celebration of the freedom to create identities. For instance, though Wilson's "These New Components of the Spectacle" does not mention Butler's work, it does suggest a criticism of its postmodern stance on identity when it says, "in a fragmenting world, [some] feel that they can in some way 'choose' the identity they were born with, or redefine and rework it. Yet ultimately we do not choose our bodies, so postmodern playfulness can never entirely win the day" (8). Wilson makes an excellent point, and just as Butler's work informs my work, I am also interested to see how my objects of study register the idea of ontology and personal (re)definition. For instance, postmodern feminists tend to be fond of Madonna and point out her ever-changing personas as a mark of power and self-determination, a sort of feminist refusal to settle into stifling roles. Madonna practically personifies Butler's suggestion of created self-hood. And yet, just as "we do not choose our bodies," we also do not choose our socio-economic or geopolitical situations. Madonna is enormously wealthy. To cast her as feminist role-playing role-model has got to be useless to the majority of the world's women. The fiction, on the other hand, is populated by a plurality of personalities coming from myriad social positions and occupying myriad body types. It therefore presents more viable conceptions of ways real women in the real world are able to practice the self-determining sort of self-construction advocated by Butler's feminist theory.

Fashion and the Novel

Though this study situates itself in the context of postmodern cultural production, as suggested earlier, narrative presentation of the clothed body is certainly as old as the novel itself. If we accept the commonly held notion set forth by Ian Watt's *The Rise of*

the Novel that the novel in English coalesces as a form in the late seventeenth century, we know that written clothing has been encoded into the novel's narrative structure from early on. In the following passage from Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko,* the narrator describes sartorial trade and dress in South America: "Then we trade for Feathers, which they order into all Shapes, make themselves little short Habits of 'em, and glorious Wreaths for their Heads, Neck, Arms and Legs, whose Tinctures are unconceivable. I had a Set of these presented to me, and I gave 'em to the *King's Theatre*; it was the *Dress of the Indian Queen*" (10). Behn goes on at length to describe the captivating native dress, and so proclaims the West's historical fascination for and influence by sartorial constructions of the Other, a fascination that is equaled by the Other's fascination for sartorial constructions in the West. And Ribeiro writes, "Eighteenth-century novels are full of references to the social disasters that might ensue if the dress was not appropriate to the situation or the class of the wearer" (*Dress* 95). Hughes discusses Defoe's *Roxana* as a novel "where dress starts to become an engine of the plot. This is not the story of single, fixed images, but of dress in movement, metamorphosis, unpredictable and treacherous" (*Dressed* 11).

In the nineteenth century, Charlotte Brontë's Rochester and eponymous narrator Jane Eyre both judge little Adèle's delight in sartorial fripperies, so that the reader is to understand such delight reveals a poverty of mind and, especially in the case of Adèle's mother, morals. As Adèle prepares to meet the ladies of Rochester's evening entertainment, Jane turns her head away from her charge to hide her condescending smile, a smile resulting from her thought that "there was something ludicrous as well as painful in the little Parisienne's earnest and innate devotion to matters of dress" (172).

Adèle's habits of dress include a penchant for pink satin, a color and texture figured in the novel as particularly and perniciously frivolous. Therefore, *Jane Eyre's* dress talk sets forth the conventionally didactic association of female sartorial delight and display with female vacuity. On the other hand, *Jane Eyre* critiques the way plain and substandard clothing is used by the horrid Mr. Brocklehurst in order to sartorially mark and maintain the very low-class social situations of the orphans at Lowood. By depriving them of anything remotely pretty or fine to the touch, he intends to keep them "humble" and "to mortify in them the worldly sentiment of pride," though pride is acceptable in his own offspring. The nasty and oppressive nature of the orphans' treatment is opposed and emphasized by Brocklehurst's daughter, who exclaims upon her visit to Lowood, " 'Oh, dear papa, how quiet and plain all the girls at Lowood look; with their hair combed behind their ears, and their long pinafores, and those little Holland pockets outside their frocks—they are almost like poor people's children! . . . 'they looked at my dress and mama's, as if they had never seen a silk gown before'" (29). Of course, the orphans' social situation is worse than that of "poor people's children," and Brocklehurst intends for them to be stuck so that they can become drudges for the likes of him. Disallowing decent clothing serves such a purpose. Jane, who Cinderella-like, moves from rags to riches in marriage nevertheless retains her properly modest and sedate preference for understatement. Upon her engagement, Rochester "obliged [Jane] to go to a certain silk warehouse." Jane narrates the shopping excursion:

> [T]here I was ordered to choose half a dozen dresses. I hated the business, I begged leave to defer it: no—it should be gone through with now. By dint of entreaties expressed in energetic whispers, I reduced the half-dozen

> to two: these however, he vowed he would select himself. With anxiety I watched his eye rove over the gay stores: he fixed on a rich silk of the most brilliant amethyst dye, and a superb pink satin. I told him in a new series of whispers, that he might as well buy me a gold gown and a silver bonnet at once: I should certainly never venture to wear his choice. With infinite difficulty, for he was stubborn as a stone, I persuaded him to make an exchange in favour of a sober black satin and a pearl-grey silk. (273-4)

Though she accepts the quality of silk, the super-sympathetic Jane, therefore, maintains her signature colors and the novel's didactic injunction against sartorial color and ornament.

One could go on and on citing examples which demonstrate that the writing of clothing and metadiscourse regarding the morals and politics of dress continue throughout the novel's history. This practice reaches a manic level of logorrhea through the voice of serial killer Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis's controversial *American Psycho*, a novel strongly rejected by many in the media and boycotted by the National Organization of Women as overly violent and misogynistic.[3] While *American Psycho* is painfully graphic in its sexual/slasher type torture scenes, I bring it up here because it is also quite radical in terms of its postmodern style and critique, which includes the over-the-top focus on clothing mentioned above, and in doing so, it also provides an example of not-subtle discourse criticizing designer-driven postmodern sartorial identity and conspicuous consumption.

American Psycho presents a horrific have/have not New York City in which people are *completely surface* moral vacuums, thereby taking to its logical conclusion the

fear that commercialized surface identities will result in personalities void of internal morality, political conscience, and human sympathy. This idea is theoretically articulated by Llewellyn Negrin's "The Self as Image: A Critical Appraisal of Postmodern Fashion Theories," an article that sets forth fashion theory's failure to question the "cult of appearance" insofar as it loses sight of morally based identity traits, such as "citizenship, democracy, duty, work, honour, reputation and morals" (111). Ellis creates hyperbolic postmodern surface identities, and Bateman presents himself and everyone within his purview in the language of fashion. Here's an example:

> The three of us, Todd Hamlin and George Reeves and myself, are sitting in Harry's and it's a little after six. Hamlin is wearing a suit by Lubiam, a great-looking striped spread-collar cotton shirt from Burberry, a silk tie by Resikeio and a belt from Ralph Lauren. Reeves is wearing a six-button double-breasted suit by Christian Dior, a cotton shirt, a patterned silk tie by Claiborne, perforated cap-toe leather lace-ups by Allen-Edmonds, a cotton handkerchief in his pocket, probably from Brooks Brothers; sunglasses by Lafont Paris lie on a napkin by his drink and a fairly nice attaché case from T. Anthony rests on an empty chair by our table. I'm wearing a two-button single-breasted chalk-striped wool-flannel suit, a multicolored candy-striped cotton shirt and silk pocket square, all by Patrick Aubert, a polka-dot silk tie by Bill Blass and clear prescription eyeglasses with frames by Lafont Paris. (87)

The book practically overflows with such language, which signifies an extreme level of narcissistic excess and an obsessive need to wear names other than one's own. While

Bateman and his social set's obsession with fashion and the "right" way to wear things challenges the old misconception that only women concern themselves with dress, it also censures the idea that contemporary high fashion distinguishes individual identities. While clothing works to set one apart from others, it also paradoxically works to socialize one into a group identity, and the Wall Street characters, for all their expensive and careful dressing, seem to look *the same*, given their wool suits (linen in summer), silk ties, and obligatory "suspenders, slicked back hair, [and] horn-rimmed glasses" (46). Note that often the clear-lens glasses are non-prescription and therefore denote no utility whatsoever, a situation which harkens back to Hawthorne's Mr. Moody in *The Blithedale Romance*. Moody wears a black patch over one eye, and since throughout the course of the narrative, the patch shifts from one eye to the other, it is a garment of pure significance; it carries no utilitarian function at all and signifies disguise, artificiality, and moral ambiguity. *American Psycho's* Bateman uses his disciplined and stylishly integrated suits to cover-up his lack of humanity and to disguise and pull together (unsuccessfully) his disintegrating sanity. [4] The reader begins to realize that the overflow of designer name-dropping does not endorse postmodern role play, and the book is as morally didactic and critical of over self-fashioning as any eighteenth-century book of manners or nineteenth-century novel. *American Psycho* writes more clothing than any novel I've read to date. Ellis plays heavily on the novel's history of writing dress, a history with which seasoned readers, though they may not realize it, are very familiar. Through its excess, *American Psycho* defamiliarizes the novel's encoding of clothing, as this study intends to.

Though *American Psycho's* over-abundance of dress description encodes the monster protagonist and his social set as amoral, it is not of course the description alone that accomplishes this effect. According to Barthes' "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative," every narrative consists of units of meaning or "functional units." Functional units, or functions, are divided into three graduated levels of meaning, depending on their descriptive purpose. According to this theory, "a narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies." And, "in the realm of discourse, what is noted is by definition notable. Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness" (88-9). This comment denies the idea that sartorial detail is at any point insignificant, or to use the preferred term, trivial. Barthes description of narrative units or functions begs the question of exactly how to identify a single unit. He answers this by saying that "the function is clearly a unit of content: it is 'what it says' that makes of a statement a functional unit, not the manner in which it is said" (90). Any bit of language that signifies the beginning of a specific action, a psychological quality, or an atmosphere constitutes a functional unit. Barthes separates functional units into two different classes, which he names "functions" and "indices." A function is a correlative unit because it signifies an action that correlates to the completion of the action later in the narrative. In other words, correlative units involve acts and signal consequences and chronological relations. On the other hand, an integrational unit, or "index," refers

> not to a complementary and consequential act but to a more or less diffuse concept which is nevertheless necessary to the meaning of the story:

> psychological indices concerning the characters, data regarding their identity, notations of 'atmosphere,' and so on. . . . In order to understand what an indicial notation 'is for,' one must move to a higher level of characters' actions or narration, for only there is the indice clarified. (92)

While Barthes, following Aristotle, notes that indices are lower on the scale of importance than functions in the narrative, he also notes that "Some narratives are heavily functional (such as folktales), while others on the contrary are heavily indicial (such as 'psychological' novels). *American Psycho* is obviously a psychological novel, and while Patrick Bateman's obsessive notation of sartorial detail (indices) take up as much space as the plot, which is advanced through description of his actions (functions), it is the revelations of his horrific acts that fill the clothing with loathing on the part of the reader. While the reader initially reads the clothing to signify wealth, taste, obsessive aesthetic sophistication, and narcissism, Bateman's actions create a discourse in which his sartorial practices become associated instead with depravity. In this way, narrative not only represents clothing, but also attaches moral values or lack thereof to ways of dressing.

Atwood, Walker, and Kingston

My clothes-reading begins with Margaret Atwood because of all the narratives I read in this study, Atwood's have been the most remarked upon as fashion-inflected. Literary critics are well aware of Atwood's thematic concerns with identity and its intersection with gender, class, geography, and nationality, all of which are reflected in complicated matters of dress. Chapter Two, "Artists, Academics, Outsiders, and Vamps: Fashion Anxiety and Signature Styles in Atwood's Toronto," focuses on the novels *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* to consider Atwood's profound fascination with clothing and

the ways in which that fascination registers issues of identity, anxiety, and survival. The theme of survival is often discussed in the context of Atwood's work. According to Atwood, survival is a theme that pervades Canadian literature and sets that literature apart from American and British literatures, which is an idea she articulates in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. In a literature obsessed with survival, victims become key figures. Atwood writes, "I found a superabundance of victims in Canadian literature. . . . stick a pin in Canadian literature at random, and nine times out of ten you'll hit a victim" (39). For purposes of this discussion, Canadian victims become Canadian fashion victims. In Atwood's work, a fashion victim is a woman who tries too hard to pander to the male gaze, who is dressed and arranged by a man into a sartorial stance that contradicts her true desire, who dresses herself in a way that contradicts her true desire, or who simply gets it wrong—that is chooses an outfit that is constantly uncomfortable in a psychological sense or that calls the wrong kind of critical attention to her body and selfhood.

Atwood's version of fashion victims abound in her work, which is permeated with clothing narration and which works to place characters temporally, geographically, socially, ethnically, economically, and psychologically . Characters both enjoy and struggle with the social imperative to present themselves through the practice of self-fashioning and performance. For most sympathetic characters, the struggle typically causes extreme anxiety, and Atwood excels at writing not only how clothing makes one look, but also how it feels to choose and to wear certain garments and how they sometimes behave in unwanted ways, causing embarrassment and awkward situations. Because Atwood's characters both enjoy and struggle with clothing, they express the

only true essence of fashion: contradictory multivalence. And because they have myriad social, economic, cultural, and psychological backgrounds and widely diverse sartorial styles, they challenge the idea that Western fashion is some sort of a monolithic force and style. In addition, Atwood also sets forth, considers, and critiques feminist theories regarding the body, dressing, fashion magazines, and the gaze, all in a literary register, so that such theorizing comes out of the academy and into popular culture. Though literary critics such as Cynthia Kuhn, Lorraine York, and Fiona Tolan have written about clothing in *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, they have missed a great deal of sartorial significance, particularly in the case of *Cat's Eye*. These novels are rich enough to engage further consideration and contextualization of clothing's significance within Atwood's presentation of twentieth-century Toronto.

Chapter Three, " 'And She Dress to Kill': Signifying Outfits and Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble* and *The Color Purple*," addresses the import of clothing in Walker's prose fiction. For instance, throughout *The Color Purple*, clothing and sewing are absolutely central to Celie's self-actualization and to Walker's narrative vision. An essay entitled "Dressing the Spirit: Clothworking and Language in The Color Purple" notes this fact, elaborating the ways images of clothing, sewing, and quilting all work to "reinforce" themes regarding "self-definition," "the human spirit," and community (Tavormina 221). While this and a few other articles about clothing and most especially quilting as practice and metaphor are valid and cover much that is to be said about sartorial detail in *The Color Purple*, they do not, as I intend to, discuss the ways in which clothing is presented as problematic. To consider clothing in the context of Walker's work as simply celebratory is to reduce both clothing's and the works' complexity. For

instance, while all of the other texts I discuss include protagonists who have relatively easy access to clothing selection, Walker writes clothing as lack, an issue feminists rarely address.

While feminists argue about whether women are empowered or disempowered by certain sartorial choices, in *The Color Purple*, Celie's initial state is one of abject indignity and oppression, which is emphasized by the rags she wears. Celie's family challenges the stereotype of the poverty-stricken southern black family because it is not poor. Her father, step-father, and husband all enjoy the privilege of property ownership, so her lack is due not to poverty but rather to misogyny. As the owner-farmers of property, the men in Celie's life have control over and withhold the financial resources that could provide her with at least decent clothing. This sartorial lack is noticed by her sisters-in-law who tell their clueless brother to provide Celie with some clothes. For the first time in the novel, Celie's is recognized as a human being by someone other than her sister Nettie, and to have some human dignity in this culture, one must have something decent with which to cover her body.

So in *The Color Purple*, lack of clothing is connected to the oppression of women and lack of choice, which is certainly problematic. Clothing is also central to the narrative vision of several stories in *In Love and Trouble,* none of which, so far as I know, have been discussed in terms of their clothing. Like *The Color Purple*, *In Love and Trouble* complicates issues of dress, thereby revealing them to be irreducible to simple significance. For instance, in "Roselily," a bride spends her wedding ceremony contemplating how she will cope with the fact that in her marriage to a Muslim man, she will be required to don the veil. She has accepted his proposal in order to escape the

drudgery of working in a "sewing plant." This is ironic, given the fact that the manufacture of a quintessentially American garment (her factory sews jeans) is practically forcing her marriage to a man in which she will face a new problem involving a garment marked in the American imagination as quintessentially oriental. In "Roselily," the culture of clothing is highly problematic indeed, and in it, Walker brings up feminist issues regarding both purdah and garment sweat-shop labor. Clothing and fashion are also problematic to the protagonist in "Her Sweet Jerome," an uneducated beautician who further alienates her educated communist husband by supplying him with unwanted, tacky suits and ties, all of which are described by the narrator in great detail. And "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" depicts how the mis-reading of garments leads to tragically fatal consequences. So while it is common to think of Walker's work as a celebration of clothing and quilting, a more careful reading reveals that it complicates issues of dressing in many interesting ways.

Chapter Four, "Bound Feet and Bobbed Hair: Performing Race, Culture, Nation, and Gender through Sartorial Style in Fashion in the Narrative Texts of Maxine Hong Kingston," examines sartorial detail and metadiscourse in *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, and *Trip Master Monkey*. Though clothing in Kingston has hardly been noticed, her narrative vision displays subtle awareness of sartorial significance and includes what Joseph Allen's "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior" calls an "essentially sartorial story" (28). Allen's phrase refers to the Mulan myth re-imagined in *The Woman Warrior*, and though Allen's article is concerned exclusively with *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's *China Men* offers another example of an essentially sartorial story. Its opening chapter, "On Discovery," is also a re-telling of an old Chinese tale in

which cross-dressing figures heavily. “On Discovery’s” protagonist Tang Ao is reduced to a feminine construction born of pain and immobility because a group of women capture and submit his body to the removal of his masculine military accoutrements in order to replace them with traditional signs of femininity in old China: foot-binding and ear-piercing. Allen’s article concludes that Kingston’s version of Mulan emphasizes the somatic over the sartorial, a point that is well-supported and applies equally to “On Discovery,” in which sartorial changes also effect somatic changes. While Allen applies notions regarding the Western male gaze to his reads of various Mulan imageries, I submit that Kingston’s “On Discovery” critiques that gaze by defamiliarizing the constructed nature of its object. In addition, *Tripmaster Monkey’s* protagonist Whitman Ah Sing is extremely aware and critical of sartorial choice and display. In Kingston’s novels the gendered aesthetics of clothing and clothing talk positions Chinese American garments, histories, ideologies, and identities into the cultural landscape of American letters, a landscape which is never fixed and continuously transformed by myriad writers and their traditions.

Because the criticism surrounding Kingston’s work has been so concerned with her incorporation of cultural myths, the silencing of Chinese American subjects, the emasculation of the male Chinese American subject, and the “authenticity” debate initiated by Frank Chin’s essay “Come All You Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” Allen’s article is extremely rare in its focus on fashion. Though ethnic and postcolonial fashion theories are also concerned with cultural authenticity, sartorial issues rarely come up in the Asian American literary debates. Given this lack of inquiry, further examination of sartorial aesthetics in Kingston’s three long works of prose fiction will

situate her voice into the novelistic tradition of including clothing discourse as part and parcel of national/cultural/ideological reflection and construction.

Kingston, Walker, and Atwood all write sartorial indices and metadiscourse regarding fashion and dressing. Their works therefore lend themselves to clothes-reading and the idea that while a poetics of clothing continues as a tradition in prose fiction, postmodern novels written by women both celebrate and interrogate the culture of clothing, reflecting its extraordinarily contradictory significance as human and literary practice.

CHAPTER TWO

ARTISTS, ACADEMICS, OUTSIDERS, AND VAMPS:

SIGNATURE STYLES IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S TORONTO

> It's difficult to know what to wear when you don't know who you are. In Canada, self-examination is an institution; the search for an identity, practically an industry unto itself. So it is not easy to come up with any snappy synopsis of the national style.
>
> David Livingston
> "Reflections on Canadian Fashion"

Atwood and Canadian Fashion

Coral Ann Howells writes, "Margaret Atwood is the most written-about Canadian writer ever, and there is an enormous amount of academic criticism on her work produced not only in North America but also in Britain, and increasingly in Europe, Australia, and India" (6). It may seem nothing can be added to this daunting discussion, but in *Various Atwoods*, Lorraine M. York invokes Derrida to remind us of the always open-ended complexity of Atwood's oeuvre, which continues to "surprise and impress her readers":

> [C]ritical and theoretical discussions of her texts [have] exceeded the boundaries of one set of hard covers. *Various Atwoods*, then is a necessary supplement to an energetic and heterogeneous critical discourse—a supplement . . . an addition that simply signals the never-completedness of the prior text, and that itself, of course, is never to be complete. ("Intro" 1)

Atwood's work, without a doubt, supports such "never-completedness," and for the close reader of fashion in fiction, her texts' preoccupation with the clothed body is a specific point of departure from which to supplement the discussion. In Atwood's narrative

world, the gaze that notes and critiques what people wear is inflected by issues of class, gender, nationality, and propriety. In both *Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride*, the "surveillant gaze" more often than not emanates from the eyes of Canadian women, and in both novels, the gaze is loaded with judgment regarding the other Canadian, a judgment which is often humorously ironic but at the same time reflective of profound anxiety over the self, its own sartorial constructions, and whether or not those constructions are properly appropriate and/or effective. In doing so, the novels reveal a sort of longing to dispense with the whole business. Though the texts are practically hyper-aware of the playful and postmodern possibilities that dressing offers, they also present an ironic, fashion-resistant, anti-consumerist meta-discourse that suggests desire for a culture in which selfhood is figured as more essential and not constructed through sartorial choice, which becomes a burden necessitated by survival in the Canadian social milieu.

Readers of Atwood are well aware of her attention to sartorial detail, though it is usually discussed only in passing. Cynthia Kuhn's *Self-Fashioning in Margaret Atwood's Fiction* is the only book-length study of clothing in Atwood's work, and its literature review explains that critics have noted Atwood's written outfits and proposed various narrative functions served by them. For instance, written clothing sets forth character types by utilizing sartorial stereotypes. Clothing illustrates "emotional changes" and "transformations," it signals gender constructions and identity politics, it provides for disguise and deceit, it is figured as both constrictive and libratory, and it simply lends to narrative setting and verisimilitude (Kuhn 19-22). Kuhn's study presents a complex series of quotations from prominent scholars of fashion and of Atwood in order to pull

together ideas regarding clothing as a contradictory site of identity formation and dressing as a practice that is specific to feminine construction and feminist resistance to socially inscribed images of feminine bodies and behaviors. Kuhn finally focuses on *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*, utilizing Atwood's phrase "flesh dress," which refers to the body, elucidating ways in which clothing acts as a boundary delimitating physical and metaphysical space, and showing "how Atwood illuminates power politics through the linking of dress, body, and story" (42).

Though Kuhn's work makes valid points, it does not attend to *Cat's Eye* except in a very cursory manner; nor is it (or other Atwood criticism) interested in genealogies of specific outfits or the historical contextualization of the Canadian fashion scene, as my research is. For instance, though she spends a lot of time discussing Atwood's use of the term "flesh dress," she overlooks the fact that Atwood, who writes and parodies art as prolifically as she writes and parodies fashion, almost certainly would have been aware of Czech/Canadian artist Jana Sterbak's controversial 1991 exhibit in Ottawa's National Gallery, which was entitled "Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic." Sterbak's work was a dress made of sixty pounds of flank steak stitched together to form a loose-fitting, sleeveless sheath. The exhibit showed the dress on a hanger accompanied by a photo of a model wearing the literal flesh-dress. As the meat decayed, its shape changed and conformed to the dressmaker's form on which it had been draped. Sterbak replaced rotted meat with fresh meat as the exhibit wore on. The piece suggested the female form as meat and was interpreted as a comment on the way in which fashion attempts to but cannot deny the decaying body, a body that becomes devalued by a youth-worshipping culture (Arnold 87; McLerran 535-552).

Though a sustained critical focus on clothing in Atwood's work is unusual, readers have noted the surfeit of material culture that permeates *Cat's Eye*. J. Brooks Bouson's *Brutal Choreographies* quotes Manguel, who writes that the novel "reads, in part, like 'an anthropological catalogue of the evolution of Toronto's tribal customs from the forties to the eighties.'" [5] And Towers, quoted by both Bouson and Davidson, writes, "the reader of *Cat's Eye* is nearly overwhelmed by the mass of documentation. A social historian of the next century could find no better source for what middle-class children in Toronto . . . wore, ate, sang, or played with during the 1940s and 1950s" (Bouson 160; Davidson 18). In an interview about *Cat's Eye,* Atwood acknowledged her desire to catalogue the material stuff of nostalgia:

> I wanted a literary home for all those vanished things from my own childhood—the marbles, the Eaton's catalogues, the Watchbird Watching You, the smells, sounds, colors. The textures. Part of fiction writing I think is a celebration of the physical world we know—and when you're writing about the past, it's a physical world that's vanished. (qtd. in Ingersoll 237)

Therefore, *Cat's Eye* is an excellent text for the close-reader of clothing, a highly visible and significant element of the physical past.

In much of Atwood's narrative world, the past is a Canadian past in which a specifically Canadian gaze attends to clothing and appearance as an indicator of proper Canadian femininity and social behavior. Atwood's writers of fashion press, such as Rennie in *Bodily Harm* and Kat in "Hairball," and her frequent references to women's magazines call attention to writing and reading about fashion in Canada. In regard to

Cat's Eye, the fact that women's magazines work to socialize the protagonist Elaine and her girlhood friends has been well noted. *Cat's Eye* refers to *Good Housekeeping*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Chatelaine*, all of which are apparently available in Elaine's home, a situation which seems rather odd, given her mother's distaste for fashion and domestic matters. Nevertheless, the magazines are there for Elaine to peruse and play cut and paste games in times of illness or solitude. At her friend's house, Elaine and her playmates use the Eaton's catalogue for scrap-booking, a game in which they cut out and glue down models they call their "ladies." Unlike the Eaton's catalogue, the magazines also contain domestic and etiquette hints and advice. In her private reading, Elaine experiences anxiety over the *Ladies' Home Journal's* "Watchbird watching YOU." In "Optics and Autobiography in Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*," Molly Hites tells us that the watchbird cartoon appeared in the *Ladies Home Journal* during the nineteen-fifties and sixties. The watchbird with its admonishments regarding dress and behavior acted as a constant reminder to readers that they were objects of a social gaze, and therefore they must rigorously manage their bodies and behaviors. The novel's inclusion of the historically factual watchbird reinforces its theme of the enforced "social construction of feminine identity" (Bouson 164) and makes Elaine realize that "there will be no end to imperfection, or to doing things the wrong way" (*Cat's Eye* 154).

It is interesting to note, however, that while the *Ladies Home Journal's* watchbird was clearly intended to regulate feminine construction, it appeared during the Cold War atmosphere in which "conformity (and the subtext of paranoia) . . . was typical," and men were also targeted in terms of personal regulation. Valerie Steele's *Fifty Years of Fashion: New Look to Now* shows an American Institute of Men's and Boys' Wear

"Dress Right" advertisement, which is clearly aimed at a male audience. The add features four images of men "properly" dressed for various social settings and instructs, "Wherever you go . . . Whatever you do . . . Whether you know it or not . . . You're being watched! Dress Right -- you can't afford not to!" (17). So while it is common to discuss the imagistic construction of the feminine self, it is also true that nineteen-fifties conservatism and conformity applied to the construction of masculine identity as well. [6]

Cat's Eye's I is female, though, and while the female-watching watchbird was the product of American culture, which very certainly influences Canadian culture, the Canadian press, which produces *Chateaine*, also worked throughout the twentieth century to present a strong interest in fashion and feminine behavior. During the pre-war period, daily news publications constantly reported on the couture fashion worn by society women who acted as role models for readers. As seemingly tireless organizers of fund-raising teas and galas, Canadian society women were extremely visible arbiters of taste, fashion, and demeanor. According to Helen Palmer's study of Canadian couture,

> The daily newspapers constantly reported detailed comments of women's events that focused on who attended . . . and what they wore . . . . Clothing was given the majority of copy with description that identified colour, textile and often the dress might be identified by country of origin or else as an import. All of these descriptions signified the importance of fashion in establishing a woman's prestige at an event. Such reports fuelled competition amongst women to rival one other, a successful dress that generated press attention, served as a symbol of their participation at the event. (73)

To think that a dress conditioned "success" is to realize the remarkable power of the dress. It is also interesting to note that a specifically female preoccupation prompts a stereotypically male preoccupation: competition.

This competitive sartorial situation is very clearly reflected in *The Blind Assassin*, where we see Atwood mimic the journalistic social register and present Ontario women who sport the couture fashion provided by both tastefully "old" and garishly "new" money. Furthermore, the moneyed families in *The Blind Assassin* achieve their fortunes through button, textile, and clothing manufacture and trade, a narrative situation that reflects a strong history of clothing manufacture and trade in Canada.[7] As Canada's social hierarchy began to loosen, Canadians, increasingly conscious of forging a strong national identity, continued to focus on dress as one indicator of Canadianess. Into the fifties, the press continued to offer detailed descriptions of what "tasteful" Canadian women were wearing—and doing. Palmer writes,

> detailed descriptions were numerous and appeared virtually daily throughout the postwar period. Not only did they make it possible for readers to follow the social leaders and events, but at every opportunity, they were given [the] chance to know what were the most fashionable styles worn in Toronto. . . . As leaders of Canadian style and promoters of Canadian etiquette, society women achieved press recognition primarily through their dress, and in this way acted as public models for others. (127)

In addition to presenting descriptions of fashionable Canadian women's outfits, the press also set-forth terms of a distinctly Canadian style that tended toward Anglo-Canadian

conservativism: "Torontonians themselves did not consider their dress extravagant, but modest, ... The Canadian opinion, that to be too fashionable was in some way un-Canadian, was in fact typically Canadian as it was so self-deprecating." And, "This self-effacing stance was inherently Canadian, and contrary to American ways" (Palmer 227). And, in the 1989 edition of the short-lived *Canadian Fashion Annual*, David Livingstone wrote,

> Modesty, something the world could use a little more of, does have its plus side. It is an ally of sensitivity and open-mindedness as well as being conducive to experiment, all of which are important to fashion design, which need not always—or only—be a business of show-offs. Too fixed, too aggressive a sense of self can lead to the sort of fatuous, overreaching pretensions that sometimes mar the fashion industry in the United States, where designer organizations sometimes take on snooty airs that seem out of place in the New World. (17)

Livingston's remark works to unify the Canadian impulse toward Anti-American "unpretentiousness" in fashion as well as the impulse to define a Canadian look, though Canada includes a wide diversity of geography and people who sport a diversity of styles and who, for the most part, remain unaware of Canadian fashion history, manufacture, design, and trade, even as they consume Canadian fashion publications and Canadian-made garments. While scholars of Canadian fashion are working to construct, interpret, and disseminate Canadian fashion's history and contributions to Canadian industry and identity and to its place in the scheme of international fashion (Palmer, "Intro"), literary

critics can point to Margaret Atwood's fiction as a space that records, constructs, and criticizes Canadian ways of dress.

Cat's Eye

Cat's Eye reconstructs Canadian ways of dress from the post-war years through the nineteen-eighties by telling the story of Elaine Risley, an artist who has returned to nineteen-eighties Toronto from her home in Vancouver in order to attend a retrospective showing of her paintings, which are described and which illustrate the people and places of her past. The narrative moves back and forth in time, thereby reinforcing the postmodern preoccupation with the past, and Elaine narrates her own story in order to come to terms with her troubled Toronto childhood. As a young girl, Elaine had settled with her family into one of Toronto's new post-war suburbs and had befriended three other girls her age. Throughout her childhood years, Elaine suffered at the hands of the girls and even at the hands of one of the girl's mother. In the novel's present, Elaine reconstructs significant memories, the most pivotal of which concerns the three girls' desertion of her as she goes to retrieve a hat her friend/enemy Cordelia has thrown into one of Toronto's scary and dangerous ravines. Elaine falls through the frozen surface of the ravine's stream and in her near-frozen state experiences a healing vision of a Virgin Mary-like figure who appears for her comfort. The experience marks the end of Elaine's torture by the girls because she then realizes that she does not need such companions.

As Elaine reconstructs her Toronto experiences, she and the reader realize that the girl responsible for her torture, Cordelia, was at the same time experiencing her own sort of torture in her fashionable, upper-class home, where her father never accepted her for the person she was. In her adulthood, Elaine understands, as she had not before, that

many of the figures who haunt her childhood memories, particularly Cordelia, were suffering their own private hells. This understanding has been fully realized as the book ends with Elaine's flying out of Toronto and wishing in a melancholy sort of way that she could see Cordelia and enjoy her company as an adult, but as happens in real life, that person who haunts her present has disappeared into the past, never to be seen again.

All of this narration of past and present is accompanied by fashion talk. We know the period under discussion and we realize characters' anxieties and personalities through their sartorial selves. Kuhn notes aging artist Elaine's "ambivalent attitude toward clothing and appearance," which is the result of her ostracism by her girlhood friends due to her "lack of social knowledge" and her "lack of vestimentary enlightenment" (17). This interpretation simplifies the situation because Elaine's ostracism is due to Cordelia's insecurities and anxieties rather than to Elaine's "lack of social knowledge," though the lack does become a target for ridicule and seems to the child Elaine a point of self-insufficiency and therefore anxiety. Fiona Tolan's "*Cat's Eye*: Articulating the Body" briefly attends to clothing and notes, "The most predominant motif that recurs throughout *Cat's Eye* is that of clothing and fashion, and it is through this medium that Atwood articulates both sexual difference and group identities" (179). While clothing and fashion create a "prominent motif" in *Cat's Eye*, time, memory, and loss are the prominent themes, which are supported by the clothing motif and which are figured in the recurring imagery of black holes. The speculative language of astrophysics creates a textual space in which Elaine can "exist in two places at once" (1), the past and the present. The memories and losses that accrue with the passage of time and the ways in which they

affect selfhood are the novel's primary concerns, concerns that are explicitly stated in the oft-quoted third and final paragraph of the short opening chapter:

> But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, laid on top of the other. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. *Nothing goes away*. (3, italics mine)

So Tolan is right on when she writes, "Time in the novel is largely expressed through the physical: through evolving fashions and disintegrating bodies" (174). This technique of presenting the material culture of life lends to what Leila O. Mitchell calls "the texture of [Atwood's] fiction" and is typical for Atwood (45).

Though Tolan states that clothing and fashion are "the most predominant motif" in *Cat's Eye*, her examination of clothing and fashion is conducted at a level of abstraction. Because her book *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* traces Atwood's novels in terms of their anticipation, reflection, and interrogation of evolving feminist theory, she concentrates on feminist disapproval of fashion as consumerist and culturally oppressive. Therefore, her essay leaves most of *Cat's Eye's* fashion statements and their significance unremarked. But *Cat's Eye* contains several remarkable outfits: most notably Elaine's powder-blue sweatsuit, her Pre-Raphaelite "get-up," her two different art-student styles, one bourgeois and one bohemian, and the eccentric outfits of old women on mass transit systems—streetcars and jets. All the outfits index a specific body shape and mindset as Elaine matures and changes physically and mentally. The text is framed, however, by Elaine's perception that it is in the old women's sometimes odd

and sometimes "don't give a hoot" attitudes toward dress that one experiences not only freedom from the anxieties of dress, but also a space for play. In her own changing sartorial choices, however, Elaine remains understandably serious and concerned about achieving specific and audience oriented effects, going for either group identity, the need to align herself with a look and the ideology that goes with it, or for camouflage, a word Atwood frequently uses. In Atwood's work, camouflage can signal either an impulse to be invisible or an impulse to be recognized as a person other than who she is, an impulse towards disguise or masquerade.

The word "masquerade" implies the artful use of clothing, accessories, and make-up so that the coded body becomes layered with (deceitful) sartorial signifiers. Invoking Joan Riviere's seminal essay "Womanliness as Masquerade," Eleonora Rao claims, "Margaret Atwood's representation of a socially acceptable femininity frequently shows 'womanliness' as a masquerade, thus stressing the notion of sexual identity as a construction" (145). And in her analysis of *Cat's Eye*, Madeleine Davies suggests the plainly clothed body is less implicated in masquerade and therefore contains more transparency of meaning than the fancifully clothed one. Referring to Elaine's Pre-Raphaelite style outfit as opposed to Elaine's signature powder blue sweat suit, she contends, "The latter is more reliable for less costume is involved . . ." (67). Theatrically inflected, "costume," like "masquerade," suggests disguise and acting, which, as noted above, are significant strategies for Atwood's characters as they negotiate their social situations. But Davies' comment about reliability raises questions because while she attributes qualities of "nebulousness" and "shape-shifting" to Elaine and her outfits, she does not make clear why the sweat suit, which Elaine has chosen, should be "more

reliable" than the Pre-Raphaelite purple dress, which Elaine's lover Josef has chosen. As readers, we, unlike the people in the world of the novel, are privy to the fact that the sweat suit is Elaine's choice (an index of independence) and therefore we prefer it, but the question remains: Precisely how do the purple dress and the powder blue sweat suit signify? The chapter that features Elaine's purple dress and her long, loose hair, signature styles for Pre-Raphaelite women, begins with the words "Josef is rearranging me" and calls to mind Atwood's prose poem "Iconography," which begins like this:

> He wants her arranged just so. He wants her arranged.
>
> He arranges to want her. This is the arrangement they have made. With strings attached, or ropes, stockings, leather straps. What else is arranged? Furniture, flowers. For contemplation and a graceful disposition of parts to compose a unified and aesthetic whole.
>
> (*Good Bones* 93)

Atwood's use of the subjective "he" and the objective "her" grammatically declares a relationship in which he acts and she is acted upon. The piece is extremely powerful in its economic articulation of gender power and its association with female appearance and sexuality. Though "she" probably does not like his arrangement of her, she has so internalized his expectations that "[i]t can never be known whether she likes it or not. By this time, she doesn't know herself." Because of the "ropes, stockings, leather straps," arrangement refers implicitly to rough sexual situations, but in the end, it's all about visual vigilance: "Watch yourself. That's what mirrors are for, this story is a mirror story which rhymes with horror story, almost but not quite. We fall back into these rhythms as if into safe hands" (94). The phrase "almost but not quite," the idea of rhythms, which

are comforting, and the notion of safety all suggest the very sticky, ambivalent nature of the arranged situation between men, women, and sexuality. Acquiescence is problematic because often it is not what she would choose in the best of all possible worlds, but rather provides a secondary sort of empowerment. The poem thereby reveals female limitations in a world where "[h]e has the last word. He has the word" (94).

Elaine, the young art student and pupil of Josef, who has arranged her outfit, "catch[es] a glimpse of" herself in "the smoke-mirror wall of the elevator" and recognizes her nineteenth-century style (331-2). Reflected and photographed images abound in Atwood's work, and the above scenario accords with Sharon Rose Wilson's observation that such images reflect a distorted sort of vision that belies a character's alienation from herself and from the world. While reflected images distort vision, they also "paradoxically . . . contribute to characters' . . . recognition that they do live in conditioned textual 'frames' (of fairy tales, advertising, comic books, true romance stories, prescribed sex roles, nationality) resembling mirrors and photographs" (298). Elaine sees herself framed, and her outfit reveals to her and the reader the nature of her relationship with Josef. Just as Josef has "arranged" Elaine's appearance, the original Pre-Raphaelite painters, whose heyday was between 1848 and 1853, arranged the dress of their models, who wore flowing fabric and vivid colors. Pre-Raphaelite style was intended to lend itself to the idealized medieval nature of the artists' Romantic subjects:

> Natural phenomena and contemporary subjects . . . were treated as if they were medieval, as well as the other way around; the lucidly drawn draperies of a Guinevere or a Beatrice would be rendered in the same way as the complex folds of a contemporary lady's dress, and vice versa. The

> visual inconsistencies in two such modes led to fancy dress' actually being designed by the artists and worn by the ladies of the Pre-Raphaelite circle. (Hollander, *Seeing* 70-71)

Because the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood designed and "arranged" the sartorial statements of their models and then captured them in paintings, the Pre-Raphaelite women are quintessential signifiers of passive objects of the male gaze. The models, most of whom were from the lower classes (ladies did not model), frequently became the lovers and sometimes the wives of the artists, and some were artists in their own right, though their ambitions were severely frustrated by their status as women and as mothers and though their production has only recently garnered scholarly attention (Marsh, *Women* 17-29). The feminine Pre-Raphaelite look also included a deportment whereby the subject appears romantically melancholy and languid, so fittingly, Elaine "move[s] through the days like a zombie, going from one hour to the next without direction" (*Cat's Eye* 331). Thus Atwood's powers of observation register awareness of the fact that certain styles are accompanied by certain physical posturings and attitudes, which is articulated by fashion historian Barbara A. Schreier in *Men and Women: Dressing the Part*:

> Because we are concerned with the interplay of fashion and identity, particularly gender identity, we use the term *appearance* in its broadest possible sense. If dress or costume implies merely the covering or decoration of the body, we encourage readers to incorporate other, more subtle cues in their definition of appearance. Postures, manners, and body gestures all play important roles in coalescing our private responses to

> socially legislated conventions. To examine garments outside of the realm of physical experience is to look at a lifeless prop. (2)

As the incarnation of a Pre-Raphaelite woman, Elaine is indolent almost to the point of lifelessness. Recognizing her somewhat morbid countenance in the smoke-mirror wall, Elaine remarks, "I should be holding a poppy" (332).

Because of its opiate properties, the poppy is a common sign of languor and death, but more significantly, the poppy alludes to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 1862 portrait of his unhappy model cum wife Elizabeth Siddal, who had died in 1861 at the age of thirty-two from an overdose of laudanum. Rossetti had married Siddal after years of treating her as a mistress and years of carrying on with other models, for which he gained a reputation as a philandering man. By most accounts, Rossetti had tired of Siddal and married her because of her fragile health and seemingly eminent death, to which his betrayal of her had contributed and for which he needed to assuage his conscience. After their 1860 marriage, Siddal, who was already addicted to the opiate, delivered a still-born daughter, which seemed to unhinge her. Siddal, who was the most promising artist of what Pre-Raphaelite scholar Jan Marsh has dubbed the Pre-Raphaelite sisterhood, ingested an overdose while her husband had gone out for a few hours one evening after they had dined with the poet Algernon Swinburne. There were rumors that Rossetti had gone to see his latest mistress, prostitute and model Fanny Cornforth, though Marsh believes his claim to have been at the Working Men's College (21). In any case, Rossetti came home to find Siddal unconscious, and though medical help was summoned and her stomach was pumped, she died. It is not known whether or not Siddal's death was suicide, but her misery was certain, and Rossetti's remorse became famous with his

oft-noted act of placing his unpublished poems into Siddal's coffin, only to retrieve them later by exhuming her grave. Rossetti's portrait, called Beata Beatrix after Dante's Beatrice, shows Siddal seated with her face pointed slightly upward. Her eyes are closed, her long neck is exposed, and she holds a poppy. Marsh writes, "[t] he pose and expression of the figure, who is represented as in a trance at the moment of passing from earth to heaven, strongly suggest those of an addict who is feeling the immediate effects of a fix – for which trance might be an approximate description" (*Sisterhood* 215-216). And though feminist scholarship such as Elizabeth Prettejohn's *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* works to revise the common idea of the Pre-Raphaelite women as passive sitters for active artists, the many paintings of languid female figures suggest passivity; in addition, the biographies show that attempted action on the part of the women was consistently frustrated by social circumstances, even though the Pre-Raphaelite men supported women's claims to civil rights.

So while Elaine's Pre-Raphaelite outfit, rooted in the European past as it is, may involve costume and register as too outré for the then provincial Torontonian sensibility, it is an extremely significant and reliable image that reveals a great deal, not only in regard to the way Elaine looks and carries herself, but also in the way it indexes, indeed emphasizes, the nature of Elaine's relationship with Josef, which is exploitive, self-defeating, and probably dangerous. Bouson writes that the outfit leads to "a sense of self-alienation and inauthenticity" (177). The outfit may be all wrong for Elaine and signify sexual exploitation, but it is quite reliable in its marking of Elaine's status as Josef's lover.

The sweatsuit is also a reliable indicator for the reader, but in the world of the novel, Elaine has chosen it specifically for its "unreliability" as an indicator of who she is. As narrator of her own memories, Elaine says that the sweatsuit has "no pretensions," and in the sense that it registers as plainer, this statement seems to go without saying, just as it comes off as very Anglo-Canadian; however, the sweat suit *does* carry pretensions in the sense it allows her to pretend to be something she is not. In fact, Elaine considers it "her disguise as a non-artist," because in Canada, an artist is a "tawdry, lazy sort of thing to be," stereotypically "overblown, pretentious, and theatrical." The sweatsuit is unreliable—at least to those on the street—because Elaine imagines that she "could be a businesswoman out jogging" or "a bank manager, on her day off" (16, 19). On two visits to the gallery featuring her paintings—two days in a row—Elaine sports the powder-blue sweatsuit. On the first day, Elaine walks to the gallery to have a surreptitious look at it, a sort of reconnoiter mission, and on the second day to go in and to discuss the paintings' placement in the exhibit, a mission that definitely smacks of business rather than exercise or leisure, as her outfit suggests. Clearly the Pre-Raphaelite outfit would announce her artistic vocation more reliably than the jogging suit, which also transmits pretensions to jogging or working out (as Elaine admits), thus suggesting a body that is physically disciplined with rigorous exercise.

Writing about the well-documented influence of sports on both high and popular fashion, Elizabeth Wilson describes sports' "ethos of physical health and streamlined efficiency," which is suggested by athletic outfits. Because of sports in the early twentieth century, particularly bicycling, "trousers become one means whereby women express an aspiration towards an athlete's body. For similar reasons both sexes have

adopted jogging suits, T-shirts, and running shoes for daily wear" (*Adorned* 166). Thus, while sweatsuits retain for some sensibilities traces of athletic pretensions, they also tend toward gender neutrality. The color powder-blue, however, suggests feminine softness and indicates Elaine's vulnerability, especially in the face of the gallery women, who are aggressively attired in comic-book green and purple or black, punk-inspired styles. Here the gaze aimed at Elaine is threatening and decidedly not male or conservative. Elaine describes the gallery manager Charna in satirical terms that emphasize an aggressive and over-the-top nineteen-eighties demeanor, a look that can hardly be imagined to pander to a male gaze fantasizing about submissive femininity: She wears a "modified blond porcupine haircut, a purple jumpsuit and green leather boots" and "about ten heavy silver rings strung on to her fingers like knuckle dusters" (93).

Like many women in the eighties, both Charna and Elaine wear pants, and while women's adaptation of pants is more complicated than a simple desire to express athletic sensibilities and bodies, the effect of sports on popular clothing cannot be overstated. In her survey of twentieth-century popular sports, Schreier notes, "The once sharp division between public and private sports clothing is blurred to the point that sports wear is now marketed as active wear" ("Sporting Wear" 122-3). Elaine, who "used to jog" but quit because "it's bad for the knees" walks "quickly" during her nostalgic walks in downtown Toronto and does some "desultory stretching exercises" in her ex-husband's apartment/art studio, but otherwise, she does not strike the reader as particularly athletic. And since outfits originating in the fitness craze and the gym become popular items of Canadian mass fashion by the eighties (Routh 157-8), Elaine's choice is very much in the thick of stereotypical eighties style and ethos, which suits Atwood's technique of

marking time with the stuff of the material. The sweatsuit, therefore, suits Elaine's desire to "blend in," though the desire seems odd given her meeting's purpose to determine the placement of her paintings in a retrospective, a possibility for self-expression that seems rather more important than casual. And while she may "blend-in" on the street, her outfit makes her painfully conspicuous in the space of the gallery where she allows the gallery worker to make the paintings' arrangement decision for her.

Davies assumption that contemporary "plain" dressing is necessarily "more reliable" than a more stylized or dressy outfit is reductive because both sartorial statements are coded, and because Elaine has chosen the sweatsuit specifically for purposes of disguise, it could not be considered more reliable. Elaine tells us that she has two sweatsuits, one blue and one cerise. Elaine has forgotten a lot, so perhaps she has not noticed, but the reader has, that the kind though flashy-dressing girlhood neighbor Mrs. Finestein had told her that blue and cerise are her best colors (240). But best color comfort notwithstanding, Elaine is extremely uncomfortable in her choice of street wear because she seems hyper aware of her outfit and of people's reaction to it, and unfortunately for her, she is "ambushed" by an unexpected "Living section" reporter who interviews her at the gallery meeting. Elaine imagines the interviewer to be sizing up her outfit: "*Your clothes are stupid.*" Sure enough, the resulting news story remarks that Elaine "look[s] anything but formidable in a powder-blue jogging suit that's seen better days" (248). So in the end, though she's chosen the outfit for disguise, "unpretentiousness," and perhaps some would imagine comfort, it is not comfortable. The sweat suit seems appropriate only in the sense that Elaine truly does "sweat out" the meeting in a negative rather than a positive fashion for the very reason that she's

constantly worried about her look. In either outfit, in-style though paradoxically not fashionable athletic or eye-catching Pre-Raphaelite, the true Elaine—and of course, there are many Elaines—is obscured. The "powder-blue sweatsuit" presents an unreliable index of her vocation, which is enormously important to her sense of self.

Elaine's Torontonian impulse toward "unpretentious" fitting-in is also reflected in the choice of outfits worn to her "Art and Archeology" class, which she attends as a very young woman entering a post-high school, art student phase. Unpretentiousness means scrupulous avoidance of "making a spectacle of yourself." One of Elaine's childhood friends, the "ten and three quarters" year-old Carol, had made a spectacle of herself by stealing and applying some of her mother's discarded lipstick. Elaine witnessed the scolding and the bruises Carol suffered for "making a spectacle of herself," which Carol's outraged mother called "such a cheap thing!" (182). Elaine comments on the memory: "'Making a spectacle of yourself,' as if there's something wrong in the mere act of being looked at" (182). [8]

Carol's severe punishment for copying what she sees adult women do underscores the deep contradiction and social danger inherent in attempting to maintain the delicate balance between the natural and the constructed female self. In Atwood's narrative vision, lipstick always figures as a hugely important signifier of feminine psychologies and constructions, whether those constructions are conventional or subversive. Many, many females in Atwood's work "draw on" their mouths as they get ready for social situations, and those with questionable motives or morality often draw on lips that are larger than their natural ones. Also in Atwood, certain colors (most notably dark orange or purple) connote dubious morality or possible insanity. For instance, when *Cat's Eye's*

Cordelia begins to lose emotional stability, "Her lipstick doesn't seem to fit her mouth," and later, "She's gone back to the too-vivid orange-red lipstick, which turns her yellowish" (280, 281). When Cordelia is doing well, "her lips [are] an understated orangey-pink" (326). *The Blind Assassin's* horrible and manipulative Winifred's "lipstick was a dark pinkish orange, a shade that had just come in—shrimp was the proper name for it . . . . Her mouth had the same cinematic quality as the eyebrows, the two halves of the upper lip drawn into Cupid's-bow points" (231). In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's psychotic mother overcompensates for her thin lips: "Her lips were thin but she made a larger mouth with lipstick over and around them, like Bette Davis, which gave her a curious double mouth" (64). The eccentric—maybe crazy—old women on the streetcars in nineteen-fifties Toronto also draw on big lips: "Their lipstick mouths are too big around their mouths . . . ." (*Cat's Eye* 5). Even Elaine's mother, who is decidedly not fashionable, "draws on a lipstick mouth when she goes out" (37). Elaine, who harbors the memory of Carol's punishment for sexualizing herself with lipstick, tends toward soft colors, like the powder blue of her sweatsuit. In reaction to the aggressive look of Charna at the Subversions art gallery, she notes, "I should have some clotted-neck vampire lipstick, instead of wimping out with Rose Perfection." But here, the aging face gets in the way of the should have: "At this age the complexion can't stand those grape-jelly reds, I'd look all white and wrinkly" (93).

To draw on vampire-colored lips would be a way for the aging Elaine to make a spectacle of herself, and the "making a spectacle of yourself" memory is a powerful one. It's reinforced by another, more troubling memory involving the "molestation" and murder of a high school age Toronto girl, whose body had been discovered in one of

Toronto's and Atwood's ubiquitous ravines. What stands out in this memory for Elaine, who was also in high school at the time, is the way in which the press presented "extensive descriptions of [the victim's] clothing" :

> She was wearing an angora sweater and a little fur collar with pom-poms, of the sort that is currently fashionable. I don't have a collar like this, but would like one. Hers was white but you can get them in mink. She was wearing a pin on her sweater, in the shape of two birds with red glass jewels for eyes. It's what anyone would wear to school. All these details about her clothing strike me as unfair, although I devour them. It doesn't seem right that you can just walk out one day, wearing ordinary clothes, and be murdered without warning, and then have all those people looking at you, examining you. (266)

The press's attention to the murdered girl's outfit emphasizes the exceedingly legitimate feminist complaint that female victimhood is associated with female clothing, as male victimhood never is. But it's also interesting to note that while Elaine remarks on "extensive description," the description we actually get is restricted to the sweater and its accessories—the angora, the fur collar with pom-poms, and the be-jeweled pin, with its useless eyes and hard shiny sparkle which contrasts with and therefore emphasizes the soft, touchable depth of the sweater. Hollander tells us that the sweater has its roots in the working apparel of male laborers in cold climates. In the twentieth century, it became elegant by way of its use by British aristocrats. Also in the twentieth century, Coco Chanel "was the first to use them [sweaters] for feminine fashion—not golf clothes" (*Sex and Suits* 170).

As feminine fashion, the sweater obtains more possibility for clingy pliability and tactile softness than the typical male sweater. Angora is of course a very fine and soft wool made from the fibers of Angora rabbit fur. The murdered girls's angora, along with the collar's fur, present the conventional association of fur and female erotica. The lovely look and feel of angora, its pleasing and fashionable aesthetic becomes marred by the crime and its association of feminine textures and female victimization. Hollander writes, "Their [sweaters'] rough, lower-class male origins nevertheless combined with their stretching and clinging capacities to keep them pleasantly rakish and daring for women, and these flavors have only enhanced their latter-day faintly perverse life as elegant garments. So has the sweater's ancient lowly association with warm winter stockings and undergarments" (*Sex and Suits* 170). It's highly doubtful that the ancient or even the early twentieth-century significance of the feminine sweater registers in most peoples' minds, but the association of furry sartorial surfaces and sexuality is not lost on Elaine and calls to mind for her another memory: "I think of a doll I had once, with white fur on the border of her skirt. I remember being afraid of this doll. I haven't thought about that in years" (266). The reader had been presented with this doll earlier in the narrative:

> For Christmas I get a Barbara Ann Scott doll, which I've said I wanted. . . . Barbara Ann Scott is a famous figure skater, a very famous one. She has won prizes. I've studied pictures of her in the newspaper.The doll of her has little leatherette skates and a fur-trimmed costume, pink with white fur, and fringed eyes that open and close, but it looks nothing at all like the real Barbara Ann Scott. According to the pictures she's muscular, with

> big thighs, but the doll is a slender stick. Barbara is a woman, the doll is a girl. It has the worrying power of effigies, a lifeless life that fills me with creeping horror. (142)

Thus the lifeless, fur-trimmed girl in the ravine and her dangerous sexual significance are associated with the also lifeless, uncanny, fur-trimmed doll in the box. Elaine notes and envies the victim's apparently news-worthy outfit, which as Routh points out, truly was at the height of popular fashion in the late fifties: "Cheap rhinestones were everywhere, in necklaces, earrings, and the ubiquitous scatter-pin and were even applied directly onto sweaters. Rhinestones were part of people's concern with status. . . . Pearls and jeweled or fur collars might finish the necklines of angora or cashmere swearters" (114). The envy for fashion, however, is tempered because it provides yet one more reason for Elaine to be anxious about "making a spectacle of herself."

Desiring to "blend-in" with the young women in her "Art and Archeology" class, Elaine adopts their look, which is studiously bourgeois. For the most part, the female students (there's only one male in the class) intend to get married. To be an artist, as Elaine wants to, is highly unconventional in nineteen-fifties Toronto. Intending to marry, the conventional young women wear conventionally proper and properly feminine, understated outfits:

> What they wear is cashmere twinsets, camel's-hair coats, good tweed skirts, pearl button earrings. They wear tidy medium-heel pumps and tailored blouses, or jumpers, or little weskits with matching skirts and buttons. I wear these things too. I try to blend in. (301)

Cashmere, like angora, is soft and invitingly touchable, though not as long-haired and deeply textured. Less fuzzy, it is less conspicuous, and the double layering of the twin set with its open and usually loose cardigan is more modest than a single-layered sweater that clings and calls attention to the breasts, which on the murder victim are emphasized by the sparkly pin. So twin sets are able to retain their femininity while layering it over with a sense of modest propriety. But, as the critics have noted, the twin set is practically an icon of anxiety for Elaine because her introduction to it recurs in *Cat's Eye* as a memory that symbolizes what Kuhn calls her "lack of vestimentary enlightenment" (17).

Because Elaine had spent her early childhood in the Canadian bush and because her mother is too disinterested in clothing to teach her anything about dress, Elaine had never seen or heard of twin sets or many other urban consumer items showed to her by her friend Carol. It seems unlikely that nine-year-old girls in the nineteen-forties would care or know about twin-sets, but Carol's mother wears them, and as Elaine describes it, in a provocative manner that features the "fifties bra [which was] essential for the high, pointed and even separated uplift that fashion demanded" (Routh 115): Carol's mother's "breasts prong[ed] out, the buttoned sweater draped over her shoulders like a cape" (57). So Carol knows what twin-sets are and lords this information over Elaine as if not to know is to be hugely ignorant. Cold waves are another feminine consumer item of which Elaine had never heard, and Carol's reaction to this lack of cultural knowledge is "You didn't know what a *cold wave* is?" (57, italics original). This memory resurfaces much later in a dream experienced by Elaine following the botched home abortion of her rival in love, Susie. Susie is definitely not the twin-set wearing type:

> She wears jeans and black turtlenecks, but her jeans are skintight and she's usually got something around her neck, a silver chain or a medallion. She does her eyes with a heavy black line over the lid like Cleopatra, and black mascara and smoky dark-blue eye shadow, so her eyes are blue-rimmed, bruise-colored, as if someone's punched her; and she uses white face powder and pale pink lipstick, which makes her look ill, or as if she's been up very late every night for weeks. (307)

So Susie's over-stated look with its bruised and abused appearance indexes a messy life and an accident waiting to happen, which does when she becomes pregnant by Josef, the artist arranger of women who has become tired of Susie and avoids her until in desperation she pokes some unmentionable sharp instrument into herself. Not having anyone else to turn to, the near-death Susie calls Elaine, who goes to her apartment, discovers the situation, throws up, calls an ambulance, rides with Susie, and hears the judgmental and non-sympathetic remarks of the paramedics. Deeply disturbed, Elaine dreams about Susie, who in the dream says to her, "Don't you know what a twin set is?" (351). Therefore, the twin set becomes associated not only with "lack of vestimentary enlightenment," but also, like the angora sweater, with vulnerable female sexuality and Elaine's realization that even though Susie, unlike Elaine, sported a danger-suggesting, make-a-spectacle sort of ensemble, she and Susie are a lot alike in their sexually ignorant dallying with the art teacher.

While Elaine had adopted the conservative and bourgeois look of femininity worn by the Art and Archeology "girls in cashmere twin sets," in order to "fit in," it does not take her long to trade that look for one that is more suited to her anti-bourgeois, beatnik

sensibility, a sensibility that's at odds with traditional Torontonian sensibility.[9] She adopts this look after attending the more artistically substantive and rigorous "Life Drawing," in which she meets Susie and for which she at first dresses inappropriately like one of the "girls at university, in their cashmere and pearls." Pearls, which in real life and constantly in *Cat's Eye* are worn with feminine sweaters, remain a quintessentially feminine bauble. While it's common these days to see men wearing all manner of jewelry, including diamond earrings, one never sees a man, even a gay man, in pearls, except in the case of shirt-fasteners. Unless worn in drag, pearl necklaces, rings, and earrings are simply not gender-bending or subversive accessories. In her beatnik artist phase, Elaine would never wear the conventionally feminine pearls. She quickly registers and adopts the anti-fashion look after her first class for which she had made "the mistake of wearing a plaid jumper and a white blouse with a Peter Pan collar" (301). The new look is an understated version of Susie's, who at this point, is still physically intact:

> I switch to what the boys wear, and the other girl: black turtlenecks and jeans. This clothing is not a disguise, like other clothing, but an allegiance, and in time I work up the courage to wear these things even in the daytime, to Art and Archeology; all except the jeans, which nobody wears. Instead I wear black skirts. I grow out my high school bangs and pin my hair back off my face, hoping to look austere. The girls at university, in their cashmere and pearls, make jokes about arty beatniks and talk to me less. (302)

Thus, by simply changing her clothes, Elaine rejects mainstream feminine construction and aligns herself with the more gender-neutral beatnik style. Elaine's new fashion

statement had originated with youthful appropriation of anti-establishment aesthetics and rejection of post-war bourgeois culture. The black turtleneck remains a cliché of that look.

Elaine's succession of outfits, which are presented in non-chronological, flashback style, are framed by the sartorial presentation of anonymous older women on public transportation. Though non-chronological, *Cat's Eye* features a tight structure in which a science-engendered consideration of the mystery and nature of time closes the novel just as it opens it, thereby framing the text with its primary awareness. But in regard to structure and especially germane for my discussion is the secondary framing device, which exists like a matte, within and adjacent to the time-space imagery. Both Madeleine Davies and Molly Hite note and comment upon the visionary possibilities offered the aging female body in *Cat's Eye's* closing scene in which Elaine, who is on a plane traveling back to her home in Vancouver, notices two older women who are traveling together. Elaine's gaze registers the women's clothing, make-up, and age, which is past that of sexual expectation, which in turn suggests the reason for the fact that they are complementary rather than competitive and that they "don't give a hoot" in regard to what people think about their physical presentations. This presents to Elaine an enviable and delicious sort of liberation: "They seem so amazingly carefree. . . . They're rambunctious, they're full of beans, they're tough as thirteen, they're innocent and dirty, they don't give a hoot" (462).

As a framing device, this scene parallels "Chapter Two," in which Elaine and Cordelia, tough and thirteen, gaze at and register the clothing and demeanor of other women on the bus they are riding. The parallel bus/plane scenarios recall George

Simmel's comments about urban life and the ways in which it is implicated in the proliferation of fashion and style consciousness:

> Interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear. The main reason for this is the public means of transportation. Before the development of buses, railroads, and trams in the nineteenth century, people had never been in a position of having to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another. (qtd. in Wilson, *Adorned* 135)

The bus and the plane settings provide a space for the extended gaze along with the critique the gaze prompts. Though at the point at which they are thirteen and on the bus, Elaine and Cordelia very definitely "give a hoot," it is the older, strangely dressed, and seemingly madly-behaved women they admire and aspire to emulate one day. And though the women on the plane, reflecting their own time of the late eighties, wear cardigans rather than the flashier sort of get-ups on the bus of the nineteen-fifties, they wear their "desiccated mouth[s] lipsticked bright red with bravado" like the women on the bus, whose "lipstick mouths are too big around their mouths" (461). Here, a mouth that sports lipstick too bright or too big signals an eccentric sort of insouciance that is achieved only with age and perhaps even a certain degree of madness, which is suspected of the women on the bus. The feminine mouth construction becomes so parodic that, calling attention to itself, it loses its force of artificiality. And the fact that the women wear lipstick at all suggests play and pleasure in self-construction rather than the anxious sort of "giving a hoot" experienced by Elaine and Cordelia.

The parallel action and imagery of *Cat's Eye's* secondary framing device feature a decidedly female gaze, young then mature, considering the clothed constructions and behaviors of other female bodies, which illustrates how a popular novel can work to disrupt and even temporarily de-center the male gaze, suggesting new, female ways of seeing that are not filtered through male desires.[10] Expressed through envy and aspiration is a feminist approval of female being in the world that is not at all in line with male-centered expectations or constructions of feminine appearance or behavior. And yet in this vision, there is still room for "dressing up," pleasure, and play. However, this vision of feminine "not giving a hoot" about what people think about her outfit is complicated by Elaine's mother who is emphasized throughout the text as indifferent to clothes, though "this indifference does not extend to holes, frayed edges, or dirt" (237). Even this capitulation to appearance is contradicted by Elaine's brother Steven, whose clothes are deliberately marked with holes, frayed edges, and dirt.[11] Elaine envies her mother's devil-may-care attitude toward clothing, and for her, "*Not giving a hoot* would be a luxury" (236, emphasis original). But herein lies the contradiction. Elaine's mother, who doesn't sew and "hates to shop," is so averse to choosing an outfit that her husband "picks out [her] dressing-up clothes . . . ." (236). We don't know what sorts of outfits Elaine's father chooses, and though they are presumably acceptable, the mere fact that he does this necessitates a degree of passivity on the mother's part. Through her I-don't-give-a-hoot attitude, Elaine's mother becomes another woman sartorially "arranged by a man." After all, one's outfit must be arranged by someone. Nevertheless, not giving a hoot, as men are allowed to do, is what Elaine and the novel wish for.

The Robber Bride

In *The Robber Bride*, which is also very concerned with the presence of the past, three female protagonists, Tony, Charis, and Roz, are haunted by a single "other" woman, Zenia, and the events by which she had caused each protagonist her own brand of psychic trauma.[12] But while Elaine's tormentors remain in the past and haunt her only psychologically, the three protagonists in *The Robber Bride* experience a tormentor who not only returns from the past, but who also returns from the dead. The antagonist Zenia is a vamp(ire) returned from her faked death in order to haunt them in her past form as an excessively dressed con artist and man-eating husband stealer. And while each of the protagonists sports a signature sartorial style that emphasizes her personal history, the glamorous tormenter Zenia presents a style of spectacular and unreal sexual power dressing.

While in *Cat's Eye* clothing talk works by presenting time and personality types through stereotypical garments and outfits, *The Robber Bride* is much more idiosyncratic and dream-like in its fashion statements, which though historically indicative, are also suited in an emphatic way to reflect the personal histories of its protagonists, a situation that illustrates the necessity for the caution one must exercise when mining novels for historical patterns of dress. For instance, Hughes points out William Thackeray's admission in "an early introduction" to *Vanity Fair* that he had dressed his characters in the style of the 1840s rather than that of the novel's 1815 setting because he thought the clothing of the Napoleonic period was too ugly (3-4). This little bit of authorial trivia also reminds us of how our eyes become accustomed to current fashion, while past styles often appear ridiculous if not romanticized. Furthermore, during the latter part of the

twentieth century, from which vantage the tale is told, a dominant silhouette becomes more difficult to pinpoint as varieties of styles become available to and chosen by consumers at the same time. Routh writes of Canadian fashion in the eighties: "the broad variety in styling indicated the ongoing independence of the consumer and her right to a range of choices" (174).

Though *The Robber Bride* marks the sixties through the early nineties with their appropriately historical sartorial signs, its protagonists wear more static styles, constants that work hard to signify their senses of self and individual angst, angst resulting from both childhood trauma and physical self-perception. The protagonists' static signature styles index and emphasize the repression of their unspeakable pasts, while secondary characters, such as the protagonists' children and the waiting staff at the Toxique café, wear nineteen-nineties post-modern and fringe fashions that more accurately chronicle/parody fashion history and a fin de siècle impulse toward the spectacular and morbid in fashion, which in turn suggests collective repression of social angst and dark realities: sex(ism), death, and war.

That the dark villainess Zenia, who has had affairs with and discarded each of the protagonists' men, is a shadow figure who contains the other women's dark and angry repressed selves and who forces the women to face and to acknowledge if not integrate those split-off selves, has been well established by close readers of Atwood. Charlotte Beyer notes that "Zenia presents herself as an absence onto which other women can project their desires and fears. Zenia is revealed to be as much a construction by the characters and the reader, a fiction in which excesses of all sorts otherwise censured can be imagined and narrated . . ." (153-4). J. B. Bouson writes, "But if Zenia is depicted as

the competitive other woman who self-consciously performs the feminine masquerade while she acts as a 'double agent' in the 'war of the sexes' (184), she is also the psychic projection of the three characters" ("Slipping" 150). Jean Wyatt's Lacanian read points out that Atwood is careful to show that each protagonist has lost or repressed something specific that Zenia embodies: but more broadly, each protagonist of *The Robber Bride* encounters in Zenia Lacan's "uncanny, the piece of the real that she has had to renounce as part of the symbolic compact, the image of her own wholeness, the image of an uncastrated self capable of unfettered and unlimited self-expression" (42).

Alice Palumbro writes, "As the lost twin of Tony, Charis, and Roz, Zenia enacts the return of the repressed, and is the repository of their submerged aggression and anger" (83). Kuhn puts it this way: "Zenia acts as a mirror for the three women, and reflected in her they see not only a cultural standard, but also their own 'negative gifts' (316). Increasingly, the three women recognize attributes that they've repressed out of an effort to perform the Good Girl act" (55). And finally, Lorna Irvine's discussion of Atwood's presentation and parody of runaway consumption and "trashy" consumer products includes not only the idea of individual repression but also of collective repression: "*Cat's Eye* and *The Robber Bride* are deeply invested in the analytic world where repression returns, revealing deep personal and cultural traumas" (216).

What the women have repressed is anger, envy, loss and violence experienced in childhood, and alienation from their bodies. This repression and alienation are figured in clothing choices and, in Roz's case, a fierce preoccupation with clothing choices. Like Elaine in *Cat's Eye*, all *The Robber Bride* protagonists are born to mothers who never attend to their daughters' edification regarding the cultural imperative to dress

appropriately for one's surroundings and for one's sense of power and selfhood. In *The Robber Bride*, Tony's, Charis's, and Roz's mothers, who also carry the weight of traumatic histories, are all so obsessed with *their own* preoccupations of selfhood that they are oblivious to their daughters' needs for sympathetic maternal acknowledgment, which would include the recognition that a daughter is a physical being who must learn to negotiate an often cruel world in which she will be perceived in part through her necessarily sartorial self, a self that's a construction no matter how one chooses to dress. This failure on the part of the mother stands for a much more significant failure in terms of motherhood, which is very obvious in the case of Tony, an historian of war, who has a fascinating fascination with the sartorial accoutrements of battle and who, like Adah Price of Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*, reveals her psychic split by reading and speaking a secret backwards language. Tony had been unwanted and unloved by her British war-bride mother, who had constantly, loudly, and even publicly battled with her seemingly cowed Canadian husband. Tony Fremont's split-off angry self is Ynot Tnomert, an avenging Barbarian, whose violent and pillaging fantasy life reveals her suppressed anger and rage at her parents' failure to love and nurture her.

Tony's mother, Anthea, fails to attend to the most basic of Tony's need for recognition, a situation illustrated by their shopping trips, during which Anthea, for whom "clothes are a solace," spends plenty of time trying on and inspecting outfits for herself but not for Tony:

> [W]hen she's [Anthea] feeling "blue," as she calls it, she goes shopping. Tony has been dragged downtown on these expeditions many times, when Anthea couldn't figure out where else to stash her. She's waited outside

> change rooms, sweating in her winter coat, while Anthea has tried things on and then more things, and has come out in her stocking feet and done a pirouette in front of the full-length mirror, smoothing the cloth down over her hips. Anthea doesn't often buy clothes for Tony; she says she could dress Tony in a potato sack and Tony wouldn't notice. But Tony does notice, she notices a great deal. She just doesn't think it would make any difference whether she wore a potato sack or not. Any difference to Anthea, that is. (139)

Through Anthea, Tony learns that her body is worthy of no more than a potato sack, and Anthea's leaving her child alone to wait outside the dressing room provides a melancholy image of mother/daughter alienation. The image foreshadows the loneliness Tony experiences after Anthea's desertion of the family when Tony is still a child. Anthea runs off with the husband of one of her bridge-playing friends, and after her defection, she sends "packages for Tony with clothes in them that never fit: sun suits, shorts, hot-weather dresses, too big or sometimes—after a while—too small" (153).

Tony learns to escape her lonely pain by losing herself in the study of history. She becomes a professional woman who has no children but continues to shop in the children's department, which is where she tellingly buys many of her clothes because she is very small and, according to her, "They fit, and there's less tax." Alienated from her own albeit small but now-adult body, Tony displaces her sartorial interest onto her scholarship, which features a specialty in military dress and accessories.[13] She has a "book-in-progress: *Deadly Vestments: A History of Inept Military Couture*," which will include a chapter taken from "her lecture on the technology of fly-front fastenings. . . ."

(23-24). Tony's research presents myriad details regarding the ways in which specific sartorial choices and designs have resulted in death for soldiers, a situation she refers to as "Murder by designer! She can get quite worked up about it" (24).

Tony's friend Roz would like to make over Tony's little-girl wardrobe and "thinks Tony goes in for too much floral-wallpaper print, although Tony has carefully explained that it's camouflage" (17). Because Tony is an expert in battle dress, it fits that she, like so many Atwood characters, would go for camouflage, but the reader has to wonder exactly how a floral print renders one invisible. Kuhn asserts that Tony's "clothes serve an important purpose for her, however. Since her queen-of-the-barbarian persona/ twin Tnomerf Ynot is capable of murderous deeds, Tony needs 'camoflage,' so she goes around 'disguised as herself, one of the most successful disguises'" (58). Kuhn has taken the "successful disguise" quotation out-of context because it comes at a point in the novel in which underage Tony is in a drinking establishment and gets away with staying because no one would think that someone who looks so young would actually attempt to fake her age, a narrative discussion which has been recycled from *The Edible Woman*. Nevertheless, Tony continues her effort of sartorial camouflage as a full-fledged adult, and at that point, her plan seems very non-strategic, especially because as an accomplished academic, Tony struggles to maintain a presence of authority, a struggle exacerbated by her diminutive stature and her gender. If invisibility denotes powerlessness on the part of a woman, disguise with an impulse toward invisibility won't work. Tony experiences sexism in her discipline where colleagues, including females, question her choice of topic, believing it to be inappropriate for a woman, who should be researching domestic (read women's) rather than military history. [14]

On the back cover of her book, her photograph shows her "frowning slightly in an attempt to look substantial" (8). It is extremely contradictory that one who is trying to look substantial would choose to dress like a child, and the choice firmly implies Tony's self-alienation. Tony's juvenile sartorial style is emphasized by her slippers, which "are in the form of raccoons," and are a part of the outfit in which Tony is introduced to the reader. And though, as Kuhn points out, Tony's plan to replace her worn-out raccoon slippers with wolf slippers presents a more feral and therefore more powerful image on Tony's feet, the progress is bitter/sweet. She needs to lose the child-dressing all together.

For a short time during her college years, Tony does attempt a more sophisticated sartorial presentation. Preferring to blend-in as one wearing camouflage would do, Tony instead comes off as conspicuous at a party she attends after an invitation from West, the man on whom her heart is set. The party takes place on a Toronto campus in the nineteen-sixties, and Atwood signifies the setting with the stereotypical beat look of the time: "Most of the women have straight hair, worn long in a ballerina ponytail or wound into austere buns. They have black stockings and black skirts and black tops, and no lipstick; their eyes are heavily outlined. Some of the men have beards. They wear the same kind of clothes that West does—work shirts, turtlenecks jean jackets . . ." (124). Tony, on the other hand,

> is wearing the sort of clothes she usually wears, a dark green corduroy jumper with a white blouse under it, a green velvet hairband, and knee socks and brown loafers. She has kept a lot of her clothes from high school, because they still fit. She knows that she will have to acquire other clothes. But she is not sure how. (124)

At this point in the narrative, Tony meets Zenia for the first time, and Zenia does not dress to fit into the crowd so much as she dresses to stand out—to be as spectacular as possible. This "bash" scene recalls *Cat's Eye* because just as Elaine discovers that her to-be boyfriend has painted his bedroom "glossy black" in order to "get back at the landlord, who is a prick," Tony discovers that Wes and Zenia have painted seemingly every surface in the apartment, including the toilet, glossy black. According to Zenia, "This is a revenge party. The landlord's kicking us out, so we thought we'd give the old fucker something to remember us by. It'll take him more than two coats to cover *this* up" (*The Robber Bride* 127). The glossy black surfaces of the apartment serve to create a surreal sort of imagery in which Tony is disoriented and certainly out of place. Looking for West, she ends up outside the bathroom door, from which a "large, hair-covered man" emerges. Seeing Tony, he says, "Shit, the Girl Guides," and Tony "feels about two inches tall." Tony's sense of smallness is taken to the point of obliteration when she goes into the bathroom, "which will at least be a refuge," to discover that even the mirror has been painted black. In the black atmosphere, Tony is deprived of her reflection (125). This obliteration of Tony's reflection prefigures the sense of nothingness she will feel in the presence of Zenia, who will replace Tony's lost reflection in the blackened mirror: In the presence of Zenia she feels more than small and absurd: she feels nonexistent" (*The Robber Bride* 126).

Coming out of the bathroom, Tony sees Zenia, who against all the black is dressed not in beat black but rather "in white, a sort of shepherd's smock that comes down to mid-thigh on the long legs of her tight jeans. The smock isn't thin but it suggests lingerie, perhaps because the front buttons are open to a point level with her

nipples" (125-6). Tony begins to realize that West belongs to Zenia, and there's no way that she can compete with such a raw display of sexuality. During this scene, Atwood parodies novelistic situations in which the sympathetic female enjoys an enormously thick and luxuriously glossy head of hair, thereby implicating the novel in the discourse of oppressive and impossible feminine constructions. Introducing Tony to Zenia, West

> has his arms around her waist, under her smock; his face is half hidden in her smoky hair. . . . 'And this is Tony,' says West's voice. His mouth is behind Zenia's hair, so it looks like the hair talking. . . . [Tony] wishes she knew someone who would bury his face in her own hair like that. She wishes it could be West. But she doesn't have enough hair for that. He would just hit scalp.
>
> (127-8)

As intimidated as she is by Zenia, Tony is taken in by Zenia's show of interest in who she is. For the first time, Tony opens up about her mother's disinterest in and desertion of Tony and about her father's suicide, which had occurred after Tony's graduation from high school. Zenia becomes the caring mother figure she never had, and in the process, takes her shopping:

> [Tony] has different clothes now, too, because Zenia has redesigned her. She has black corduroy jeans, and a pullover with a huge rolled collar in which her head sits like an egg in its nest, and a gigantic wraparound green scarf. . . . The pageboy with the velvet hairband is gone; instead, Tony's hair is cut short and tousled on top with artful wisps coming out of it. Some days Tony thinks she looks a little like Audrey Hepburn; other days, like an electrocuted mop. Much more sophisticated, Zenia has

> pronounced. She has also made Tony exchange her normal-sized horn-rimmed glasses for bigger ones, enormous ones. (133)

Audrey Hepburn was noted for her small and innocent though sophisticated appearance, and her look prefigured those of sixties tiny girl models such as Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton. Such a style would certainly seem to fit Tony's body and college-girl selfhood, but the description above is clearly one of an over-stated, ridiculous look. Zenia's make-over assistance is designed to come-off as caring and generous, and Tony desperately needs to believe in Zenia's good will, though deep down she knows the ensemble doesn't work, and Zenia's sartorial sabotage is as ill-willed as the lies, the blackmail, and the husband-stealing she will inflict on Tony. At this point, however, Tony, fierce in her fantasies only, is too needy and grateful for the attention to acknowledge the underhandedness of Zenia's assistance, even though she can see that buried in all that fabric, she ironically looks more "juvenile" than she had before.

After Zenia is out of her life, Tony returns to her girlish style with its Peter Pan collars and polka dots, so she retains that style throughout the four decades of the novel. Likewise, Charis has a signature style that does not change. Roz, who wants to makeover Tony's look, never attempts such an idea with Charis. This is fitting as Charis, who has changed her name from the harder sounding Karen, frequently disassociates herself from her body. Though she practices yoga, bathes in herbal concoctions, ritually treating her skin with ablutions, she is not much concerned with surface looks; rather, she is obsessed with cleansing because she feels polluted. For Charis, who had been physically abused by her mother and sexually abused by her uncle, the body is a burden that needs constant cleaning, not masking or decorating. Like Tony, Charis was a war-baby, born to a single

woman, which of course was socially devastating at the time. Charis' unwed mother, Gloria, like Tony's unhappily wed mother, Anthea, had dressed very bourgeois and lady-like proper. Her style is so carefully put together as to make her seem extremely insecure in her own sartorial impulses and, by extension, her own being.

Kuhn notes that "Like Zenia, both Gloria and Anthea present polished veneers but are corrupted beneath to different extremes: Gloria's abuse and Anthea's abandonment have devastating effects on their daughters" (61). The point is quite true, yet it lacks sympathy for the mothers who have suffered devastating circumstances in their own turns. Having grown up on a working farm where animal "poo" covers the front yard, Gloria had escaped at sixteen to forge her own way. Her mother had never let her forget that she was "soft" and that she should have been a boy. Through her undefined relationship with a soldier, who, according to Gloria, had been killed in the war, Gloria becomes the single mother of Charis, a difficult thing to be in post-war Canada. Comments made by Karen's relations tell us that Gloria and the soldier were scandalously unwed, though Gloria attempts to hide the fact by wearing a wedding ring. Gloria, who teaches grade two, releases her frustration through the physical abuse of Karen and had once hit a student, which almost cost her her job. Having severely beaten Karen's legs with the sharp side of a pancake flipper and verging on the edge of a total breakdown, Gloria takes Karen to her mother's messy farmhouse. Because of "her nerves" she needs a rest from Charis.

Though Kuhn refers to Gloria's look as "polished," her outfit on the trip to the farm signifies the epitome of insecure bourgeois aspirations: "Her mother wore an ivory-coloured linen outfit with a sleeveless dress and a short-sleeved jacket over it. She had a

white straw hat and a white bag and shoes to match, and a pair of white cotton gloves, which she carried" (230). The extreme put-togetherness and its perfectly matched and muted monochrome good-taste color reveal an inability to show any hint of individuality or quirky imperfection. She follows sartorial propriety to its middle-class extreme, breaking no rule, calling no undo attention to herself. While Kuhn is correct to note that Gloria uses her gloves as props, emphasizing the drama of her despair, it *is* despair of the deepest sort. Gloria leaves Karen with the grandmother, who, though hard, has healing hands and becomes a comfort to Karen, but is and has been no comfort to her own daughter Gloria. The next time Karen sees her mother, the setting is a mental institution, a cold, hard, and gray place where Gloria has suffered shock treatments, and the depth of her despair is reflected in the unkempt look of a totally unhealthy, empty, non-constructed persona:

> a door opens and her mother comes into the room. She walks slowly, putting a hand out to touch the furniture as if to guide herself.
> *Sleepwalking,* thinks Karen. Before, her mother's fingers were slim, the nails polished. She was proud of her hands. But now her hands are swollen and clumsy and there is no ring any more on her wedding finger. She's wearing a grey house coat and slippers that Karen has never seen before, and also she has never before seen her mother's face.
> Not this face. It's a flat face with a dull shine on it, like the dead fish in the white enamel trays at the fish store. (252)

Karen sees the grayness of her mother's illness spreading as she is taken on occasional visits and knows that Gloria is dying: "Nobody could stop her, because that was what she wanted to do" (253).

Thus, Karen ends up motherless and living with an aunt and uncle, who do not much like her and in whose post-war prosperity suburban house she suffers sexual abuse at the hands of her uncle. There she learns to disassociate herself from her body and later attempts to discard all the pain of her past by changing her name from Karen to become her repressed alter-ego Charis, a woman whose signature style is soft and flowing to reflect her "soft" nature and her organic, hippy-like lifestyle. Charis' "softness" is opposed to her grandmother's hardness. The "hard" grandmother had typically worn male clothing—overalls and men's work boots—to facilitate her farming lifestyle and had accused her daughter Gloria of being too soft, not a boy. But Gloria, whose up-tight outfits and abusive behavior come off as hard, ironically accuses the soft Karen of being "too hard." Charis' softness, her sartorially flowing body and personal permeability, is part of her fashion statement: "After she became Charis she was harder, hard enough to get by, but she's continued to wear soft clothes: flowing Indian muslins, long gathered skirts, flowered shawls, scarves draped around her" (41).

This sartorial softness is then contrasted to the hardness of the next generation. Like her mother, Charis is also an unwed mother, though since her daughter August is born in a nineteen-seventies urban environment where anonymity is possible, she does have to suffer the gossip and disgrace to which her mother had been subjected. While Charis had changed her name *from* the harder sounding Karen, August has changed her name *to* the harder-sounding Augusta, and her sartorial style is carefully put-together to

produce a smooth and shiny "hard" surface appearance: "her own daughter has gone for polish. Lacquered nails, dark hair gelled into a gleaming helmet, though not a punk look: efficient" (41). "Her brittle suits [and] her tidy little soldiers' boots" cause Charis to worry about Augusta's hardness, but the military tenor of the description—which resonates throughout *The Robber Bride*—bespeaks of strength, and Charis' reluctant but loving acceptance of Augusta's self-construction and Augusta's love for Charis signal a breaking of the hard/soft female family dynamic, which is reflected in clothing choices, and which has been devastating. Though Charis perceives as Augusta as "hard" and materialistic, she nevertheless nurtures her daughter and allows her her own sense of selfhood and self-construction, which lends August a sense of strength and no-nonsense self-assuredness that will carry her through. The narrator syntactically qualifies the idea of a hard girl through acknowledgment of the mother's perception, participation, and acceptance: "Her daughter is a hard girl. Hard to please, or hard for Charis to please" (40). Here, the pleasing becomes the duty of the mother rather than the daughter, and hardness is disassociated from the girl's essence to be re-associated with the girl's feelings, which marks a healing of the mother/daughter, soft/hard dyad.

It's obvious that of the three protagonists, Tony, Charis, and Roz, Roz is the most style-conscious. She has gobs of money, and the narrator, focalizing through Tony, says that she "shops munificently" (28). While Roz carries with her an essentially feminine kind-hearted softness, a softness that registers on her generous and spongy body, she has learned to play the hard-ball game of high-stakes business and therefore constructs her public persona in the hard-edged style of glammed-up power suits. When the three women meet at the trendy Toxique café, where they discover that the supposedly dead

and buried Zenia is alive, well, and in Toronto, Roz arrives from her office "packed into a suit that Tony recognizes from the window of one of the more expensive designer stores on Bloor. . . . The jacket is electric blue, the skirt is tight. Her face is carefully air-brushed, and her hair has just been re-coloured. This time it's auburn. Her mouth is raspberry" (28). A hard-edged style, though, is difficult to pull-off in a softly rounded body:

> Her face doesn't go with the outfit. It isn't insouciant and lean, but plump, with cushiony pink milkmaid's cheeks and dimples when she smiles. Her eyes, intelligent, compassionate, and bleak, seem to belong to some other face, a thinner one; thinner, and more hardened. (28)

Thus, Roz is also placed into the hard/soft dichotomy. The word "milkmaid" hints at her steerage class "roots," and the "bleak" look in her eyes reveal that despite her ability to shop designer fashion, she is miserable. Roz, who is tall and large-framed, has trouble squeezing her body into the "tarted-up" (to use a favorite phrase of Atwood) business suit of the prosperous eighties, which saw a backlash against the conservative and dull-colored business suit advocated by John Molloy's famous books of 1975 and 1977, *Dress for Success* and *The Women's Dress for Success Book.* Both books were extremely influential, and "Legions of ambitious women adopted the deliberately anti-fashion uniform promoted [by Molloy]: comically feminized business suits with shawl collars and demure knee-length skirts, high-necked blouses with jabots and vests, and men's-style shirts with bow ties" (Szabo 124). As the eighties wore on the suit jacket and skirt remained a staple of the corporate woman's wardrobe; however, the silhouette became tighter and more exaggerated as the colors became brighter and more jewel-toned and, as

Roz laments, shoulder pads became enormous. Steele writes that "in the 1980s, the injunction to 'dress for success' had not been forgotten. Many working women adopted a uniform that combined a broad-shouldered jacket and a very short skirt." She quotes Davis, who had written about "the rather masculine, almost military styles that were fashionable among some women in the mid-1980s: exaggerated shoulder widths tapering conelike to hems slightly above the knee" (134). Steele speculates that women adopted the exaggerated military silhouette because it distanced them from "unwelcome stereotypical inferences of feminine powerlessness and subservience," which is undoubtedly true, but the tight-fitting, shorter skirts and the high heels often worn with them added a sexual dimension to the power suit and suggested women had not yet (and still have not) figured out how to dress for respect, respect that does not come with sartorial/somatic judgment. Szabo notes, "For women it was a sexy, big-shouldered skirt-suit designed by Donna Karan conveying, as Melanie Griffith states in the 1988 film *Working Girl*: 'a head for busness and a bod for sin'" (124). For women, the head and "bod" remain inextricable, and therein lies their dilemma in the public world of business, a world in which people virtually never focus on the bodies or outfits of men.

Roz, who wears feet-pinching high heels, has the head for business but not a Melanie Griffith style bod for sin, though her body is as capable as any other sinner's. Her size, however, devalues her extreme competence in the eyes of her husband and those with whom she works. While it would seem that the ability to take up space, to fill a room with her presence, would be an advantage, Roz experiences her body as a drawback in a culture that prefers its women to be small or at least thin. Roz has tried to slim down through diets, but she enjoys her food, and tells herself, "It's not as if she's fat,

anyway. She's just solid. A good peasant body, from when the women had to pull the ploughs" (79). Thus the class issue, which has caused Roz to feel like an outsider with her blue-blooded husband and in the upper echelons of Toronto society, is connected to Roz's appearance.

Zenia, on the other hand, who seemingly has no roots at all, is a sort of every man's fantasy and every woman's fantasy self; she has both a head for business and a body for sin. At one of Roz's "dinner parties in the early eighties," Zenia attends "in a tight red suit with jutting shoulders, a flared peplum at the back of the jacket skirting the curve of her neatly packed bum; Zenia in spike heels, hip cocked, one hand on it" (97). The red, the peplum, the jutting shoulders, and the spike heels are all details Molloy would abhor, and at a later point during the same eighties time period, Zenia shows up at Roz's "wearing amazing lizard-skin shoes, three hundred bucks at least and with heels so high her legs are a mile long, and a cunning fuchsia-and black raw silk suit with a little nipped-in waist and a tight skirt well above the knees" (353). While Atwood's sartorial description comes off as humorous, the situation is not funny for Roz, who has "serious thighs" and bemoans the return of the mini skirt, asking herself—and the reader—what were you supposed to do if you have "serious thighs"? Though during the eighties, there were a variety of skirt lengths from which to choose, the point is that Roz envies Zenia's body, which is noted by the men on the board of Roz's women's magazine *WiseWomanWorld*. Though Molloy's *Women's Dress for Success* and popular wisdom preach that a woman's authority is compromised by clothing that calls attention to her sexuality, Zenia's male colleagues appreciate her body right along with her professional acumen, which, like her body, is partially faked. Zenia has managed to weasel her way

onto the board of *WiseWomanWorld* and to change the impulse of its features, so that rather than a hard-hitting feminist journal, it becomes shallow and predictable, featuring fashion, beauty, and sex tips. Zenia has pushed to change the magazine's name from *WiseWomanWorld* to the simpler *Woman*. Both titles resemble and therefore call to mind Condé Nast's fashion magazines—*W* and *WWD, Women's Wear Daily*.

The whole *WiseWomanWorld* scenario also calls to mind Gloria Steinem's 1990 article "Sex, Lies, and Advertising," in which Steinem laments the demise of the short-lived feminist magazine *Ms.* Steinem's article details the ways in which the editorial content of women's magazines is controlled by advertisers who insist upon content that supports, features, and generally reinforces its surrounding ads, while magazines created for men and general audiences do not have to bend to such censorial pressure by advertisers. The *Ms.* editorial staff refused to publish what it felt was damaging, demeaning, or misleading content, content that advertisers wanted to be adjacent to their ads. According to Steinem, advertisers go so far as to require the editorial content of women's publications to mention their products and to insist that editors refrain from placing any information that could be considered "negative" in the vicinity of ads: "The point is to be 'upbeat.' Just as women in the street are asked, 'Why don't you smile, honey?' women's magazines acquire an institutional smile" (8). *Ms*. folded due to the refusal of advertisers to take its readership's intelligence and independence seriously. If the publication would not succumb to its demands for ad-inflected copy, advertisers refused to buy space. Because of their ad-driven editorial restrictions, women's magazines are what Steinem refers to as "catalogues."

Roz had been invited to take over *WiseWomanWorld*, which "was about to go under because it couldn't attract big glossy lipstick-and-booze advertising" (347). Roz enjoys the feminist content of *WiseWomanWorld*, so that even though she injects the magazine with cash, it's not until Zenia completely changes the format that it begins to make money, which is a sad comment on female readership and feminine culture. The idea of wisdom is lost with the change of title to *Woman*, and "gone are the mature achievers, the stories about struggles to overcome sexism and stacked odds. Gone too are the heavy-hitting health care stories. Now there are five-page spreads on spring fashions and new diets and hair creams and wrinkle creams, and quizzes about the man in your life and whether or not you're handling your relationships well" (367). Therefore, Atwood slams with humor the familiar and lamentable content of popular women's magazines, which unfortunately makes women appear to be mentally vacuous indeed.

For serious readers of Atwood, Zenia, who embodies the airbrushed and digitally altered fashion photo fantasy, calls to mind Kat, the protagonist of "Hairball," a short story in *Wilderness Tips*. Like Zenia, Kat had spent time in London, working for a fashion magazine. Kat's London rag had been called *the razor's edge*, and Atwood's description of *the razor's edge* also parodies popular women's magazines: "Haircuts as art, some real art, film reviews, a little stardust, wardrobes of ideas that were clothes and of clothes that were ideas—the metaphysical shoulder pad" ("Hairball" 36). In London, Kat had "Ramboed through the eighties," and like Zenia, she is an outré fashionista who takes her hard-edged style to Toronto where, to her surprise, she discovers there's a fashion industry: "Kat had been away too long. There was Canadian fashion now? The English quip would be to say that 'Canadian fashion' was an oxymoron" (39).

Kat, whose mother had christened her the softer-sounding Katherine, likes her paired-down name because it's "street-feline and pointed as a nail" (36). She's a hard-edged, husband-stealing woman who commits the outrageous act of sprinkling her recently removed ovarian cyst with cocoa powder, wrapping it in tissue, and sending it disguised in a trendy box of chocolates to the wife of her boss/lover Ger (shortened from Gerald) in order to shock the wife and reveal the affair. Though Kat has "shaved off most of her hair" (37), she acts and dresses in vampish style that's a lot like Zenia's, and though she temporarily wins her war of the sexes through sex and manipulation, in the end, she, like Zenia and other manipulative Atwood characters who are over-dressed, is punished. Before their respective punishments, however, Kat and Zenia use their awareness of the fantasy of empowerment through the construction of exaggerated and never-ending feminine beauty, which is promoted by women's magazines to retain their readership:

> What you had to make them believe was that you knew something they didn't know yet. What you also had to make them believe was that they too could know this thing, this thing that would give them eminence and power and sexual allure, that would attract envy to them—but for a price. The price of the magazine. What they could never get through their heads was that it was done entirely with cameras. ("Hairball" 37)

But while Kat promotes the fantasy through photography and outrageous style, Zenia embodies the fantasy. Zenia's enhanced-by-plastic fantasy body resembles that of a Barbie doll with which the daughters of Roz and Charis play, and Zenia's personal background is also a fantasy, consisting of nothing more than a series of made-up

scenarios, like the scenarios in the girls' games, "games in which Barbie goes on the warpath and takes over the world and bosses everyone else around, and other games in which she comes to a nasty end" (383). Both Kat and Zenia come to nasty ends.

Like Barbie, Zenia changes her clothes a lot. And like Barbie, Zenia has a career, but also like Barbie, the real business of her life is about appearance, the surface, and fantasies, fantasies of an endless play of outfits on a never-aging body. If Zenia's return from the dead represents a return of the repressed, what is also repressed is the fact of mortality, the dread of mutability and death. In the fantasy world of agelessness and immortality, the business of procreation has no place, and like Barbie, both Zenia and Kat will never have body-changing pregnancies, so that their narrative situations illustrate Walter Benjamin's remark that "the modern woman who allies herself with fashion's newness in a struggle against natural decay represses her own reproductive powers, mimics the mannequin, and enters history as a dead object" (qtd. in Evans 186). This is not to say that all non-child-bearing women in Atwood's fiction are non-productive. Tony, for instance, is not a mother and yet is extremely productive and maternal as well. She studies, writes, and teaches and also nurtures her husband and her friends. But Tony is clearly no flashy fashionista, as Zenia and Kat are.

The non-life-giving situation is problematic for Kat, who unlike Zenia is not a shadow figure but rather a character born of realism.[15] At thirty-five, Kat mourns the fact that her body has produced a cyst rather than a child, and in her anxious and feverish perversion, she preserves, names, and talks to her cyst before sending it on its explosive mission. The story closes with Kat's realization that her hard-edged, militant, and appearance-based approach to life and to love has resulted in the sabotage of her own

well-being and sense of fulfillment. Though Kat had enjoyed a period of power and creativity, she was clearly dispensable because power had resided with the male boss Gerald after all. Her punishment is to face the realization of her own biological passing in a state of lonely meaninglessness.

Zenia, on the other hand, seems never to age, which causes wonder on the part of her victims, who age naturally. The fantasy woman, the representation of repressed fears and desires, must be punished with her violent return to the subsurface of consciousness. Zenia's punishment is her narrative banishment from the fictional real world of the three tortured protagonists: Tony, Charis, and Roz, who at the end of Zenia's string of deceits and betrayals, are still wearing the signature styles that mark who they are. Those signature styles include not only what the women put on for public appearance, but also the cozy comfort clothes they wear at home where they are allowed to drop the constructed proprieties demanded by the urban Toronto setting. Roz lounges or dresses for work in her "orange velour bathrobe"; at home grading papers, Tony wears her "Viyella dressing gown and her cotton socks and her grey wool work socks over them, and stuffs her bundled feet into her [raccoon] slippers" (7); and Charis, who seemingly spends quite a bit of time wearing no clothes because she spends quite a bit of time in the bathtub, sleeps in a "white cotton nightgown," as Roz does, does yoga in nothing, and works in her yard in overalls and a man's boots, as her grandmother had.

Unlike the three protagonists, the antagonist Zenia has no home and therefore dresses only for public performance.[16] The only times the reader encounters Zenia dressed in anything other than some vampish and outrageously detailed outfit is when, at the end of book, Charis finds the homeless Zenia in a hotel, wrapped a terry robe, and

during her nineteen-seventies period when she lives with Charis and presents a body bruised and brutalized by physical abuse and disease. Both the abuse and the disease turn out to be faked, and yet their appearances, which evoke Charis' sympathy, still suggest the organic and the fallible in an otherwise perfected, ageless body, a body that *The Robber Bride* reveals to be an illusion. Toward the end of the book, when each of the protagonists goes in turn to the Arnold Garden Hotel in order to confront Zenia about her faked death and the reason for her return to Toronto, Roz notices that she "really is looking terrific," and yet to Charis, who catches her pre-constructed self in the terry bathrobe and turban, she looks surprisingly old. In addition, Tony notices that "her dark eyes are . . . shadowed by fatigue" (434, 406).

The eyes shadowed by fatigue recall the nineteen-nineties fashion imagery dubbed "heroin chic," and sure enough, Zenia in her decadence is carrying and using the drug. Her decadence is finally showing and her punishment is near. As it turns out, Zenia had faked her death in order to escape the wrath of some Irish "armaments types" who had been angry because Zenia had done "a shell game involving some armaments that turned out not to be where [she] said they'd be" (406). Upon her return to Toronto, she reveals herself to be darker, even more criminal than anyone had assumed. Subsequent to the protagonists' respective confrontations with Zenia, who is unabashedly brutal in her conversations with them, Charis has a vision of Zenia's death. When the three get to the Arnold Garden Hotel to check on the veracity of Charis' vision, they discover Zenia's dead body floating, Ophelia-like, in the hotel's fountain, just as Charis had predicted she would be. According to the inspectors who come to investigate, Zenia's death occurred as the result of one of three means: accident, suicide, or murder, for which Tony, Roz,

and Charis all have motive, though the inspectors are not privy to that information. Zenia has an overdose of heroin in her dead body and old needle tracks on her arms. Appropriately, she was also ill with ovarian cancer. And so in the end, Zenia the fantasy is Zenia the toxic, a body filled with poison and disease, a character who embodies Rebecca Arnold's statement about fashion's tendencies at the end of the twentieth century to reflect "basic fears concerning feminine sexuality and its inherent 'evil.'" Such fears "have been brought dramatically to the surface, exhibited as spectacles of danger and seduction, with violence an ever-present reminder of punishment for such display" (85).

The previous quotation is taken from a discussion that considers the ways in which avant-garde couture and street fashion at the end of the millennium reflected a desire to distance itself from traditional imagery of healthy and clean-cut perfection as well as feminine modesty and docile submissiveness. Atwood's description of the trendy Toronto urban scene does not miss this desire and the way it has been encoded onto the clothed body. Such resistance reveals cultural acknowledgement of the falsity of the fantasy. In its production of hard-edged styles and seemingly brutalized bodies, high fashion imagery in the late twentieth century changed so that "models were shown in ever more brutal images that both flaunt and fear the anxieties of decay, disease, and physical abuse" (Arnold 81-2). In this way fashion, like Zenia, reflects cultural anxieties resulting from the myriad traumas of the violent century and the increasingly imagistic and technological world in which we live. Aware of its complicity in the production of anxiety, fashion participates in ironic defiance of its own imagery, thereby revealing itself to sometimes be a self-critical cultural form. The defiance, however, is often dark and

dangerous in its imagery. Arnold's account of the dark images of fashion at the end of the twentieth century is marked by themes of erotic violence, decadence, and decay. The same themes permeate Caroline Evans' fascinating and beautifully illustrated book *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity, and Deathliness.* In it, she writes, "On the edge of discourse, of 'civilization,' of speech itself, experimental fashion can act out what is hidden culturally. And, like a neurotic symptom, it can utter a kind of mute resistance to the socially productive process of constructing an identity." Furthermore, she writes, "If the imagery of late twentieth-century fashion seemed dark or bleak, it may be because it signaled an attempt to chart new social identities in a period of rapid change, while reflecting contemporary concerns with death and decay" (6).

Like Zenia, fashion "at the edge" reveals cultural consciousness of and fascination for collective anxieties as well as dark desires. In *The Robber Bride*, the trendy café at which Tony, Charis, and Roz meet is very tellingly named "The Toxique," and its serving staff is dressed in an aggressive, erotic, and in-your-face style, at which Charis "wrinkles her nose" because "these cloths are too tough for her" and because they "remind her of some of the things they used to sell in Okkult [a store in which Charis had worked]. At any moment there could be rubber scars and fake blood" (61, 62). Alexander McQueen's designs of the nineties actually did feature garments that appear to be splattered with fake blood. Arnold describes McQueen's work of the period as "a series of collections steeped in brutal sexuality. His first collection, in 1993, saw models walk the runway in distressed white muslins, brown-red mud splattered across their breasts as though they were victims of some terrible violence or surgery" (85). McQueen's subsequent designs continued in a similar mode, and "the look encapsulated the late twentieth-century

fascination with a sleazy glamour that lives off its own deathly surface, turning its back on 'natural' fashion and cosmetics, using deliberately shocking references as a form of resistance to the constant clarion call for health and beauty" (Arnold 86). The words "sleazy glamour" are perfectly suited to the fashion statements sported by both Zenia and people at The Toxique where "the waiters may have eye shadow or nose rings, the waitresses tend to wear fluorescent leg warmers and leather mini-shorts," and "people with pallid skin and chains hanging from their sombre, metal-studded clothing slouch through to the off-limits back rooms or confer together on the splintering stairs that lead down to the toilets" (27). During an evening at Toxique, Tony waits for her friends, and "From the young woman, or possibly man, who appears beside her, dressed in a black cat-suit with a wide leather stud-covered belt and five silver earrings in each ear, she orders a bottle of wine and a bottle of Evian" (398).

The preceding quotations illustrate Atwood's keen observation regarding fashion and the way it speaks what Ryan Gilbey called "disruptive undercurrents" (qtd. in Arnold 86). As always, Atwood's descriptions of the material stuff of culture are accurate. Her extraordinary sense of observation results in the construction of a fictional Toronto where clothing signifies not only in regard to characters' psyches and motivations, but also in regard to the cultural zeitgeist. Through it all, Atwood like other writers in the tradition of great novelists, is also a moralist. As such she remains ambivalent in her humorous and satirical presentation of women's fashion statements, which she clearly writes as sites of anxiety and constructions of overly-sexualized femininities. Though her work realizes the centrality of clothing and fashion in a world of ever-faster change, it is also critical of fashion and of those who pay obsessive and excessive attention to personal

appearance. After all, because we all must die, the end is marked for everyone by dis-appearance, a fact with which both fashion and fiction are wont to grapple.

CHAPTER THREE

"AND SHE DRESS TO KILL": SIGNIFYING OUTFITS IN *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND *IN LOVE AND TROUBLE*

Walker, Sartorial Sensibility, and the Critical Record

Margaret Atwood's sartorial statements and their often over-determinant nature implicate clothing as lending to a general angst experienced by characters who have internalized contradictory injunctions to uphold standards of feminine beauty and to resist feminine frivolity and artistry in self-fashioning. Alice Walker's fiction registers a different sensibility, which is less imbued with the dominant culture's anxieties born of contradictory cultural commands regarding sartorial expression. Rather, Walker's characters grapple with the dominate culture's notions of female beauty and with African American culture's responses to those notions. In Walker's novel *The Color Purple* and her short story collection *In Love and Trouble*, fictional representations of clothing serve the traditional narrative work of suggesting characters' cultures and values as well as spiritual and intellectual states. Contradiction reigns again, however, because while clothing and hairstyling become spiritually inflected with notions of well-being and self-actualization in *The Color Purple*, in *In Love and Trouble*, capital T-trouble is quite often sartorially inflected.

Much has been written about quilting, both literal and figurative, in Walker's work, but little has been written about her fiction's sartorial statements.[17] While "Everyday Use's" Dee is frequently criticized for her flashy nineteen sixties look, *In Love and Trouble's* other stories are virtually ignored in terms of their sartorial senses, and only two essays that I know of attend to clothing in *The Color Purple*: Mary Jane Lupton's "Clothes and Closure in

Three Novels by Black Women" and M. Teresa Tavormina's "Dressing the Spirit: Clothworking and Language in *The Color Purple*." Lupton's "Clothes and Closure" recognizes the centrality of clothing to *The Color Purple's* plot and writes, "Like many novels written by women," *The Color Purple* "show[s] a particular interest in clothing as a sign of character, race, and gender, and as a vehicle for the transformation of the self" (409). Referring to "Phebe the dressmaker" in Jessie Fauset's *Comedy: American Style*, Lupton writes that "Jessie Fauset's enterprising seamstress is born again, almost fifty years later in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" (413).[18] Lupton approves of Celie's transformation via clothing-construction and entrepreneurialism and moves on to criticize Steven Spielberg's 1985 film version of the book because "the issues of gender identity and feminist economics are ignored, as is the theme of clothing as anything other than decoration" (415).

The other clothing conscious article about Walker's work is M. Teresa Tavormina's "Dressing the Spirit: Clothworking and Language in *The Color Purple*." Tavormina's title suggests her point that, for the black character, clothing is imbued with the positive sense of the spiritual and the communal self rather than anxiety:

> Reference to cloth, clothing, and clothworking abound in *The Color Purple*. Again and again we read about people's clothing, especially Shug's. Both Nettie and Celie have a keen eye for what people wear, and are sharply conscious of their own dress as well, at times embarrassed by it, at times pleased. Most important, sewing and designing clothes becomes Celie's refuge and then her work. The meaning of these ubiquitous references goes beyond a realistic description of a common female interest or activity, however. By the end of the novel, Walker's clothing and clothworking

> images have reinforced several major themes: The nature of self-definition, the creative power of the human spirit, and the growth of familial and societal bonds out of shared life and history. (221)

Thus, Tavormina notes *The Color Purple's* postmodernist break from realism, for which it has been heavily criticized, and lends credence to the idea that attitudes toward clothing in black-authored fiction come from the culture's own historical/creative center and certainly in the case of *The Color Purple*, clothing carries positive—even spiritual—connotations. My work extends the discussion of clothing in *The Color Purple*, taking issue with its detractors and historically contextualizing black fashion statements, which has not been done hitherto. It then clothes-reads *In Love and Trouble's* sartorially sensitive texts, thus attending to the aforementioned critical gap.

The Color Purple

In the fictional world of *The Color Purple*, which is populated predominantly by black people, narrative attitudes toward clothing are underpinned by a shared culture and history of lack, a lack which had been experienced by people denied the basic human need for at least decent clothing, which is opposed to a history of access and choice, if not abundance. While it had been typical for nineteenth-century European-American culture to praise "the natural woman" and to discredit the woman overly dressed or made-up in "fripperies," Linda Scott's *Fresh Lipstick* points out that the black slave woman who worked in the fields epitomized "the natural" because she was disallowed personal grooming or sartorial choice. Scott reminds us that "[s]eldom given access to grooming materials and almost never allowed to bathe, slave women wore their clothes, usually issued to them once a year with little regard to size or gender, until they were rags. These African women were

routinely made to do ‘men’s work’ and were forced to wear breeches while they did it.” Scott goes on to write about the ways in which slave women were denied personal identity through the denial of hygiene and clothing. Their look was as natural as could be, and therefore “[t]o talk of free white women being ‘forced’ to wear corsets by magical fashion icons, thereby becoming ‘slaves to fashion,’ seems an insensitive exaggeration in light of the physical and institutional forces articulated in the black female slave’s ‘natural’ look” (17).

Fashion writer Constance C.R. White also discusses the lack that marked the “circumscribed” sartorial state of black slaves. She quotes Michele Black Smith: “They [slaves] were condemned to wear a rough cloth of beige, brown, or blue-and-beige linen or cotton, which often came from factories up north . . . . This plantation-issue fabric came to be known as Linsey-woolsey, or Negro cloth, and carried with it the unpleasant association of slavery even after emancipation” (18). The passage goes on to note that there were “codes on the books” regarding what blacks could or could not wear and that the Linsey-woolsey had the “same effect as branding.”

Ted Ownby’s *American Dreams in Mississippi* examines plantation and store records to show that, though it was rare, slaves had occasional opportunities to make cash purchases for themselves. Slaves acquired money through extra work and occasional payments and gifts from their masters. Ownby’s account reveals that slaves typically spent their rare cash on non-essential garments or accessories or luxury cloth, such as silk, to produce more fashionable clothes than those they had been issued, which, as Ownby notes, were plain, rough, and uniform. Rather than purchasing “goods for everyday survival” as one may expect, the data suggests “that slaves were using their ability to make consumer choices as

ways to identify themselves as something other than workers and to reject the appearances created by slaveowners' practice of handing out the same clothes to everyone" (49-60).

An interesting study entitled *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* also discusses the surprising and variegated array of garments and accessories acquired by antebellum slaves (White and White 5-36). Through its examination of primary sources, including many advertisements for the capture of runaway slaves, *Stylin'* contends that "No matter how poorly they were treated, most southern slaves had a few special items of clothing with which to dress up," and "through the ways they fashioned their appearance, African and African American slaves discovered an often surprising degree of social and cultural space" (26, 10). In the context of slavery, clothing ceases to be wasteful extravagance and becomes instead a rare opportunity for autonomy and resistance to control by whites, including non-effective sumptuary laws enacted in the South Carolina Negro Act of 1735, which forbad slaves to "wear the cast-off clothes of their owners." This injunction was ignored not only by blacks but also by white owners, who used clothing as a reward because "they had something to gain by exploiting the sartorial desires of their human property" (White and White 14). So while we need to qualify the idea that slaves had absolutely no sartorial autonomy, that autonomy remained limited. African and African American resourcefulness notwithstanding, the social condition of the slave was still marked by rough fabrics and plain, loose garments.

The general lack of access to somatic decency and sartorial choice is reflected in Celie's post-emancipation and yet slave-like condition in Walker's 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple*. *The Color Purple* is an epistolary work; its protagonist Celie writes letters to God and later her sister Nettie. In Celie's third letter to God, she

expresses her state of utter abjection. Her stepfather, whom she had been led to believe is her biological father, has taken and given away her second baby born by him. As Celie mourns the loss of the baby, she writes how her "father" berates her appearance: "I got breasts full of milk running down myself. He say Why don't you look decent? Put on something. But what I'm sposed to put on? I don't have nothing" (4). Later, after Celie has been married-off to a man who fully expects and forces her to function as one of mules of the world, her husband's sisters come to visit. Noting that Celie needs something to wear, the sister named Kate calls attention to Celie's lack:

> Buy Celie some clothes. She say to Mr. _____.
>
> She need clothes? he ast.
>
> Well look at her.
>
> He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need something? his eyes say.
>
> (21)

So Kate, who is "dress all up," takes Celie to the store for her first new dress. What is interesting at this point is that Celie, who is extremely sensitive to and appreciative of color, a fact reflected in the novel's title, would prefer a dress of red or purple. Though the store has "plenty red," her choice is limited to "brown, maroon, or navy blue" because Mr. _____ "won't want to pay for red. Too happy lookin" (22). Like the slaves who wore the "Negro cloth" mentioned by Constance White, Celie has to settle for dull, blended shades rather than the bright secondary or pure primary color she would prefer. And also like a pre-emancipation black woman, Celie's sartorial self is marked by lack of choice, lack of variety, and lack of pure color.[19] The forced suppression of Celie's sartorial desire is akin to her suppression as a creative human being; in addition to which, love of color is quite

literally written into the historical/cultural record as a specifically African American sensibility. Therefore, Celie's feminine desire for color is culturally situated as well, so that the suppression she endures relegates her existence and self-determination in terms of both gender and culture.

Walker's title, *The Color Purple*, certainly and forcefully announces the book's rhetorically central stance concerning the joy and beauty reflected in strong and vibrant color, and an acute sensibility toward color is much discussed as a specifically black aesthetic by writers of black history and culture. Calling attention to the fact that cultural, historical, and geographic situations create different fashion sensibilities, White writes, "black consumers' predisposition to certain styles is influenced . . . by history, folkways, and particular environments." Calling attention to the color issue, she quotes Veronica Jones, black owner of a retail fashion business: "We like color. We like softer fabrics" (3). Using a graph to illustrate the sheer variety of fabrics that southern slaves purchased when they had the opportunity, Ownby also notes the different design aesthetic of African-American slaves: "Cloth had long been crucial as a way of marking individuality and hierarchy in African societies. Scholars . . . have analyzed the tendency of slaves to use an African aesthetic that emphasized contrasting colors, irregular striped patterns, and a willingness to mix patterns and fabrics that European Americans saw as incongruous and gaudy" (56). White and White not only note but also emphasize the way in which the African aesthetic struck white viewers. Among many others they quote in regard to white dismay over what seemed to be very strange combinations of colors and garments is Fanny Kemble, who noted slaves' manner of dressing up on Sundays, which to her eyes involved "the most ludicrous combination of incongruities that you can conceive . . . every color in the rainbow, and the

deepest possible shades blended in fierce companionship" (28). Kemble's reaction attests to remarkably different cultural attitudes towards design aesthetics and also to the Eurocentric sense of its own superiority, though from a position of hindsight, such posturing comes off as incredibly simplistic.

A preference for bright and contrasting colors also informs African American quilting, a matter reflected in fiction by Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison (Kelley). Lisa Jones' wonderfully entitled *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* also proclaims positive attitudes towards vibrant and contrasting color as part of a specifically black sartorial sensibility. Endorsing Jean E. Patton's *Color to Color: The Black Women's Guide to a Rainbow of Fashion and Beauty*, Jones writes, "Don't take refuge from the hard eye of the status quo aesthetics in muddy colors that 'recede' you into the background" (167).

On the other hand, while White and Jones assert a style that clothing watchers may have noticed, colorful dressing is only one practice of dressing within an exceedingly diverse group, living diverse lifestyles, working in diverse fields, and populating diverse regions, both urban and rural. In addition, there is a post Civil War opposition between blacks who presented styles flamboyant and sometimes sexualized with an impulse toward individualism and those who presented a conservative style with an impulse toward respectability and community values. Evelyn Brooks Higginbottom writes about the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, which believed that conspicuous consumption and flashy fashion would undermine black solidarity by creating divides between affluent and poor blacks. And Stephanie Shaw discusses ways in which black women "across the class spectrum" were taught to practice moderation in personal consumption in order to foster

community cohesion and also to present young black women as virtuous in the face of sexual assault by white men (Higgenbottom and Shaw, cited in Benson 284). White and White also note the call to moderation and "dressing with simplicity" by black writers (102-105). These practices in black fashion history mark a trend that shuns bright color dressing as too flashy and self-consciously conspicuous. So while black fashion has created its own aesthetic, it has shared with American fashion at large the divide between ideologies of austerity and impulses toward conspicuous display, though ideologies of sartorial austerity are not articulated in writing by black voices until choice becomes a possibility.

Opting for individual assertion and personal preference for joy in color, Celie not only desires but also seems to crave color in what has otherwise been for her an almost hopeless and colorless existence. Her epistolary journey is marked by the incorporation of color into her world. For instance, when Celie has begun to express herself through the design and manufacture of pants, those pants are almost always brightly colored. Squeak chooses a pair the "color of sunset," while Shug is feeling new fabrics Celie has draped all over the place. Celie remarks, "it all soft, flowing, rich and catch the light. This a far cry from that stiff army shit us started with, [Shug] say" (219). And when Celie gets around to creating pants for Sofia, "one leg be purple, one leg be red" (223). This parti-colored scheme includes the two colors Celie had wanted for her first dress and therefore signifies the large degree of her new agency and the way in which vibrant color appeals to her sartorial imagination and symbolizes the bright turn her life has taken.

Celie makes clothes and wears outfits that are definitely and conspicuously eye-catching, and she turns her pants-making into a capitalist enterprise, a situation that challenges bell hooks' *Black Looks*, which applies to a later era in the twentieth century but

carries on the rhetoric of resistance to conspicuous fashion. In a discussion about Black Nationalism, hooks' disavows marks of black fashion as communal resistance to white appropriation and colonization of black culture. She writes,

> When young black people mouth 1960s' black nationalist rhetoric, don Kente cloth, gold medallions, dread their hair, and diss the white folks they hang out with, they expose the way meaningless commodification strips these signs of political integrity and meaning, denying the possibility that they can serve as a catalyst for concrete political action. As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption. (33)

Hooks contends that white appropriation of commodified black styles results in just another act of cultural imperialism so that black presence and politics are rendered absent. In addition, black styles present an essentialized idea of blackness that denies the diversity of individual African American communities. Rejection of black style is concomitant with rejection of consumerism as if to wear a specific garment is to be lost in some sort of consumerist daze of political unconsciousness. This idea is supported by the work of Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen who write that "Consumption is a social relationship, the dominant relationship in our society—one that makes it harder and harder to hold together, to create community. . . . To establish popular initiative, consumption must be transcended—a difficult but central task facing all people who still seek a better way of life" (qtd. in hooks 34). Though it's questionable that consumption is society's "dominant social relationship," capitalism's tendency to turn just about any political style into a style for style's sake has been well-established. In addition, black nationalism has traditionally railed against

conspicuous consumption as harmful to black uplift, and yet its efforts to re-create African American history and to establish a national identity has resulted in styles, such as the wearing of kente cloth, that bespeak an alternative cultural heritage as well as pride in that heritage.

Hooks' point that meaning gets depoliticized by commodification and therefore is lost in Afrocentric style statements is supported by the fact that black Americans who sport such styles as aesthetic and/or political statements are often unaware of the origin or the meaning of those designs and are also unaware that the purchase of non-African copies, which are widely available and less expensive than authentic hand-weaves, negatively affects the success of African artisans (Boateng 212-226). Textile manufacture is a global business, and since labeling provides inadequate information, African or supposed African textiles are imbued with the same production and labor problems as all textiles. An ideological contradiction results from the fact that means of production are hidden from the consumer. In addition, sartorial connotations change with context, and in America, African textiles obtain new significance that loses traditional African significance and regional specificity. Some people, for instance, do not know that kente cloth originated in Ghana where its use tends to be formal. Boateng writes, "The use of kente for items like umbrellas, beach balls, and furnishings is considered to degrade a cloth that is normally reserved for ceremonial use" (221). On the other hand, it is also true that black people living in the work-a-day world, outside of the academy, in and out of politics, find a sense of cultural self-worth and dignity through their clothing and through the inclusion of African-inspired styles. I would also argue that African-inspired textiles and black hair styles retain cultural distinction regardless of white appropriation, though it is true that their political punch diffuses.[20] Those who

celebrate rather than denigrate sartorial expression consider the use of African and African American inspired design by both black and white designers and the population at large as a situation in which a distinctly African or African American aesthetic influences other aesthetics and therefore reveals Africa and African Americans as a cultural players on the global stage. In other words, the use of African American design reflects active influence rather than passive appropriation.

In regard to the vexed relationship between feminism and clothing, bell hooks aligns radical black feminism with traditional white and second-wave feminism in the de-valuing of play and expression through clothing, which is presumed to automatically indicate empty and excessive consumption even though the purchase of a plain garment is no less an act of consumption than the purchase of a conspicuously expressive garment. I use the word "conspicuously" because the plain garment is also expressive—a garment cannot avoid expression of some sort. One gets the sense that for hooks, radical politics and even life are simply too serious and fashion too frivolous, though she does not say so out right. On the other hand, Lisa Jones, who also complains about white appropriation of black culture, maintains that style is serious and black style is empowering for those whose access to power is limited by class and economic circumstance:

> Style is political, of course: It's about danger and choices, who is made family and who is made slave. . . . For black women without access to the room of one's own to make leisure-time art, our bodies, our style became the canvas of our cultural yearning. It has been, in recent history, not just a place of self-mutilation, but a place of healing. . . . Racism wounds us in gender-specific ways. Men, an elder once told me, are made to feel stupid, and women to feel

> ugly. Claiming beauty (and the power in that), and the dissemination of it to the young women who follow us, is serious, in my mind, serious as boys pointing cannons at oil wells. (91-2)

The previous quotation precedes a discussion about Coreen Simpson, fine-art photographer and designer of the super successful Black Cameo. Unlike white cameos, in which "the model holds her head down in a demure way or seems vulnerable," Simpson's Black Cameo looks up, therefore signaling pride and defiance (Simpson qtd. in Jones 94). Hooks would agree with such defiance. In *Black Looks*, she condemns Shahrazad Ali's "conservative tract" entitled *The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman* because in its misogynist stance toward black women it promotes "a rejection of black styles that emphasize our diasporic connection to Africa and the Caribbean" (110). In this sentence, hooks contradicts her earlier stand. The wearing of "black styles" becomes a way for black women to cultivate—a word that etymologically indicates postmodern cultural construction—the beauty of which Jones writes. While hooks would agree that black women need to recognize and claim their own style, she cannot resolve the conundrum through which black style and beauty are constructed, enhanced, and highlighted through sartorial construction and accessories and are therefore corrupted through their complicity with mass consumer culture. Whether over-stated, under-stated, resistant, conservative, black or white, unless the wearer designs and produces her own fabrics and garments, all style statements in the west and increasingly around the globe are constructions that occur within the system of what hooks calls "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (*Black Looks* 32). Though one can avoid excessively loud sartorial statements and constructions that require more resources

than others and though one can adopt practices that are conscious of the means of production and distribution, one cannot opt out. [21]

In *The Color Purple*, a book that largely fails according to hooks because she measures a book's value according to its politics, part of Celie's oppression is due to inaccessibility to the specifically black beauty of which Jones writes. She is cast by her father, her husband, and even by her future lover Shug Avery as ugly. Celie has internalized the idea of ugliness that serves to validate her oppression, and even Shug's very first words to her are "You sure *is* ugly" (48, italics original). The emphasis on "is" signals that Shug has been told before hand of Celie's ugliness, a point Celie confirms by following up her quotation of Shug's ugly words with the phrase, "like she ain't believed it." In other words, Shug had not believed that anyone could be so ugly as Celie had been described to her. Seeing is believing. In *The Same River Twice*, Walker discusses Celie's ugliness as a condition of cultural ideas regarding what constitutes beauty:

> In Celie's rural and small town turn-of-the-century culture, through the forties at least, the voluptuous, the portly, that stout female form was admired. Even a very fat female was admired if she was also good-natured and 'light on her feet,' i.e., a good dancer. Skinniness, boniness (though not slenderness, which was admired if the body was also curvaceous and perceived as strong), was considered, in a woman to be almost a deformity. (51)

The quotation is interesting in the sense that it speaks to the idea that replacing one standard of beauty (thinness) with a different standard (voluptuousness) is simply more either/or thinking and not the answer to the well-being of womankind. Nevertheless, while Celie's shape would be considered ideal by many in the U.S. today, in her own socio/historical

context, "Being skinny is [her] major 'fault'" (51). [22] While Celie's shape is natural, cultural expectations devalue that shape, and *sartorial lack* further decreases her value as a woman:

> [Celie's] other 'ugliness' consists of a furtive, beaten down manner (she cowers), unkempt hair and poor and slovenly clothing (she has no one to teach her to care for herself and no one to buy her clothes or even notice she's still wearing her dead mother's clothes, tattering, years after her mother's death). As she begins to create herself through her writing . . . and her love of Shug and Nettie, she begins to take on an outer beauty that approximates her extraordinary loveliness of spirit. (51)

In *The Color Purple,* pride exhibited in the ability to stand straight and to hold up one's head—like Simpson's Black Cameo—performs beauty, and as Celie learns to hold up her head, she also acquires a wardrobe, which includes the pants she creates and sells. When Celie makes the return from her successful stay in Memphis to Mr._____'s farm, she feels and looks different. She has become stronger and more confident. Indeed, she has come into her own, and her outfit reflects the fact: "Got on some dark blue pants and a white silk shirt that look righteous. Little red flat-heel slippers, and a flower in my hair. I pass Mr. _____ house and him sitting up on the porch and he didn't even know who I was" (224).

Hooks would like the fact that Celie designs and sews her pants so that she is not alienated from her labor; however, her turning the pants-making into a small business sends the novel's clothing production into the capitalist marketplace. Mary Jane Lupton writes, "Walker has taken Celie as far on the road to success as Walker's 'womanist' economics will permit before she runs the risk of mimicking the values of the dominant culture," and

"[Celie's] capitalism is meant to be distinct from that of the Black bourgeoisie, which would imitate the style and language of the majority in an act of self-alienation" (414). Lupton is treading a very fine line here. Free enterprise is free enterprise whether practiced by Celie, the dominant culture, or the Black bourgeoisie. While capitalism is clearly guilty in its tendency to exploit labor and to create economic and class divisions, it remains the economic system under which we and increasingly more people live. Entrepreneurial women like Celie not only empower themselves through economic independence but are also in positions to employ other women and, through their managerial practices, to ameliorate the conditions whereby capitalist enterprise abuses and exploits its labor force. While capitalism is traditionally pitted as contrary to communal values, Celie's empowerment is paralleled by an increasing sense of her own place within her own little community.

Trudier Harris is stronger in her rhetorical stance against Celie's capitalist practice and slams *The Color Purple* because of its departure from realism. Harris expresses distaste for the "ridiculous" and "preposterous" love triangle situation and maintains that, in the end, Celie "has *effaced herself* into free enterprise" ("From Victimization" 9, 14, emphasis added). To write that a protagonist who has evolved from a silent, cowering figure who is turned in upon herself to a protagonist who has expanded her presence through speech and somatic bearing is a read that forces its politics. Harris, like many black literary critics, deplores the book's depiction of black life, which she fears will be taken by white "spectator" readers to represent *all* black communities ("On The *Color Purple*"). Regardless of such criticism or the degree to which Celie participates in the capitalist economy, she has definitely not *effaced herself*, but rather, has *asserted herself* to become a more expansive presence in the world she occupies. Certainly, her class situation is improved, and she is in a

position to radiate her new-found independence and power, to enhance the status of her sisters and progeny through employment, role-modeling, and the financial support necessitated by formal education.

Central to Harris' dismissal of Celie's progression is the implausibility of her rags-to-riches, "ugly duckling turned princess" scenario. If one rests judgment upon *The Color Purple's* adherence to or departure from realism, it certainly fails in regard to its writing of clothes, which may seem to be represented as historical artifacts, but can only be read metaphorically. Women wearing pants, for instance, is the book's central metaphor for its gender-bending impulse. Sophia, who is presented as much larger than Harpo, is nevertheless able to wear his pants, which calls attention to the novel's inability to maintain generic realism. This causes a narrative situation in which the reader has difficulty deciphering what is real and what is fantasy, a difficulty analyzed by bell hooks, who writes, "historical accuracy is altered to serve didactic purposes—to teach the reader history not as it was but as it should have been" ("Writing" 224). *The Color Purple* strikes hooks, therefore, as *not true*, a situation that results from readerly expectations or what Ralph Ellison, referring to the novel, called "the implicit realism of the form" (63). Form is problematic in *The Color Purple*, and Harris's comment that the Africa portions of the book are analogous to the whaling chapters in Moby Dick is particularly apt ("On *The Color Purple*" 155). On the other hand, postmodern novels are known for exceeding the bounds of genre—all the long works in this study blend realism and fantasy—and, Celie's pants, as we all recognize, are as symbolic as Cinderella's glass slippers and Hester Prynne's scarlet letter. Perhaps Walker should have taken Hawthorne's cue and called *The Color Purple* a romance.

Tavormina's "Dressing the Spirit" recognizes *The Color Purple* precisely as it verges

into the realm of fairy tale because it "reflects on certain aspects of the Cinderella myth"; in addition, *The Color Purple's* clothing also reflects a specifically African American aesthetic attitude. Celie's pants, according to Tavormina, resemble "native African dress as Nettie describes it" because "Folkspants are genuinely comfortable clothes, extensions and adornments of the people wearing them, rather than a shamefaced, constricting covering-up of the self. Only the 'colorless' whites, according to *The Color Purple*, feel naked and ashamed without clothes" (222). Through contrast, therefore, sartorial meta-discourse in *The Color Purple* and in Tavormina's essay constructs white people's clothing as imbued with an historically familiar association: shame. On the other hand, "For black people, it is different: 'Since they are covered by color they are not naked.' Instead, they dress for comfort and celebration, like the Sengalese, 'these shining, blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns.'" Furthermore, in Africa, "men and women both preshate a nice dress" (Walker, qtd. in Tavormina 222).

Black fashion writing supports this dichotomy. Given the different historical/cultural backgrounds that work to create different attitudes towards North-American ways of dressing, White observes that "Black women and men are interested in dressing up, a characteristic also found in Latin cultures; it is the direct opposite of Wasp style, which is under-stated and puritanical" (2). White's statement is overstated since both black and white society are extremely varied and both cultures include subcultures that embrace fanciful dressing; nevertheless, the Atwoodian fear of "making a spectacle of oneself" and the impulse towards invisibility reflect a tendency toward the "understated and puritanical" aspects of which White writes. The desire for eye-catching and fashion forward style flies in

the face of "shame-faced" attitudes toward dress and refuses respectable restraint of time, money, and self-regard, therefore causing moral anxiety.

Sartorial history in the European West is replete with admonitions, most often directed against women, regarding any sort of extravagance or style in dress, which was usually interpreted not as a sign of aesthetic pleasure or individual creativity but rather as a sign of a frivolous mind, wasteful expenditure, vacuous morality, and sexual wantonness. The raillery becomes a part of the Caucasian mind-set and is carried forward into Victorian feminism and dress reform, where participation in fashion becomes a simplified sign of feminine passivity and sexuality rather than agency. There is contradiction in these criticisms because they work to cast a woman as both a passive victim of fashion and at the same time an agent of selfish desire. The fashionably dressed woman has been constructed as both, a situation from which many black and poor immigrant women of all colors had been excluded and which Atwood expresses in the sartorial anxiety of women in twentieth-century Toronto. This difference in sartorial history and sensibility is reinforced by the fact that black fashionability is more readily recognized as signifying "a highly political subtext of struggle, a determination to renegotiate the social contract" (White and White 128).

The word "puritanical" has negative connotations in the sense that it signals pleasure denied for the sake of greed masquerading as moral rectitude, and certainly the Puritans, from whom many white Americans and Atwood too claim descent, were rigid and serious in their suppression of desire and pleasure, including sartorial pleasure.[23] This suppression had been codified and institutionalized in sumptuary laws, but George Francis Dow's *Every Day Life in the Massachusetts Bay Company* points out that while colonial "magistrates considered it desirable to curb the extravagancies of dress that followed the London mode,"

they were ultimately unable to do so (60-70). In reference to the Massachusetts Bay Company, Scott points out that "if defendants [brought to court for violating sumptuary laws] could prove that he or she had a personal fortune of at least 200 pounds, they were exempt from the rule" (24). Therefore the laws were in effect more about the maintenance of class divisions than moral rectitude.

Before the eighteenth century, the enactment of sumptuary laws in the west was common and often designed to retain class divisions, all the while harping on moral issues. Though it focuses on Europe—mostly England—rather than the Americas, Ribeiro's thorough account *Dress and Morality* details the long history of sartorial suppression and sometimes rabid raillery against fashion. Her introduction notes, "This book is really a history of the criticisms directed at clothing on the grounds of its 'immorality', a term which is synonymous with clothing which reveals or emphasizes sexual areas of the body" (16), an idea corroborated by the American Puritan law which stated that "no garment shalbee made with short sleeves, whereby the nakedness of the arm may bee discovered" (qtd. in Dow 62). According to the accounts of Dow, Scott, and Ribeiro, though such laws were enforced with various punishments, they always met with a resistance which inevitably rendered them useless.

In regard to the American South, Ownby examines sermons, poems, letters, and diaries to show how white women of the anti-bellum period were also constantly admonished for desiring fashion. Such admonishment encouraged the thrifty virtue of dutiful sewing to meet a family's needs for clothing and linens and discouraged what was presented as the frivolous vice of sartorial desire. Ownby writes, "Evangelical preachers loved to condemn women's taste for luxurious and frivolous clothing, often in ways that joined the weaknesses

of the upper classes with what they saw as the special weaknesses of women" (27). Therefore, both white and black women in the south were historically reproached by white culture for attending to sartorial finery, white women because they were being "frivolous" and black women because they were constructing sartorial selves that transgressed the bounds of their position within the social hierarchy. In this scenario, white women's sartorial extravagance challenges their own cultural/political mindset and milieu, which with its rhetoric of "protecting" white womanhood, is implicitly sexist and horribly divisive for black and white women, while black women's sartorial extravagance challenges an outside culture that explicitly oppresses them in terms of both race and gender. Therefore, their resistance is more explicit and more readily constructed as heroically subversive.

Celie's signature garment, pants, works against gender oppression and toward renegotiating a new and equal role for black women, but Shug's style is flashy, feminine, and unapologetically sexy, a style through which her body challenges the standards of beauty that count against Celie. Though Shug's sexual behaviors suggest an insecurity of its own sort, her problem is not with a lack of confidence in her body or its expression, though she has the same negatively perceived attributes as Celie. Mr. _____'s father, who does not understand his son's attraction to Shug, puts it this way: "Just what is it about this Shug Avery anyway . . . she black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats" (56). Thus, Alphonso sets forth three physical qualities historically used to belittle a black woman's value and provides just one example of the ways in which Walker's work participates in a situation articulated by Patricia Hill Collins:

> Literature by Black women writers provides the most comprehensive view of

> Black women's struggles to form positive self-definition in the face of denigrated images of Black womanhood. Portraying the range of ways that African-American women experience internalized oppression is a prominent theme in Black women's writing. (Collins 83)

And Trudier Harris writes,

> Black women throughout their history in the United States have been victimized by a standard of beauty alien and inapplicable to them. Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and others have written of the consequences for the dark-skinned black woman, the one who was not light and did not have 'good hair." ("From Victimization" 10)

Indeed, literature and criticism by black women authors often express the pain of exposure to denigrated imagery, and black hair has been a major aspect of that denigration. Descriptions of hair textures and styles are ubiquitous in black writing by both men and women because of beauty standards engendered by racism. In "Black Hair/Style Politics," Kobena Mercer writes, "If racism is conceived as an ideological code in which biological attributes are invested with societal values and meanings, then it is because our hair is perceived within this framework that it is burdened with a range of 'negative' connotations" (249). Later in the article comes the following: " 'Good hair,' used to describe hair on a black person's head, means hair that looks 'European," straight, not too curly, not that kinky. And, more importantly, the given attributes of our hair are often referred to by descriptions such as 'whoolly,' 'tough,' or. more to the point, just plain old 'nigger hair'" (249).

Though hair is not clothing, it is a part of the body we "dress," and *The Color Purple* is almost obsessed with the condition of hair. As such, it reflects and challenges the early to mid-twentieth-century internalization by black people of racist attitudes toward hair with African qualities of texture, an internalization described and decried by Eldridge Cleaver's essay "As Crinkly as Yours." Lisa Jones puts it this way: "Hair is the be-all and end-all. Everything I know about American history I learned from looking at black people's hair. It's the perfect metaphor for the African experiment here: the price of the ticket (for a journey no one elected to take), the toll of slavery, and the costs of remaining. It's all in the hair" (11-12).

The importance of hair as a marker of black identity is evident in *The Color Purple* through numerous queries about hair, which are raised as characters question and describe each other's selfhoods. Just as Alphonso berates Shug by noting that she's "nappy headed," Shug questions Celie about her absent sister Nettie and her hair: "What kind of dress she like to wear? Shug ast. What her birthday? What her favorite color? Can she cook? Sew? What about her hair?" (123). Once again, color is important, and clothing and hair take the rhetorically emphatic first and last positions in the query. Before Celie had met Shug, she wondered about Shug's clothing and hair style: "What she wear? "How her hair is? What kind lipstick? Wig?" (27). When Celie describes Sophia, she notes, "Hair notty but a lot of it, tied up on her head in a mass of plaits" (32). And, when Nettie wonders in a letter how Celie has aged, she writes, "I try to picture what the years have brought you in the way of weight and wrinkles—or how you fix your hair" (232). Seemingly everyone is concerned with hair, and Celie is often apprehensive about her hair's lack of style, which parallels her

lack of clothing. She worries about her own unkempt state as she prepares to meet Shug for the first time:

> [T]he first thing I try to do is change my dress.
>
> But too late for that. By time I git my head and arm out the old dress, I see the wagon pull up in the yard. Plus a new dress won't help none with my notty head and dusty headrag, my old everyday shoes and the way I smell. (46)

In this scenario, Celie has no time to freshen-up, so she has to meet Shug "as is," to which Shug reacts: "You sure *is* ugly." Shug, on the other hand, wears flamboyant flapper style and, according to Celie, is "dress to kill. She got on a red wool dress and chestful of black beads. A shiny black hat with what look like chickinhawk feathers curve down side one cheek, and she carrying a little snakeskin bag, match her shoes" (47). In the next sentence, Walker produces an unusual juxtaposition of style and nature: "She look so stylish it look like the trees all round the house draw themselves up tall for a better look." In *The Color Purple*, trees are the stuff of the spiritual, so clearly, if the trees approve, the reader should as well. Stylish Shug changes both clothing and hairstyles throughout the book, and Celie's participation in such feminine stylin' works to cement sisterly bonds.

In *The Color Purple*, hairdressing becomes a bonding act that connects and nurtures female and generational bonds, which reflects a tradition for peoples whose ancestors came to America as slaves. White and White write that "[t]he way African American slaves styled their hair was important to them as individuals, and it also played a substantial role in their communal life" and "in the years before the Civil War, when the vast majority of African Americans was enslaved, the styling of hair, far from having negative connotations was one of the few areas of which it could be said that whites allowed blacks a relatively unhindered

scope for cultural expression" (38, 39). Constance White also comments on hair and suggests that African American attention to hair reflects African attitudes: "African-American women may have inherited their attitudes toward hair from their African sisters; in Africa, hair is treated with loving attention. Women think nothing of spending several hours creating spectacular coiffures, incorporating human hair or synthetic hair extensions to achieve the desired effect" (183). Helen Bradley Griebel's discussion "The African-American Headwrap" discusses the importance of the head in the West African human and figural aesthetic and describes "elaborate hairstyles embellished with flowers, beads, shells metal and feathers [and] by shaving the hair close to the scalp in ornamental patterns, or by applying clay to the hair and sculpting it into various shapes" (218). Therefore, the centrality of hair in the psyche of black-authored literature reflects both a history of racial denigration and also an enduring, positive aesthetic, an aesthetic that certainly challenges puritanical admonitions about ornate self-fashioning and frivolous expenditures of time. Writers like Shane White and Graham White, Constance White, and Lisa Jones all see positive aspects in black hair styling and challenge the idea that hair straightening suggests a desire to be white. Rather, hair straightening is just one method among many choices of creative hair styling. Many successful and confident black people straighten their hair, and white people, after all, constantly color, curl, straighten, and otherwise style their hair as well. Jones calls hair play "hair freestyling," and referring to the work of bell hooks, which she respects, she calls into question the common idea of "internalized self hatred," an idea that has lost a great deal of ground and yet is not so easily dismissed. The history is very complex, but through it all, in conditions of internalized oppression or self-love, hair remains a sartorial aesthetic of considerable priority.

In *The Color Purple*, when Celie meets Shug for the first time, Shug's "shiny black hat" covers up the fact that she's "got the nottiest, shortest, kinkiest hair [Celie] ever saw," and yet Celie "loves every strand of it" (55). In this way, Celie, who will cornrow Shug's hair, challenges internalized hatred of black hair. In addition, the dressing of Shug's hair is presented as act both maternal and nurturing: "I work on her hair like she a doll or like she Olivia—or like she mama. I comb and pat, comb and pat. First she say, hurry up and git finish. Then she melt down a little and lean back gainst my knees. That feel just right, she say. That feel like mama used to do. Or maybe not mama. Maybe gandma" (55). *The Color Purple* pays ubiquitous attention to women's hair which has become burdened with the American de-valuation of nappy hair; yet, Celie also challenges this devaluing just as she inscribes it. Hair is such a loaded signifier of blackness that its aesthetic qualities come into Shug's and Celie's conversation about what God and Jesus look like, a conversation that contains the familiar observation regarding the Bible's description of Jesus' hair:

> Nettie say somewhere in the bible it say Jesus' hair was like lamb's wool I [Celie] say.
>
> Well, say Shug, if he came to any of these churches we talking bout he'd have to have it conked before anybody paid him any attention. The last thing niggers want to think about they God is that his hair kinky.
>
> That's the truth I [Celie] say (202).

The denigration of kinky hair is tempered by the acknowledgment that Jesus had lamb's wool hair and therefore suggests the manufactured and false nature of racial distinctions. So while the socially "negative" aspects of black hair are registered in characters' consciousness, Shug

and Celie creatively work their hair in response to what Mercer calls "a range of 'problems' created by ideologies of race and racism" (248). Outside of a public context where people feel free to let their hair down, hair ceases to carry its negative sense. Celie "loves every strand" of Shug's hair even though it's the "nottiest" and "kinkiest hair" she had ever seen, and when Celie frets that her "hair is short and kinky because [she] don't straighten anymore," she remembers that "once Shug say she love it no need to" (266). Thus, in *The Color Purple*, hair carries more contradictory significance than clothing. As a specific target of racism, black hair and the care of black hair register both the internalization of racist attitudes and active resistance to those attitudes. [24]

In Love and Trouble

In *The Color Purple*, clothing lends itself to senses of both emotional and spiritual health while, on the other hand, in Walker's 1973 first collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble*, clothing often detracts from senses of emotional and spiritual health. Oppression and loss of spirit are directly written into style statements in "Roselily," "Really, *Doesn't* Crime Pay?," "Her Sweet Jerome," and "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff." And while clothing in the well-known "Everyday Use" is usually read as typically indicative of a selfish and shallow nature, I read the story as more ambivalent toward its fashionista's fashion statement.

"Roselily," *In Love and Trouble's* first story, is especially cogent to contemporary discourses regarding women's habits of dress because its eponymous protagonist contemplates a future in which her identity will be marked by the "robes and veil" worn by a woman of Islam, a style of dress referred to as hijab. The fact that hijab was the target of recent school dress-code legislation in France and remains hotly contested in contemporary

discourse provides a fine example of how something as supposedly trivial as what women wear becomes exceedingly charged with political significance. Though some Muslim women recognize the historically dynamic and extremely complex, culturally determined meanings of hijab, and though they are working hard to challenge its common interpretation in the West, hijab is often, nevertheless, simplistically read to signify oppression of the female body and selfhood (Alvi, Hoodfar, and McDonough; El Guindi; Heath). This is, of course, a correct reading in certain contexts where the extreme covering of women signifies extreme social and political constriction; however, there are also myriad reasons women choose to veil. Oppression occurs where choice is denied as it is, for instance, in Iran, where in the past, forced unveiling caused oppression. We naturally associate hijab with the Middle East where different styles of veiling pre-exist the Qur'an, though veiling is usually mistakenly thought to be initiated by Qur'anic law. Alvi, Hoodfar, and McDonough closely examine sacred Muslim texts and write, "the authority for the religious importance of the veiling of Muslim women was based more on later Qur'anic commentaries than on the Qur'an's own prescriptions" (186).

Islam adopted a cultural and social practice that evolved into a religious one, but there are many Muslim women who do not wear hijab. Popular ignorance surrounding hijab results in simplified and stereotypical oppositions between extreme modesty and oppression in the East and extreme display and sexual license in the West. Women who practice Islam object to what they see as the simplistic and condescending attitude of feminists who consider Islam and its ways of dress to be unacceptably misogynistic. Though it is nuanced rather than simplistic and sympathetic rather than condescending, a womanist questioning of hijab and Islam registers in "Roselily," thereby illustrating Walker's following comment:

> I am intrigued by the religion of the black Muslims. By what conversion means to black women, specifically, and what the religion itself means in terms of the black American past: our history, our "race memories, our absorption of Christianity, our *changing* Christianity to fit our needs. What will the new rituals mean? How will this new religion imprint itself on the collective consciousness of the converts? Can women be free in such a religion? Is such a religion an anachronism? (qtd. in O'Brien 75).

As suggested above, Roselily is confronted in a very personal way with black American Islam, which, like its Eastern counterpart, also emphasizes moral purity to sometimes include extreme covering of the female body. Black Islam in the United States is diverse and not all groups wear hijab, but all Muslims are required to dress with modesty, and there are at least three communities in which women appear fully covered, faces included. American Muslim scholar Amina Beverly McCloud explains the construction of an American Muslim woman, a construction that begins with sartorial expression:

> The notion of 'Muslim woman' refers directly to dress and adab [social discipline and etiquette]. The Muslim woman is one who looks Muslim, wearing a scarf that covers her hair, neck and bosom. Her dress touches the ground, her sleeves close at the wrist, and whether she wears a blouse and pants or a dress her clothing must be loose enough so that it does not show her form. The Muslim woman is obedient to her husband, takes constant care of her children, and soft spoken [sic]. She does not want much, is content, and understands that this behavior is pleasing to God. . . . This conception of Muslim woman has determined life for many African-American Muslim

> women for decades, though not all have accommodated this notion in its entirety. (147)

The rest of McCloud's thorough survey of contemporary African American Muslim communities supports such an image of Muslim womanhood, and knowing that this description will raise eyebrows among women of all cultures and colors, McCloud quotes another Muslim writer who elaborates, "even as Islam instituted [. . .] a hierarchical structure as the basis of relations between men and omen, it also preached, in its ethical voice . . . the moral and spiritual equality of all human beings. It is because Muslim women hear this egalitarian voice that they often declare (generally to the astonishment of non-Muslims) that Islam is non-sexist" (Ahmed, qtd. in McCloud 147-8). Astonishment indeed. The idea that enjoying spiritual equality necessitates social inequality is one that many feminists simply cannot abide.

In our cultural situation and moment in history, Muslim women struggle to promote their own senses of spirituality and modesty as matters of *choice* in a world they see as excessively material and sexually permissive.[25] In regard to marriage, there is "considerable diversity" in Muslim family arrangements; however, "primarily because the Qur'an urges marriage and prohibits casual gender mixing, marriage is understood within African American Muslim communities as protection and a secure status" (McCloud 96). If one stops to ponder the socio/historical situation in which black women have had to suffer racism, sub-standard employment opportunities, poverty, desertion, and physical abuses of every kind, a desire for protection and security is logical, but a protected situation can also be problematic. Attributing the idea to Farah Jasmine Griffin's "Conflict and Chorus: Reconsidering Toni Cade's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*," Davis points out, "a woman

who is to be protected is also often expected to obey" (28), a comment born out by McCloud's description of the woman of American Islam. For Roselily, however, protection and obedience will rule the day; *choice* is not of the first order.

"Roselily" is not a traditional narrative because it is not propelled by plot; rather, the story is constructed through and around language from the traditional Christian wedding rite and is set on the porch of a rural Mississippi home where Roselily is being married to a Muslim man from Chicago, the urban north and center of the most well-known and also one of the least orthodox of American Muslim organizations, the Nation of Islam. Dolan Hubbard identifies Walker's structure in "Roselily" as "a call (masculine discourse) and response (feminine discourse)" and says that in the "first story in *In Love and Trouble,* Walker uses a country wedding to illustrate that what is good for the black man is not always good for the black woman, who needs to be freed from an unyielding masculine ideology" (217). The story sets forth the most memorable words of the Christian marriage rite: "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony. If there's anybody here that knows a reason why these two should not be joined together, let him speak or forever hold his peace" (3-8). These phrases are separated and interspersed by the language of a third-person narrator who focalizes Roselily's ambivalence regarding her own ontological predicament between Christianity and Islam; between single motherhood, which is heavy with work and financial insecurity, and marriage, which is heavy with the certainty of pregnancies and homemaking; and between cultural/familial memory and Black Islam's willful break from the "so called Negro" history in the United States. In this way, Walker establishes and interrogates, with the most exquisite economy, fundamental and competing ideas concerning black American identity.

Noting Roselily's wedding outfit, Mary Helen Washington writes, "The very robe and veil she is wearing are emblems of servitude that [Roselily] yearns to be free of" (92).

The wedding is clearly Christian, and in Christian weddings the bride typically wears a gown or a dress, which would articulate the body, whereas, a Muslim bride often wears a caftan-like outer garment called abaya, which hides rather than articulates the body. The narrator's unexpected use of the word "robe" rather than "dress" or "gown" imagistically suggests Roselily's Muslim future in which the robe and veil are emblematic of Islam's "everyday use" of hijab. Hijab signifies a religion and a lifestyle that demand extreme sartorial modesty and austere behavior. These demands are emphasized by "the stiff severity of [the groom's] plain black suit." Roselily "feels shut away from him" because of his suit and "his religion. A lifetime of black and white. Of veils. Covered head" (5). The preacher's speaking the phrase "to join this man and this woman" calls to Roselily's mind items that are associated with confinement rather than with the freedom that she struggles to associate with her marriage and its attendant break from poverty. To Roselily, the joining of this man and women suggests "ropes, chains, handcuffs, his religion. His place of worship. Where she will be required to sit apart with covered head" (4).

This association of confinement and segregation with sartorial expression is repeated after Roselily has thought about her acceptance of the unnamed man's proposal, which had been the hasty result of her "impatience" to be done with her going-nowhere life in a rural town where she's employed as a garment shop worker doing the non-creative, horribly repetitive sewing of seams. Unlike Celie, who designs and chooses fabrics for the creation of her pants, Roselily is alienated from the creative aspects and finished products of her labor, and the narrative ironically and alliteratively juxtaposes opposing ideas of freedom and

confinement in sartorial terms: "Her husband would free her. A romantic hush. Proposal. Promises. A new life! Respectable, reclaimed, renewed. Free! In robe and veil" (7). Because Roselily is oppressed in her job as a seamstress, clothing hampers her sense of autonomy on both sides of the marriage vows. Though the "joining of this man and woman" offers a seemingly delicious freedom, the passage's final positioning of the dreaded "robe and veil" puts the kibosh on that imagined freedom in no uncertain terms. The phrase is followed by white space so that it reads like a door closing.

Because reference to hijab is repeated on each of the first five pages of a six and a half-page text, it becomes the story's central image—a metaphor for confinement to what Barbara Christian identifies as the social conventions inherent in both Christianity and Islam. According to Christian, social conventions offer a sort of path-of-least resistance out of an oppressive situation, and yet such conventions need to be resisted if one is to be true to her personal spirit—her agwu (31). While Roselily wears the marriage veil of Christianity, her sartorial musings emphasize not only the problematic patriarchal nature of the religion hijab signifies but also the problematic nature of literally having to wear hot, uncomfortable, and constrictive garments: "She cannot always be bride and virgin, wearing robes and veil. Even now her body itches to be free of satin and voile, organdy and lily of the valley. Memories crash against her. Memories of being bare to the sun" (6). As Christian notes, Roselily is resistant to her outfit and what it signifies, which, according to its traditional meaning, is false. Roselily is not a virgin; she has four children by an untold number of men, as her community is certainly well-aware. The clothing is, to use Christian's term, "contrary" to everything Roselily is and feels, so that in "Roseliliy," the positive connotations attached to clothing, their spirit-lifting and body-affirming qualities set forth in

The Color Purple are undermined by a sense of powerless resignation. Roselily seems to have retreated into silence; in the world of the text, her ambivalence remains internalized. Her objection to the robe and veil remain unarticulated just as her body in hijab will remain individually unarticulated as it stands for a body religious and politic.

"Really, *Doesn't* Crime Pay?" posits the conventional association of feminine attention to the body and fashion with mental vacuity, in this case mental vacuity that has resulted from unfulfilled artistic aspirations. Since the aspiration is sacrificed to shopping and somatic ablutions, the narrative creates a strong opposition between well-groomed nothingness and unkempt intellectual activity. The story is written in first person, and its narrator describes her hands as "Helena Rubentstein hands," which indicates that she is "not a serious writer," who would have bitten nails and ragged cuticles. Her "white and frilly shirt" also indicates her state as a "fluff of nothing." The narrator recounts her relationships with two men; one is her husband Ruel, who desires that his wife exist only to play the role of kept suburban housewife, a woman living to shop and to have babies. He is ashamed of her desire to write "*a lot of foolish, vulgar stuff*" and answers her expressions of emotional dissatisfaction with suggestions that she go shopping. The protagonist does his bidding; she goes shopping and buys

> *six kinds of face cream, two eyebrow pencils, five nightgowns and a longhaired wig. Two contour sticks and a pot of gloss for my lips.*
>
> *And all the while I was grieving over my story. Outlined—which is as far as I can take stories now—but dead in embryo. My hand stilled by cowardice, my heart the heart of a slave.* (16, italics original)

Walker presents the preceding in italics to indicate the words as writing, a written text within the written text. The unfulfilled writer/protagonist does not want babies, so the text sets forth the familiar creating art/giving birth metaphor. Because her husband wants the baby and not the art, she is stymied by cowardice so that she follows the orders of another and therefore has the "heart of a slave," a slave to shopping and self-fashioning. She describes herself as "a womb without a brain that can be bought with Japanese bathtubs and shopping sprees" (18).

The other man described by the narrator/protagonist is Mordecai Rich, who appreciates her art, and under the influence of his appreciation, she "glows" with grimy and wholesome satisfaction: "I am dressed in dungarees, my hands are a mess. I smell of sweat. I glow with happiness" (18). Unfortunately, Mordecai Rich, with whom the protagonist has an affair, disappears and later publishes her good story under his own name. To add insult to injury, he has announced that "his next book will be called "The Black Woman's Resistance to Creativity in the Arts" (21). With this development, the narrator loses her sanity, attempts to murder Ruel, and is placed in a mental institution. In this scenario, men drive a woman into a state of mental vacuity and then blame her for being there. The story ends after the frustrated artist is back with her husband who blames all on Mordecai and who continues to try for a baby, though one will never be born because his wife, with secret amusement, takes birth control pills. His active, grimy life in his fields cultivating peanuts is contrasted to her clean but barren existence. She is "perfect and beautiful in every limb," waiting for his return and "cooking supper as if [her] life depended on it." Having become such a "fluff of nothing," she describes her life of emptiness as a life of shopping "twice a day," buying meaningless clothing and make-up, and amusing herself by "painting [her] own face" (23).

Thus, "Really, *Doesn't* Crime Pay?" forcefully reminds us that participation in rites of fashion and beauty lends itself to but cannot complete feminine creativity and self-determination. When precipitated by male injunctions and when practiced as an extreme form of self-absorption, such rites result in alienation from both community and one's sense of outwardly directed creative powers.

In "Her Sweet Jerome," extended and elaborate descriptions of bad choices in style emphasize the class division within a marriage and, by extension, within a black community. Though the protagonist is known in her town as a "colored [woman] with money," she is clearly marked somatically and sartorially as low-class. An uneducated, self-employed hair-dresser, she marries a school teacher who enjoys her and, because he inherits it, her father's money but despises her style and her demeanor. The protagonist, Mrs. Washington, shows her fashion non-sense by purchasing for her husband stereotypically flashy clothes made from cheap fabrics. Because the protagonist suspects that her sweet Jerome is having an affair, the story opens with her rifling through his wardrobe:

> Ties she had bought him hung on the closet door . . . glorious ties, some with birds and dancing women in grass skirts painted on by and, some with little polka dots with bigger dots dispersed among them. Some red, lots red and green, and one purple, with a golden star, through the center of which went his gold mustang stickpin, which she had also given him. She looked in the pockets of the black leather jacket he had reluctantly worn the night before. Three of his suits, a pair of blue twill work pants, and old gray sweater with a hood and pockets lay thrown across the bed. The jacket leather was sleazy and damply clinging to her hands. She had bought it for him, as well as the

> three suits: one light blue with side vents, one gold with green specks, and reddish that had a silver imitation-silk vest. (24)

Thus, the narrative illustrates the unnamed protagonist's low class status through a description of her attempts to dress her husband in flashy color and "sleazy," "imitation" fabrics. The protagonist's self-fashioning is equally tasteless. A large woman, she has "a predominate taste for pastel taffetas and orange shoes. In the summertime she paid twenty dollars for big umbrella hats with bows and flowers on them and when she wore black and white together she livened it up with elbow-length gloves of red satin" (27). A woman who emphasizes her presence by sporting large, billowy styles and "circle[s]" her eyes "with expensive mauve shadow" hardly needs to "liven it up," which registers as a comical move, and yet Mrs. Washington's descent into madness and suicide is not at all the stuff of comedy.

The protagonist's husband, Jerome Franklin Washington the third, is an educated man carrying on a secret dalliance with a group of revolutionaries. Mary Helen Washington identifies Jerome as one who "considers himself one of the elite, the 'black bourgeoisie" (93). But his tendency to refer to his friends as "comrades . . . jokingly (or not jokingly, for all [his wife] knew)"; his friends' use of phrases such as "slave trade," "violent overthrow," and "off de pig"; and the revolutionary tenor of the books he reads suggest a middle-class man during the heyday of radical black nationalism, a man with definite radical leanings that bespeak anti rather than pro-bourgeois aspirations. Searching for clues to reveal with whom her husband is cheating, the protagonist finally locates, under the bed, the answer to his absences and his obsession: books with covers on which

> Fists and guns appeared everywhere. 'Black' was the one word that appeared

> consistently on each cover. *Black Rage, Black Fire, Black Anger, Black Revenge, Black Vengeance, Black Hatred, Black Beauty, Black Revolution.* Then the word 'revolution' took over. *Revolution in the Streets, Revolution from the Rooftops, Revolution in the Hills, Revolution and Rebellion, Revolution and Black People in the United States, Revolution and Death.* (33-4, italics original)

The badly dressed protagonist has an epiphany. Her husband has been courting violent revolution rather than another woman, and "she didn't even know what the word 'revolution meant, unless it meant to go round and round, the way her head was going" (34). Even though Washington is enamored with radical black power, he beats his wife and despises her for her uneducated, proletarian ways, thereby making a joke of lip service he pays to socialism and black solidarity. The tragedy of the situation is completed as Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington the third, whom the reader likes for her hard working and generous spirit, "sets the marriage bed afire" in order to burn the books which she linguistically associates with a female lover: "Trash!' she cried over and over, . . . 'I kill you! I kill you!'" (34). She "cracks-up" and dies in the flame of her own fire, thereby making an ironic mockery of her earlier self assurance that "A final crack-up in her own home was impossible" because "she did not think her husband's lover bold enough to show herself on his wife's own turf" (30).

"Her Sweet Jerome's" presentation and condemnation of hypocritical black nationalism and Roselily's marriage to a Muslim man substantiate Amanda J. Davis's statement that

> for African American writers in the 1960s and 1970s, interpreting black experience largely meant doing so in the context of the black nationalist movement. With its emphasis on community, a revolutionary future, and present subjectivity, black nationalism was proposed as the route to liberation—liberation that was to garner support in the works of black artists and the development of a black aesthetic that stressed racial stability and solidarity. (24)

Davis goes on to a focus on ways writing by black women exposed violence perpetrated against black women and how that violence contradicted the black nationalist call to "black unity" (24). Likewise, Madhu Dubey writes, "the works of 1970s black women writers insistently questioned, at a thematic level, the gender assumptions of black nationalist discourse. Especially in the black women's fiction of the period, elements of the black nationalist construction of black femininity directly enter the texts as thematic material" (20). Walker's work in *In Love and Trouble* links sartorial sensitivity with feminist critique that exposes the macho positioning of men in the black power movement, a positioning that effectively, and to the movement's detriment, excluded the forces of feminine creativity and work.

Though clothing was—and is—a significant component in the construction of black nationalist identities, both male and female, its presence in fiction is rarely addressed in critical discussions. However, Dubey's book, which is committed to a formal examination of selected novels by Morrison, Walker, and Gayle Jones, mentions Walker's writing of clothing once. In a consideration of Walker's 1976 novel *Meridian*, she notes the way in which Meridian's "closely cropped hair, railroad cap, and dungarees signal her refusal of the

conventional signs of femininity." Thereby, "*Meridian* challenges, in the most dramatically visible terms, Truman's conception of the black woman as a nurturer of the black nationalist's newfound sense of manhood" (127). Dubey's statement calls attention to the fact that black nationalist groups often expect their women to be what Davis calls "reproducers of warriors and supporters of male needs" (26), a fact that black feminists such as hooks and Walker have exposed and challenged. In "Roselily" and "Everyday Use," the protagonists are imagined as fully subscribing to two different black nationalist conceptions of feminine sartorial behavior. The narrative attitude to these sartorial statements imbues specific garments or looks with interrogatory significance.

While Roselily is inwardly resistant to her induction into black Islam, Dee, one of the four characters in "Everyday Use," is outspoken and sartorially expressive about her adoption of a new Afro-centric sensibility. "Everyday Use," which is probably the most anthologized of all Walker's short stories, has a great deal of critical conversation surrounding it so that seemingly everybody who is anybody has said everything about "Everyday Use." "Everything" includes remarks about Dee's Afro-centric fashion statement, which critics typically see as negatively signifying Dee's superficial and selfish nature. Nancy Tuten writes that "Commentaries on Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use' typically center on Mama's awakening to one daughter's superficiality and to the other's deep-seated understanding of heritage" (125). In such reads, the story's central metaphor, the quilt, is posited as standing in opposition to Dee's clothing: Quilt/art/tradition/community/loyalty as opposed to fashion/mass culture/fleeting/individual/disloyalty. For instance, David Cowart writes about Dee's "fashionable politics," which become "the foil to an authorial vision of the African American community, past and present, and its struggle for liberation" (171).

Furthermore, Dee "styles and dresses herself according to the dictates of a faddish Africanism" but "succeeds only in becoming a phony" (172). Dee, who like her sort-of-but-not-exactly Muslim boyfriend, is "all pose . . . [and she] despises her sister, her mother, and the church that helped to educate her." Cowart recalls hooks when he writes, "Wangero seems to think that the African American past can be rescued only by being commodified" (178).

Though Cowart recognizes the nuanced timber of a text that is ambivalent rather than simply condemnatory, Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Charlotte Pierce-Baker are particularly vehement in their castigation of Dee and her choice of outfit, which, to their way of thinking, displays a reprehensible impulse toward a sort of mindless individuality and away from community. Community in this context consists of Mama, the story's narrator; Dee, Mama's oldest daughter, who has left home and returned for a visit; and Maggie, Mama's younger daughter, who has remained at home to live with Mama until, as Mama tells us, she "will marry John Thomas (who has mossy teeth in an earnest face)" (50). As the story opens, Dee and Maggie are waiting for Dee's arrival in the freshly swept yard of their simple, rural shack-like home. Dee, we find out, has changed her name to Wangero Lee-Wanika Kemanjo, which symbolizes pride in her new identity as an Afro-identitfied American. She arrives in a car and is described by Mama as she emerges: "It is hard to see them clearly through the strong sun. But even the first glimpse of leg out of the car tells me it is Dee" (27). Dee/Wangero, to whom, for convenience, I will refer as Dee, is wearing

> A dress down to the ground. . . . A dress so loud it hurts my eyes. There are yellow and oranges enough to throw back the light of the sun. I feel my whole face warming from the heat waves it throws out. Earrings gold, too,

> and hanging down to her shoulder. Bracelets dangling and making noises when she moves her arm up to shake the folds of the dress out of her armpits. The dress is loose and flows, and as she walks closer, *I like it*. (28, italics added)

Mama also describes Dee's elaborate hair style, which resembles dos that appeared as the Afro began to lose its force. Robin D. G. Kelley's "Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro" describes such styles and writes that they were promoted to re-invigorate the afro by diversifying it. Dee's hair "stands straight up like the wool on a sheep. It is black as night and around the edges are two long pigtails that rope about like small lizards disappearing behind her ears" (28). Dee is definitely done-up. According to Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Charlotte Pierce-Baker s "Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use,'" Dee's outfit marks her as a sort of African American poster-girl for the foolishness of the fashion conscious. They write,

> [I]n her stylishness, Dee is not an example of the indigenous rapping and styling out of Afro-America. Rather, she is manipulated by the style-makers, the fashion designers whose semiotics the French writer Roland Barthes has aptly characterized. 'Style' for Dee is the latest vogue—the most recent fantasy perpetuated by American media. . . . Assured by the makers of American fashion that 'black' is currently 'beautiful,' she has conformed her own 'style' to that notion. Hers is a trendy 'blackness' cultivated as 'art' and costume. (160)

The most obvious problem with this rather condescending assessment is that it is commonly known, at least since the publication of Dick Hebdige's oft-cited 1979 work *Subculture: The*

Meaning of Style, that since the emergence of post World War II youth culture, "consumers are no longer perceived as 'cultural dopes' or 'fashion victims' who imitate fashion leaders but as people selecting styles on the basis of their perception of their own identities and lifestyle. Fashion is presented as a choice rather than a mandate" (Crane 15). Valerie Steele writes, "Fashions no longer 'trickle down,' they usually 'bubble up' from various subcultures" (89), and Christopher Breward puts it this way: "The precious and autocratic designer, dictating global skirt-lengths at a whim, may be an overblown caricature most at home in the spectacular context of Hollywood film or the glossy magazine" (21). Breward goes on to discuss the historical and present influence of designers who are in no way written out of the fashion system, and yet the point remains that consumers determine which fashions succeed and which do not by accepting or rejecting what they are offered, and their sartorial behaviors influence what designers and ready-to-wear manufacturers create. Dee's style statement has evolved in a much more complex trajectory than suggested by "Patches."

Afro-centric dressing in the United States, which expressed itself in various forms of which Dee's is only one, did not take its cue from "the fashion designers." Though Dee's style did indeed become trendy, as initially expressive and politically disruptive fashions usually do, its manifestation was due in part to "The Black Panthers and other black nationalist and civil rights groups" who "used clothing as a synthesis of protest and self-affirmation. Nationalist groups' incorporation of Afrocentric style pieces "were incorporated into Afrocentricity because the constituency wore them and popularized them" (Lewis 30). Black artists were powerful initiators of Afrocentric style, including the afro hairdo. Artist Kwame Brathwaite relates that in 1962, the African Jazz-Art Society and Studios in Harlem (AJASS) "devised a show which they called 'Naturally '62: The Original African Coiffure

and Fashion Extravaganza Designed to Restore Our Racial Pride and Standards.'. . . The goal of the show was to prove to the world that 'Black is Beautiful'" (n. pag.). The Society featured a group of models and entertainers, free of make-up and straightened hair, who were called the Grandassa Models. The show included music and "commentary on the African fashions." The affair was hugely successful, and, according to Van Dyk Lewis, was "the impetus for the popularity of Afrocentric fashion in America" (30).

In regard to hair style, Maxine Leeds Craig writes that Abbey Lincoln toured with the Grandassa models and that their "fashion shows promoted the link between black pride and what had begun to be called variously the 'aunaturel' 'au naturelle,' or 'natural look.'" (26). The entertainers and Grandassa models "were sympathetic to or involved with the civil rights movement and felt that unstraightened hair expressed their feelings of racial pride" (25). Likewise-minded students at traditionally black universities had also begun to sport short, unstraightened hair which at the time was called "close-cropped." Though the mainstream did not accept the unstraightened hair as aesthetically pleasing at first, the students, entertainers, and models had initiated what would become the afro hairstyle.

The second problem with the Bakers' dismissal, which is suggested in the previous discussion about Afro-centric fashion trend-setters, is their assumption that Dee's style is non-indigenous. Afro-centric fashion takes its designs, its colors, fabrics, silhouettes, and accessories from a variety of influences both western and African. Lewis writes, "Afrocentric fashion references the apparel traditions of multicultural Africa, including the tradition of both the colonizers and the colonized. The story of batik (which is Indonesian in origin) is an example of the former." All of this borrowing results in styles that "are worn exclusively or integrated into Western dress." And, "Afrocentric fashion is analogous to Western fashion.

Both appropriate much from oppositional fashion expressions; consequently both expressions are fragmented" (Lewis 28). What is recognizably African American dress, then, like the quilt, is a pulling together of fragments to create a new whole. Because it takes its cues from a plethora of culturally distinct communities, in Africa and the West, it represents a sort of multi-cultural American bricolage. Therefore, contrary to what "Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'" claims, Dee's outfit *is* indigenous.

In typical fashion, "Patches: Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'" reads Dee as a sellout to fashion so that "Individualism and a flouting of convention in order to achieve 'artistic' success constitute acts of treachery." Furthermore, "Quilts, in their patched and many-colored glory offer not a counter to tradition but in fact, an instance of *the only legitimate* tradition of 'the people' that exits" (158, italics added). These emphatic statements and veneration of the quilt lead Sam Whitsitt's "In Spite of It All: A Reading of Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'" to ask some provocative questions. For instance, Whitsitt notes that quilts and the art of quilting are currently fashionable. Referring to Barbara Christian's insight that Walker's work features a "certain kind of 'contrariness,' a 'willingness at all turns to challenge the fashionable belief of the day,'" he states,

> if the symbolic value attributed to the quilt can be taken as a "fashionable belief of the day," we might have a dilemma, since the very story which surely contributed to the success of such a belief could likewise be questioning it, and this would produce a dilemma, as well, for those critics who want to ensure that Walker holds an honored place in the history of quilting and who likewise feel that any questioning of that history would be dishonoring it.
>
> (444)

My purpose is not to question the history or the value of quilting, but rather to call into question the total dismissal of a young woman who practices her art and expresses her identity in *other* ways.

Critics who dismiss Dee as superficially fashionable ignore the fact that Walker identifies with all of the women in "Everyday Use" (Washington 101-2), and that though Dee does not quilt, she is in fact an artist. Mary Helen Washington writes that as "the photographer and collector of art, [Dee] has designed her jewelry, dress, and hair so deliberately and self-consciously that she appears in the story as a self-creation" (101). As a teenager she had cut and re-fashioned an old suit her mother had been given ("Everyday" 26). The Baker article ignores this facet of Dee's black female creativity while it commends the same craft in *The Color Purple*:

> Celie's skill as a fabric worker completely transmutes the order of Afro-American existence. Not only do her talents with a needle enable her to wear the pants in the family, they also allow her to become the maker of pants par excellence. Hence, she becomes a kind of unifying goddess of patch and stitch, an instructress of mankind who bestows the gift of consolidating fragments. (165)

After making a typical Walker narrative journey, Celie stays home, and perhaps that is the reason her clothing construction rates and Dee's does not. Or perhaps it is that Dee's outfit would have been fashionable at the time while Celie's pants would have gone against the fashion grain, as if to be in tune with fashion is automatically bad. Susan Farrell approves of Dee's "fighting spirit" and her dress. She correctly notes how Mama admires the dress and writes, "Dee is concerned with style, but she'll do whatever is necessary to

improve her circumstances" (181). The "but" in the statement implicitly suggests that there's something inherently negative and superficial about liking style. Dee is certainly a long way from perfect. She is arrogant and self-centered, and of course, the reader experiences a warm, fuzzy sensation when Mama firmly hands the quilts Dee had wanted to the "hangdog" Maggie who then smiles. And yet, would critics of Dee really want her, and by extension all young black women, to stay at home quilting? Would we contain the talents and aspirations of the likes of Dee, so that her only option is a life in which she quietly stays home to sew quilts or appropriately plain garments and marry a boy with "mossy teeth"? The unqualified condemnation of Dee reads like the traditional berating of a woman who puts down the needle and stands up and speaks for herself—albeit rudely in this case. Referring to the by now practically cliché women's pen/needle metaphor, Whitsitt writes,

> For women writers prior to the mid-1900s, taking up the pen rather than the needle was a transgressive act which the metaphor of the needle facilitated. Today, however, this same metaphor runs the risk not only of being quite conservative but also of establishing a ground which can make a woman writer who does not 'quilt' or use the metaphoric 'needle' appear a transgressor or betrayer of that community. If the metaphor once helped women to get out of line, that same metaphor today runs the danger of working to keep women in line. (445)

In demanding the quilts and in denying her mother's and sister's appreciation of cultural artifacts, Dee's tone is out of line, and in her flashy outfit, which is out of context at her mother's rural home, she has, according to some, made a spectacle of herself, of her "inauthenticity." And though the narrative certainly critiques her nationalist-driven desire to

break with her immediate past, she, as Whitsitt suggests, is yet a piece of that human patchwork that makes up a community. And if we are to criticize Dee's willful ignorance of her family history, what are we to make of the fact that her own mother doesn't bother to inquire whether or not she has "gone and married" Hakim-a-barber? (30). Dee is also very young. One can imagine that, like Walker in search of her mother's garden, Dee will figure it out one day. And if, as the narrative contends, the value of the quilt lies in its everyday use, what could be more everyday useful than the clothes on one's back? Why shouldn't they, like the quilt, express one's identity or aspirations as well as her artful impulses?

I read the casting of Dee's outfit as inauthentic as a misread of American fashion. The misreading of clothing is something that each of us risks every time we negotiate the public sphere, a fact neatly set forth by "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff," a story in which the (possibly willful) misreading of clothing leads to the most horribly tragic of circumstances. Walker's inspiration for the story came from a story of her mother's and goes like this. During the Depression, a young mother of four, Hannah Kemhuff, goes to a bread line because she and her husband are out of work and the family is hungry. Though the family is experiencing extreme economic hardship, they have good hand-me-down clothing that Hannah's sister in Chicago had received from her well-to-do employers and had sent to Hannah. Being proud, Hannah dresses her family and arrives at the line with her head held high. She quickly notices, however, that everyone else is dressed in tatters, even though, as Hannah knows, some have good clothing at home. Upon seeing the tatters, Hannah asks her husband, "What does [the ragged clothing] mean?" (64). Hannah cannot decode her neighbors' outfits, but they, upon seeing Hannah and her family "all dressed up in [their] nice warm clothes, though used and castoff they were, began saying how crazy [they] was to have

worn them" (64). Because Hannah has dressed her children to appear clean and decent even in the face of hardship, the food-distributing but mean-spirited white woman, Sarah Marie Sadler, refuses Hannah food. Hannah, who is telling her story to a root worker named Tante Rosie, says, "all of us dressed to kill I guess [Miss Sadler] thought—and she took my stamps in her hand and looked at them like they was dirty, and then she give them to an old gambler who was next in line behind me! 'You don't need nothing to eat from the way you all dressed up, Hannah Lou,' she said to me" (65). Plead as she may, she leaves without food, and her children end up dead from starvation, a result too terrible to imagine. Tante Rosie helps Hannah to achieve a sensational "revenge" that quite gratifies the reader, but the damage that had been done to Hannah's family is something from which she never recovers.

In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker tells her mother's version of this story, which is much less sensational but true. Walker's mother had experienced the Depression, had been hungry, had taken government distributed food vouchers to a Red Cross bread line, and had been refused by a white woman who had been incensed by her not-ragged-enough clothing (*In Search* 15-21). Walker's mother, with the help of family, managed, and Walker uses the story in *In Search* in order to celebrate her sense of community and the rich rural and Southern heritage that informs her writing. Both versions, however, suggest how we can become morally entrapped by sneering at a person's clothing. In this case, attitudes toward clothing detract not from the spiritual health of the wearer, but that of the onlooker.

In the narrative worlds of *In Love and Trouble* and *The Color Purple*, Walker's most compelling works to date, clothing signifies at the level of action. Celie's pants, a mundane garment if there ever was one, becomes practically magical. In "Everyday Use," Mama's

overalls are ennobled by Mama's proud work ethic while Dee's proud outfit is brought down to earth as her mother refuses her the quilts. In "Really *Doesn't* Crime Pay?" feminine clothes and grooming are infused with the traditional significance of intellectual and spiritual vacuity, and though cheap and tacky, Mrs. Jerome Washington's clothes signify not so much that she is cheap and tacky, but that she is a victim of uninformed ignorance. While protagonists may not agonize over what to wear, they may suffer the consequences of choosing the wrong outfit. Walker's fiction reveals the ideological contradictions inherent in self-fashioning, and in that fiction, as in life, clothing and hair matter.

CHAPTER FOUR

BOUND FEET AND BOBBED HAIR: PERFORMING RACE, CULTURE, NATION, AND GENDER THROUGH SARTORIAL STYLE IN THE NARRATIVE TEXTS OF MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

As Asian American academic theory struggles to conceptualize and to accommodate an ever larger, shifting, multicultural, multinational, and diasporic group of peoples, literary texts—primary, secondary, and theoretical—continue to include in their formulations a focus on identity. Though currently conceptualized as almost radically post-structural, post-national, geographically de-centered, and discursively constructed, and though the word "subjectivity" is preferred over the word "identity," identity remains the major theme in the context of Asian American letters. For instance, Lingyan Yang's "Theorizing Asian America: On Asian American and Postcolonial Asian Diasporic Women Intellectuals" criticizes Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's "Denationalization Reconsidered" for maintaining "the problematic binary opposition between Asian America as primarily 'domestic'/ 'Americanized'/nationalist/ First-Worldly here and postcoloniality as merely global /diasporic/Third-Worldly there" (142).

Yang argues that such a binary creates a theoretical divide between Asians born in American and Asians born outside America; furthermore, it "underestimate[es] the complex and dynamic historical connections and dialogues between the two" (143). According to Yang, Asian American theory must reflect its multiethnic and multicultural demographic by acknowledging the importance of a global, postcolonial perspective: "A more rigorous and historicized critique of Empire . . . in the global context will only strengthen the 'domestic' Asian American critical and political inquiry" (145). The more recent anthology

Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits concurs and notes, "[i]n our use of the phrase 'sites and transits' . . . 'site' also denotes attitudes and postures, the arrested moment of *identity* in place and time , , . " (Lim, Gamber, Sohn, and Valentino 1, emphasis added). Here, identity is reconsidered to include the notion of "passing" through time and space so that locatedness within the United States becomes a temporary marker of subjectivity. The shifting in time and space of such identities lends an even greater instability to the postmodern sense of anti-essentialism, thus reemphasizing the discursive nature of identities that are constructed. And revalidating Lisa Lowe's influential argument in *Immigrant Acts, Transnational Asian American Literature* declares that "Asian American identity, instead of being essentialized and fixed, is produced in a complicated, unstable fashion by 'Asian American cultural production'; that is, it is constructed and imagined" (3).

In this context, the cultural production of Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston remains as pertinent as ever because it always already presented identity as non-essential and constructed. Though in its impulse to "claim America," Kingston's work represents what Sau-Ling C. Wong calls a "domestic perspective" rather than the more worldy "diasporic perspective," it absolutely looks to China in the construction of its historical cultural context and its imaginary geography. Kingston's postmodern narratives, *The Women Warrior, China Men,* and *Trickmaster Monkey,* all set forth Chinese American identity as constructed through history, class, place, myth, popular culture, gender, age, and ethnicity, and since both China and the United States are implicated in the experiences, memories, and constructions of all the preceding categories, the domestic perspective cannot be extracted or disentangled from the diasporic.[26] In the real world and in the literature that seeks to articulate and respond to its conditions, the site of intersection for these international

and discursively influenced attributes is the Asian American body. The Asian American body is socially constructed as a clothed body, and while Asian American bodies are the sites of a great deal of discussion in Asian American letters, literary scholarship virtually ignores the clothing that is central to the articulation of said bodies. The work of Dorinne Kondo is an exception. Kondo's book *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* focuses on the theatrical performance of race and gender rather than the everyday performance of race and gender. It specifically addresses Japanese influenced couture and David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*, and is therefore not apropos to my study of Kingston; however, Kondo appreciates the significance of sartorial construction as it relates to the performance of identity and possibilities for intervention into "regimes of truth." Kondo writes,

> these essays contend that both [couture fashion shows and theater] can offer opportunities for aesthetic/political contestation. Both are key arenas for the performance of identities, from the 'individual' to the 'national.' Spectacle and staging are necessarily elements of each, whether on the theatrical stage, on a runway, or in the more mundane settings of everyday life, as we perform ourselves with the costumes, props, and theatrical conventions at our disposal. Accordingly, both fashion and theater highlight the performativity of gender, race, and nation. And through enacting/subverting familiar tropes of these and other identities, Japanese fashion and Asian American theater in turn become interventions—contestatory and/or problematic—in circulating Orientalist discourses. (5)

The performative body enacts identity and therefore its costume is politically inflected. Kingston's texts, which are both somatically and sartorially conscious, reflect the

significance of Kondo's insight. While somatic consciousness fits Kingston's discourse squarely into the company of many Asian American writers and feminists, sartorial consciousness fits her discourse into the company of Kondo. Sartorial consciousness, however, is for the most part absent in the huge critical apparatus that attends to Kingston's work, which is a gap that my work intends to address. I know of only three essays that consider clothing in Kingston: Marilyn Elkins' "No More 'Tight Red Cheongsams': Asian American Women's Treatment of Fashion" briefly attends to *The Woman Warrior* and contends,

> The women writers of Asian American literature manage to treat the issue of fashion with the complexity that [Anne] Hollander suggests it deserves, for they refuse artificial binaries which vilify or glorify their characters for attention to dress. They usually dismiss the assumption that a woman's attention to fashion indicates spiritual or intellectual vacuity. (171)

Elkins makes some interesting points, but her short discussion barely scratches the surface of Kingston's attention to sartorial detail. My research delves much more deeply and carefully into Kingston's clothes-writing.

Joseph R. Allen's "Dressing and Undressing the Chinese Woman Warrior" correctly notes that the "White Tigers" chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, which recounts the story of the cross-dressing Fa Mulan, is an "essentially sartorial story." Allen researches and sets forth myriad versions of the Mulan myth and concludes that Kingston's telling "interweaves the somatic with the essentially sartorial story to create one that draws our attention even more to the biological rather than cultural signs of gender" (369). Kingston's version of the Mulan story does indeed draw attention to the biological signs of gender; however, because

Kingston's Mulan functions exceedingly well as a military hero despite menstruation and child-bearing, she challenges social constructions of the female body that would restrict her choices due to biological contingencies. Though feminist theory has determined that gender is in no way biologically but rather entirely socially constructed, the fiction tends to be more ambivalent in its epistemological presentation of gendered constructions. While writers like Kingston, Walker, and Atwood all set forth and challenge the restrictive social constructions of gender, they also write situations in which the female body biologically engenders reproductive consequences for heterosexual women, consequences not experienced by male bodies and consequences that cannot be constructed away, except through serious surgical intervention. Mulan's baby and the botched abortion in Atwood's *Cat's Eye* are cases in point. Nevertheless, the point remains that Allen recognizes "White Tigers" as a sartorial/somatic tale, thereby suggesting the value of a sartorial/somatic approach to her work.

Finally, Mita Banerjee's "The Asian American in a Turtleneck" suggests a sartorial focus but is really interested in genre. It does, however, note Kingston's sartorial consciousness by stating that both Kingston and her *Tripmaster Monkey* protagonist Wittman Ah Sing attempt to "deconstruct" their ethnic-identified identities by donning black turtlenecks, a move which dresses the "postasian" self in "plain American clothing," and which also "implies a politics of cultural representation" (62-3). Though it appreciates sartorial consciousness, "The Asian American in a Turtleneck" conflates Wittman's turtleneck and Kingston's sweatshirt, thereby "mis-reading" sartorial significance by simplifying it.[27]

Given the dearth of critical treatment regarding clothing in Kingston, my research attends to a narrative practice that situates Kingston's work into the great tradition of writing fictional fashion and reveals that, in Kingston, clothing signifies in various ways and is often politically inflected.[28] In *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, for instance, characters who are sartorially inscribed are characters who have crossed the boundaries of countries, laws, and cultures. The boundary is sometimes in the mind rather than the geo/political world, so that in *The Woman Warrior* especially, sartorial inscription sometimes signifies a crossing of the line that separates eccentricity from insanity, a boundary "not delineated in space" (*The Woman Warrior* 8). This is not to say that we always see characters changing clothes during moments of transformation, though that does happen; but rather, transformative moments are sartorially conspicuous because the narrator lingers on an outfit. Inappropriate clothing that is never changed out of and that calls attention to itself is especially indicative of insanity. Just as *The Woman Warrior's* Brave Orchid says that the difference between sane people and insane people is that sane people have variety in their talk-story, her stories imply that the difference between sane people and insane people is that sane people also have variety in their sartorial style. *Tripmaster Monkey*, on the other hand, with its pervasive sense of the theatrical, is much more overt in its sense of clothing as costume and as politically significant. Focalizing through and sometimes lapsing its voice with the very fashion-conscious playwright and actor Wittman Ah Sing, *Tripmaster's* narrator, delivers direct, that is to say non-diegetic, commentary on the sartorial choices of others and how appropriate or inappropriate certain looks are and for what reasons. Wittman, who takes the shape-shifting trickster Monkey King as his imaginary alter-ego, is hyper aware of the power of both stereotypes and sartorial transition.

Though Chinese American literary criticism's concerns and debates regarding the representation of Asian American identity have spent few words on clothing talk, its discourse is permeated with references to the Asian body just as feminist discourse is permeated with references to the female body. For instance, Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian American* tips its hat to Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* by stating "[t]he fact that the Asia American body is composed simultaneously through race, class, gender, and sexuality has become an accepted truism of Asian American critical practice, exemplified in Lisa Lowe's justly famous characterization of the Asian American body politic as being marked by 'heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity.'" (6). Nguyen therefore writes about the significance of the body as a site upon which the discursive properties of cultural identities come together, and the Introduction to his study sets forth the "crisis" in Asian American studies whereby intellectuals settled into a rigid sort of theoretical practice that evaluates literary production according to how it reflects one of two political thrusts: assimilation to dominant (read capitalist) political and cultural practices or resistance to dominant political and cultural practices (4-7). According to *Race and Resistance*, such bifurcated critical practice reduces the literary texts it treats by overlooking the fact that the texts present "flexible" strategies for negotiating the American economic, political, and often racist/sexist landscape (4). Nguyen further notes that such reduction ignores the plurality of Asian identity especially in terms of political and economic positions, ethnicity, and class. The literature, however, is avowedly ambivalent about identity and its strategies for negotiating America. Nguyen recognizes and bases his study of a variety of Asian American fictional texts on the premise that

> For Asian American cultures, one particular object invested with both

> symbolic and cultural capital is the body. . . . Thus bodies in Asian American literature are never just individually significant but point instead to the intersecting relationships of race, class, gender, and sexuality that ascribe meaning and substance to the very idea of an *Asian American* body in the first place. (17, italics original)

Referring to the work of feminist Elizabeth Grosz, Nguyen asserts, "These intersecting relationships mark the Asian American body as not just *a* cultural product but '*the* cultural product'" (17, emphasis original). As "*the* cultural product," the body fuses both individual experience and the public face of the body politic. And as the cultural product, the body also features forcefully in Asian American texts; therefore, *Race and Resistance* reads its diverse selection through a focus on the Asian American textual body produced within Asian American novels, yet in one sentence dismisses clothing as integral to the socio/political construction of the racialized body: "While critics who have dealt with the body as a project have focused their attention upon methods such as plastic surgery, exercise, and fashion, race as a form of signification through racial formation is also a method for transforming the body symbolically" (18). Nguyen does not name critics to whom he refers.

In feminist theory, the body is and often already had been the site of serious critical and utopian discourse, and yet such discourse is typically disinterested in sartorial construction. For instance, Donna Haraway's famous "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" imagines a radically hybridized body that has transcended the bounds of biology, and Hélène Cixous' equally famous "Laugh of the Medusa" also posits the body as the site of a new feminine liberation imagined through the body. Cixous writes, "Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your

body is yours, take it" (309). And later in the essay, she imagines a feminine language (*écriture feminine*) that emanates from the body:

> Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge through, get beyond the ultimate reserve, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence," the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the work "impossible" and writes it as "the end." (315)

Feminist theories attend to the body, therefore, as a specific site of empowerment, and yet that body is seemingly never imagined as a clothed body. It is remarkable that a discourse so focused on somatic constructions disregards sartorial constructions, a situation that feminist scholarship such as mine seeks to address.

Propriety, (In)sanity, and Chinese Style

The Woman Warrior is an unconventional series of stories about Kingston's female relatives, including her mother and two aunts, one paternal and one maternal. The stories are interspersed with mythological and imaginative flights of fancy. The opening chapter is entitled "No Name Woman," and in its privileged position, it sets the pattern for sartorial consciousness. Effectively blending the sartorial and the somatic, "No Name Woman" presents a powerfully poignant tale of transgression and transformation. Kingston begins "No Name Woman" and therefore *The Woman Warrior* by skillfully introducing issues of imposed silence and orality, not telling and telling, with the oft-quoted sentences, "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all

brothers because it is as if she had never been born'" (3). [29] The text, a narrative within a narrative goes on to re-tell Brave Orchid's story about the narrator Maxine's aunt, who had become illegitimately pregnant after her husband, whom she barely knew, had been absent for years. Like many Cantonese villagers, he had journeyed to the Gold Mountain to work. The villagers punish and disgrace No Name Woman and the entire family by cruelly ransacking the home in a fearful nighttime raid. They tear apart clothing, destroy the loom's work-in-progress, break dishes and furniture, spill food, and kill livestock. When the terrible scene is over, No Name Woman, rejected by her family and community, spends the night alone under the cold black sky, gives birth in the pig sty, and finally jumps into the family well, taking her newborn with her.

"Powered by Necessity," Brave Orchid restricts the details of her re-telling to "all the useful parts," which include a description of the villagers' use of masks and hairstyles to ratchet-up the histrionic nature of the raid and the fear it's meant to impose: "As the villagers closed in, we could see some of them, probably men and women we knew well, wore white masks. The people with long hair hung it over their faces. Women with short hair made it stand up on end. Some had tied white bands around their foreheads, arms, and legs" (4). Here, disguise is used both to hide identities and to instill fear. The white of the masked faces and bands is the color of mourning in China, and it would standout, ghostlike and frightful, against the deep dark of a rural night. Standing-on-end hair also conjures a sense of dreadful alarm. Such sartorial detail works to Brave Orchid's advantage because as a cautionary tale, this talk-story is meant to frighten Maxine, who has just begun to menstruate (a hugely significant biological and socially inflected transformation), but details regarding No Name Woman's personality and sartorial self are left out. Because Maxine is

looking for "ancestral help," she fills in the left-out details using her own remarkable imagination. The first and therefore most significant of those details is the way the aunt looked and presented herself sartorially. Maxine writes, "If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, 'Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?' I cannot ask that. My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts" (5). Because No Name Woman's look and sartorial sensibilities are not necessary for Brave Orchid's didactic purpose and because they would further actualize what is supposed to be not said, Maxine invents them.

In her rare but short discussion of clothing as it features in Asian American literature by women, Marilyn Elkins states the following: "Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976) uses fashion to help illustrate both the no name woman's conflict with her role as a grass widow in China and the generational conflict her niece feels as a first-generation Chinese American woman" (173). Elkins' thesis is that Asian American women writers "refuse artificial binaries which vilify or glorify their character for attention to dress" (172). However, while her reading of "No Name Woman" does not vilify the character for attention to dress, it certainly sees her as being punished for her attention to her sartorial self. Elkins writes, "Because the narrator's mother hints that a search for beauty may have been connected to the aunt's infidelity and subsequent rejection by her community, the narrator envisions the no-name woman as paying too much attention to her looks and rejecting ordinary loveliness." (173). But in fact, the only language in Brave Orchid's account that "hints" at a "search for beauty" is that which mentions No Name Woman's textiles, clothes, shoes, and combs, all of which the raiders see fit to destroy or steal. Certainly, even for Brave Orchid, these items are "necessities." Only the comb could be construed as for-vanity-

only, unless as Maxine imagines, No Name Woman had short hair, hair that could not be contained by a bun when one is engaged in manual labor. No Name Woman is a rural woman, and Valery Garrett's *Chinese Dress* shows a photo of a rural Cantonese woman wearing a typical comb and writes that though their clothing was of rough cotton construction, such women "dressed their hair with many colorful and elaborate hair ornaments, especially on festive occasions" (164-5). No Name Woman's sartorial accoutrements as listed by Brave Orchid seem basically run-of-the-mill. In Kingston's account, it's Maxine, not Brave Orchid or No Name Woman, who is searching for beauty, and Maxine imagines her aunt as courting the gaze through art. Maxine writes, "To sustain her being in love, she often worked at herself in the mirror, guessing at the colors and shapes that would interest him, changing them frequently in order to hit on the right combination. She wanted him to look back" (9). In the novelistic tradition that attends to hair, Maxine fixates not so much on No Name Woman's wardrobe, but rather on her hairstyle, which is interesting because since ancient times hair had been politically significant in China where changes in hair style have marked changes in political power.

Much has been written about the significance of hair style in China, and Lung-kee Sun's "The Politics of Hair and Issue of the Bob in Modern China" drives home his point regarding sartorial propriety in traditional Chinese culture by quoting Confucius' reaction to the service of Guan Zhong, a prime minister whose work had saved the empire from "being overrun by barbarians." Confucius famously expressed his gratitude in sartorial terms: "But for Guan Zhong, we should now be wearing our hair unbound, and the lappets on our coats buttoning on the left side!" (353). This observation by Confucius is also quoted in Valerie Steele and John S. Major's *China Chic*, which further notes that the "odd phrase—with hair

unbound, buttoning garments on the left—was apparently even in the time of Confucius a stock phrase that meant 'living like barbarians" (16). As Steele and Major comment, proper decorum in sartorial presentation was highly significant in terms of cultural identity for a people with elaborate sumptuary laws enacted to maintain social order and who saw its civilization as superior.

During No Name Woman's time, a time of extreme political disintegration and violence, women's hair and whether it should be long or short, was not only hotly debated, but also became the focus of right-wing terrorists, who used a bobbed head as an excuse to torture and maim the bodies of politically or fashionably progressive women. If No Name Woman had bobbed hair, as Maxine imagines, she was only one of many women during the chaotic years of War Lord violence who suffered violent deaths due to the charge that they were sexually wanton, a charge leveled not because pregnancy signified sex but because short hair signified sexuality, which is ironic because the feminist argument was the opposite—that short hair was *less* sexually alluring. Thus, conservatives and progressives alike countenanced hairstyle as a stereotypical marker of sexual proclivity. Noting the global appearance of the bob and the controversy it created, Sun cites myriad contemporary sources and writes,

> The bob appeared in the first year of the republic and was put into practice by a few but failed to become a fad. . . . It raised its head again under the impact of the New Culture movement of the May Fourth era (1915-1925), in the context of iconoclasm. Articles by both women and men proliferated in newspapers and journals, arguing that it was too time-consuming and

> unhygienic to keep long hair; furthermore, hair-maintenance was "detrimental to women's personality," for it turned women into men's toys. (356)

According to Maxine's account, the men had left her ancestral village in 1924, a year described by historians as "the extreme point of political disintegration" (Roberts 143; Chang 21) and noted by Kaige Chen's film *Farewell My Concubine* as "The Warlord Year." It was also the year that Lu Xun published his satirical essay "On Moustache," an essay that playfully referred to the Chinese obsession with hair as a signifier of civil order (Sun 356).[30]

"On Moustache" begins with Lu Xun's observation that his mustache needs trimming, which leads to a discussion of his sporting a Japanese-style moustache—that is one with ends pointing upward rather than down, which was the Chinese style. Lu Xun's moustache was a point of personal style that he had to over and over again explain to "patriotic" types who noticed its foreignness. In the end, because he's tired of explaining his style choice and because the pomade used to create the upwards point of the ends costs money, he decides to let it grow down naturally and cuts it level so that it has no ends at all. Observing how people had noticed the change and then the matter was done with, Lu Xun jokingly concludes, "I don't know whether this [the fact that the matter was closed] was because in the absence of two tips they had nothing on which to base an argument, or because now that my moustache was like this I was no longer responsible for China's fate" (108).

Also in 1924, a short story by Lu Xun called "Soap" notes in passing the fact that young women in China, like those in the West, were beginning to bob their hair. The protagonist of the story complains to his wife, "Just think, it's already in very poor taste the way women wander up and down the streets, and now they want to cut their hair as well.

Nothing disgusts me so much as these short-haired schoolgirls" (214). The speaker is hypocritically prurient, which reflects Lu Xun's progressive ideals, but the point is that these excerpts address the way in which hairstyles signify political contention and consciousness. Like Lu Xun's fiction, Sun's article forcefully illustrates how hair styles became a point of political significance and violent upheaval because it describes graphic scenes from Chinese novels and journalistic accounts in which women are marked as leftist because of their bobbed hair and are consequently captured, tortured, and mutilated to death by "counterrevolutionary thugs" (362).

Removed from urban centers, No Name Woman lived in a rural village "on a farm near the sea," and while Brave Orchid's account ignores No Name Woman's self-presentation, Maxine's embellishment determines her hairstyle as short because "only the older women in our picture album wear buns." Maxine surmises that the young No Name Woman plucked her brows and forehead and "combed individuality into her bob" (9). There is no indication on the part of Brave Orchid that No Name Woman's terrible fate had anything at all to do with hairstyle, and yet the villagers are extreme in their zealous adherence to the conservative Confucian patriarchy progressives were actively challenging. In the context of Maxine's family/village history, No Name Woman is certainly defiant. What the young Maxine doesn't realize is that in the context of Chinese history and revolution—political, social, and cultural—her imagined bobbed hair is a sign of extremely dangerous defiance. It marks not only No Name Woman's transgression and subsequent transformation into "a spite suicide" and a "weeping ghost" but also China's violent political transformation.

Just as the bob hairstyle features in Maxine's sartorial construction of No Name Woman's "individuality," it also features as a stereotypical sign of weak and passive Chinese American femininity as Maxine remembers her torture of a sixth-grade classmate. In "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," Kingston writes of an after-school scene set in the girls' lavatory, where she has been followed by a tall Chinese American girl whom she despises for the girl's silence and weakness. Critics have pointed out how Maxine's loathing is generated by self-loathing and how the story reverberates with *The Woman Warrior's* theme of moving out of silence and into the power of voice. It is interesting to further note the way in which the textual space given to clothing and hair style in "No Name Woman" is paralleled in the torture scene. As Maxine reconstructs the scene, she itemizes her reasons for hating the girl, who at this point in the story is uncharacteristically separated from her protective older sister: "I hated the younger sister, the quiet one. I hated when she was the last chosen for her team, and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her for her China doll hair cut, I hated her at music time for the wheezes that came out of her plastic flute" (171). The "China doll haircut" suggests a bob or perhaps a pageboy, which is simply a longer length bob, and this style is reiterated as Kingston writes that "[s]he wore black bangs" and "[h]er straight hair hung, the same all these years, no ringlets or braids or permanents," and "her straight hair turn[ed] with her head, not swinging side to side like the pretty girls" (175-6). We find out later, however, that the girl's hair had to have had some movement because after Maxine has managed to bully her into tears,

> [s]he shook her head, and some hair caught in the tears; wet black hair stuck to the side of the pink and white face. I reached up (she was taller than I) and took a strand of hair. I pulled it. 'Well, then, let's honk your hair,' I said.

> ‘Honk. Honk.’ Then I pulled the other side—‘ho-o-n-nk’—‘a long pull; ‘ho-o-n-n-nk’—a longer pull (177).

The honking reads as funny. Maxine, however, is angry. She inflicts and later attempts to rationalize her rage, focusing on the Chinese American girl’s accoutrements of femininity—her silence, her hair, and her clothing. She tellingly admits, “If she had had little bound feet, the toes twisted under the balls, I would have jumped up and landed on them—crunch!—stomped on them with my iron shoes” (178). Wanting to distance her sense of self as far as possible from the girl who resembles herself, Maxine “grew her hair long to hide [her neck] in case it was a flower-stem neck,” and she vows to “wear black always” because she “hated [the other girl’s] clothes—the blue pastel cardigan, the white blouse with the collar that lay flat over the cardigan, the homemade flat, cotton skirt that she wore when everybody else was wearing flared skirts. [Maxine] hated pastels” (176-7). Everything that Maxine hates about the girl has to do with her exceedingly feminine, that is to say quiet, modest, and unpretentious appearance and demeanor. Maxine associates not only voice but also hair with “personality”: “Don’t make me pull anymore, or you’re hair will come out and you’re going to be bald,” says Maxine. “Do you want to be bald? You don’t want to be bald, do you? . . . If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality. You’ll have no personality and no hair” (180).

This extended focus on sartorial style precedes a remarkable moment of transition for Maxine, and her torture of the girl like her is akin to Cordelia’s torture of Elaine in Atwood’s *Cat’s Eye*. Like Cordelia, Maxine is suffering a profound sense of non-being due to the perceived devaluation of her young and unsure female self. Devaluation is a patriarchal affair. For unrevealed reasons, Cordelia’s father cannot accept her as worthy. No matter

what, Cordelia cannot please her father. Maxine is also cowed by male force and the perception of her own inadequacy as one of the girls who is nothing more than "a maggot in the rice." Voice is key to existence, and Maxine is also torn between the powerfully loud and bossy Chinese feminine voice she hears at home and the silenced "American feminine voice" she observes in the wider culture. Both Cordelia and Maxine experience severe crises of an existential sort. They are led to unconsciously doubt the worth of their own existences, and, also unconsciously, project their fears and insecurities onto bodies that resemble their own. It is remarkable that Maxine once again fixates on hair as a marker of personality, or lack thereof.

Maxine's crisis culminates with the lavatory scene, which is followed by social retreat. After the incident, she withdraws from the world outside of her family into an eighteen-month-long mystery illness that inflicts "no pain and no symptoms." This withdrawal is recalled as a satisfyingly peaceful time, and Kingston writes that "[n]othing happened." And when she goes back to school and sees the girl she had bullied, she notices, "[s]he wore the same clothes, hair cut, and manner as when we were in elementary school, no make-up on the pink and white face, while the other Asian girls were starting to tape their eyelids" (181). Though the girl has not changed, Maxine had "watched the seasons change the peach tree" (182), and she emerges to embark upon a gradual assertion of her voice and her identity, an identity that is fiercely resistant to being defined according to feminine social or sartorial constructions. Having taken literally her mother's statement that if they failed, she and her sister would grow up to be wives or slaves, Maxine constructs her sartorial self in a style that is decidedly unfeminine and unrefined in either the East or the West, while her

classmates are sadly struggling to force their features into a construction of what they consider to be American pretty.

Maxine's confusion is complicated by the fact that her self-presentation as awkward and unkempt puts her at risk of insanity because the crazy people she knows are not only those who cannot articulate themselves but also those who are sartorially awkward. Nevertheless, an arranged marriage is to be avoided at all costs, and so since Maxine "thought every house had to have its crazy woman or its crazy girl," she risks being that one. Kingston writes, "my sister did not start talking among nonfamily until a year after I started, but she was neat while I was messy, my hair tangled and dusty" (189). In this remembrance of things past, an unkempt appearance supersedes silence in the construction of insanity.

In Maxine's imagination, insanity is always accompanied by sartorial impropriety. For instance, Moon Orchid, Maxine's aunt who arrives from China, is convinced—rather forced—by Brave Orchid to find and confront her younger husband who had emigrated from China long ago and had since married a woman younger than Moon Orchid. Though the husband, a medical doctor, had continued to send Moon Orchid money, he had gone about his new life as if she did not exist. This situation so incenses Brave Orchid that she will not rest until Moon Orchid locates the man and demands in a face-to-face meeting that he integrate her into his American life, thereby displacing the young American wife. When Moon Orchid arrives from Hong Kong, she dresses very well but also very inappropriately. No matter what the task or the occasion, Moon Orchid is dressed up, perpetually overdressed for day-to-day life in Stockton, and especially overdressed for days she goes with the family to work in their laundry, "wearing stockings, dress shoes, and a suit" (136). Her inability to change her look according to social surroundings and circumstances is opposed to Brave

Orchid's practical and flexible sartorial habits and is also analogous to an inflexibility that disables her in the face of the changes and disappointments which are the stuff of her immigration experience. Moon Orchid's confrontation with her husband is a disaster and sends her into a state of progressive paranoid insanity which is marked by somatic and sartorial sinking: Her "skin hung loose, like a hollowed frog's, as if she had shrunken inside it. Her clothes bagged, not fitting sharply anymore" (155).

The Woman Warrior recalls other people Maxine has known who have transgressed the borders of sanity. For instance, "[t]here was Crazy Mary." Crazy Mary is a neighbor of the Hongs' who is unkempt and sartorially inappropriate:

> She often had rice on her face and in her hair. Her mother cut her hair neatly around her ears, stubble at the back of her neck. She wore pajamas, a rough brown sweater buttoned crooked, and a big apron, not a work apron but a bib. She wore slippers, and you could see her thick ankles, her naked heels and tendons. (187)

Maxine's memory of Crazy Mary triggers and is therefore followed in the text by her recounting of a "witchwoman" who went to the slough where people picked berries. Remembering the witchwoman, Maxine waxes fantastical:

> She came riding to the slough with a broom between her legs, and she had powdered one cheek red and one white. Her hair stood up and out to the sides in dry masses, black even though she was old. She wore a pointed hat and layers of capes, shawls, sweaters buttoned at the throat like capes, the sleeves flying behind like sausage skins. . . . Sometimes she carried her broomstick horse like a staff. (188)

Though the reader recognizes insanity in this sartorial description, the child Maxine and her siblings see a scary "witchwoman," whom they forget once she disappears: "We forgot her, never seeing her again. She had probably been locked up in the crazyhouse too" (189).

Maxine's catalogue of crazy women also includes one from her mother's talk-story, "the village crazy lady . . . whom the people stoned" (92). This story is set in China during the Japanese invasion of 1937-1945. A group of Chinese refugees, including Brave Orchid, is encamped near a river. On a peaceful day, the camp's inhabitants are enjoying the cessation of fearsome bombing raids until their peace is broken by the presence of a woman inappropriately and extravagantly disporting in a sort of self-stylized costume. Together, the costume and the movement recall a Chinese opera performance:

> The village crazy lady put on her headdress with the small mirrors, some of them waving quickly on red stalks. In her crazy lady clothes of reds and greens, she greeted the animals and the moving branches as she carried her porcelain cup to the river. Although her bindings had come loose, her tiny feet made her body sway pleasantly, her shoes like little bridges. . . . The villagers turned to look at her. She dipped her fingertips into the water and flung droplets into grass and air. Then she set the cup down and pulled out the long white undersleeves of her old-fashioned dress. She began to move in fanning circles, now flying the sleeves in the air, now trailing them on the grass, dancing in the middle of the light. The little mirrors in her headdress shot rainbows into the green, glinted off the water cup, caught water drops.
>
> (94-5)

The woman had "undulated toward a clearing where the light of the afternoon seemed to be concentrated," and so the refugees are naturally afraid that her glinting mirrors and water drops will signal Japanese planes. Brave Orchid had noted already that the "bombing drove people insane," and the lady in her mirrored headdress has clearly become unhinged. But the make-shift community succumbs to its fear and accuses her of being a spy for the Japanese. In her insanity, the "crazy lady" claims supernatural power:

> Someone took the crazy lady's cup and threw it at her. It broke at her feet.
>
> "Are you a spy? Are you?" they asked her.
>
> A cunning look narrowed her eyes. "Yes," she said, "I have great powers. I can make the sky rain fire. Me. I did that. Leave me alone or I will do it again." (95)

Brave Orchid recognizes delusion when she sees it, but the displaced villagers are too frightened to heed her pleas that they simply take the woman's dangerous headdress. Rather, they stone her to death. The crazy woman's fate alludes to the terrible social displacement of women with bound feet after bound feet in China came to be constructed as shameful to the woman and by extension to her country, a situation which has been thoroughly discussed by Dorothy Ko and which I will set forth later.

Maxine "did not want to be our crazy one," and yet she does all she can to appear non-wifely, and to her way of thinking, possibly insane. She describes her behavior: "I dropped dishes . . . . I picked my nose while I was cooking and serving. My clothes were wrinkled even though we owned a laundry" (190). At a later point in Maxine's reconstruction of the past, she tells of affecting an even stranger look in order to discourage

the attentions of any and all FOB marriage candidates: "I put on my shoes with the open flaps and flapped about like a Wino Ghost. From then on, I wore those shoes to parties, whenever the mothers gathered to talk about marriages" (194).

The intensity of Maxine's fear of marriage is matched by her disdain for the FOB boys who are sartorially and somatically conspicuous: "FOB's wear high-riding gray slacks and white shirts with the sleeves rolled up. Their eyes do not focus correctly—shifty-eyed—and they hold their mouths slack, not tight-jawed masculine. They shave off their sideburns" (194). Thus, Kingston not only emphasizes Maxine's fear of marriage to a sartorially inappropriate male but also alludes to the ways in which sartorial and somatic styles and mannerisms are culturally specific, learned behaviors. The FOBs are marked as outsiders just as tourists are so often marked by Bermuda shorts, t-shirts, and cameras, a style that elicits the sort of dismissal and derision commonly reserved for outsiders.

Maxine's disdain for FOB style is matched and repeated through the focalized voice of *Tripmaster Monkey's* protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing, a young man who is very conscious of dress and manners and who also determines insanity by decoding somatic/sartorial clues. The sight of an old woman selling trivets she has made from bottle caps and yarn prompts Wittman's judgement: "He looked at her thick feet chapped and dirty in zoris. Their sorry feet is how you can tell crazy people who have no place to go and walk everywhere" (4). Coming across an FOB family in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, Wittman thinks to himself,

> Mom and shamble-legged kid were each stuffed inside of about ten homemade sweaters. Their arms stuck out fatly. The mom had on a nylon or rayon pantsuit. ('Ny-lon ge. Mm lon doc..' 'Nylon made. Lasts forever.') . . .

> Next there came scrabbling an old lady with a cane. She also wore one of those do-it-yourself pantsuit outfits. On Granny's head was a cap with a pompon that matched everybody's sweaters. (5)

Wittman cares not for money or material possessions, but he's sartorially snobbish enough to look down upon cheap synthetic fabric and families in obviously coordinated outfits (another tourist give-away). Wittman's sizing-up (or perhaps sizing down) interrupts the narrative flow as the FOB commentary continues:

> The whole family taking a cheap outing on their day offu. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats out in public. Didn't know how to walk together. Spitting seeds. So uncool. You wouldn't mislike them on sight if their pants weren't so highwater, gym socks white and noticeable. F.O.B. fashions—highwaters or puddlecuffs. Can't get it right. Uncool. Uncool. The tunnel smelled of mothballs—F.O.B. perfume. (5)

This is the sort of talk that prompts Sheng-mei Ma to write that "Kingston portrays the Chinese body as the source of Asian American self-hatred." Wittman dehumanizes these and other people with Asian characteristics "in order to confirm his own differences, despite his similar physical characteristics to the Western undiscerning eyes" (37). She goes on to write that both Wittman and his AJA friend Lance "are pathologically sensitive to the inadequacy of their physical attributes and compensate by marrying Caucasian women." The word "pathological" and the idea that a Caucasian woman is worthy only due to pathology are harsh to say the least, and anyway, Wittman's first choice is not Caucasian. She is the beautiful dancer/actor Nanci Lee, whom we meet in *Tripmaster's* opening chapter and who is dressed in a black leotard and a black skirt. Ma points out that "Wittman adores Nanci Lee

for the false assumption that she is able to break away from the ethnic bondage." *Tripmaster Monkey,* however, very clearly registers the discrimination of Asian bodies by the film industry, for which Nanci Lee auditions. Ma notes this when she writes that in *Tripmaster Monkey*, "even Nanci is stereotyped by her Oriental face in the film industry." That Wittman's desire is fueled by his "false assumption" is debatable. Wittman finds her to be extremely beautiful after all. Whatever his motivation, however, Nanci Lee will not have Wittman and so he ends up married to his second choice, the blonde Taña. And while it's true that Wittman is "fascinated" with Taña's blonde hair, he also questions that fascination and then turns it into a fascination with the different shades of dark hair that he sees on other people and his own head. Noticing a group of Asians at a Mattel presentation he's attending with a co-worker, Wittman determines,

> [t]hese four heads were each a different black. Kettle black. Cannonball black. Bowling-ball black. Licorice. Licorice curls. Patent-leather black. Black sapphire. Black opal. And since when have ashes been blonde? Ashes are black and white. Ash black. And his own hair. What color was his own hair? He pulled a mess of it forward. It's brown. But he always put 'black' on his i.d.s. I've got brown hair. (59)

Upon realizing that his and other Asians' hair is often actually brown, Wittman "felt the dearness of those four people," and so he decides to recognize as many shades of brown as degrees of black he has named: "[w]e'll come up with many, many names for dark." So while Wittman freely admits that he has been "[m]ade racist by other people's trips" (57), *Tripmaster Monkey* exposes and critiques that racism, in this case by turning its novelistic attention to hair.

Before determining that the four Asians at the presentation are dear to him, Wittman had been typically harsh in his criticism of one of the four's sartorial style because she is sporting a cheongsam, a graceful garment much maligned in Asian American letters because of its associations with the sexual stereotyping of Chinese and Chinese American women. For instance, Marilyn Elkins' article about fashion in Asian American fiction, which I cited in my discussion about "No Name Woman," is entitled "No More 'Tight Red Cheongsams': Asian American Women's Treatment of Fashion." Elkins' title alludes to and therefore emphasizes a line in Diane Mei Lin Mark's poem "Suzie Wong Doesn't Live Here," in which "the tight red cheongsam/embroidered with peonies" is rejected as a stereotypical sign of submissive "Madame Butterfly/and the geisha ladies" (qtd. in Elkins 177). Elkins does not mention it, but because the poem conflates cheongsam and "geisha ladies," it also critiques the way in which Chinese and Japanese cultures are conflated and homogenized, which is characteristic of Orientalism. The qualification of the cheongsam as "tight" and "red" and "embroidered with peonies" signals its association with feminine sexuality, and Elkins notes, "In the United States, the film *Suzie Wong* imbued the dress with qualities of eroticized exoticism for members of mainstream culture" (178, n 1). Elkins is referring to a 1960 film called *The World of Suzy Wong*, a film in which Nancy Kwan plays a prostitute and which seemingly always comes up in cheongsam discussions. In an article about cheongsam in Singapore, Beng-Huat Chua writes, "At the sleazy extreme is that most Orientalist image of the stereotyped Chinese woman reminiscent of the prostitute found in the Hollywood film, *The World of Suzy Wong*" (282). Wittman adds his ethnic weight to the negative sentiment created by such imagery because he is "against girls who wear cheongsam." Knowing that Chinese-American beauty contests include cheongsam as an

official contest garment, Wittman's narrator denigrates the young woman by calling her "the one in Miss Chinatown Narcissus Queen drag" (58).

Predictably, historians of fashion are a bit less harsh in their discussions of the cheongsam, though they certainly document the ways in which the garment has been used to objectify the female body, especially through film and advertising. They are also cognizant, however, of the great variety with which the garment was and still is worn and of its historical/political significance. Antonia Finanne writes, as the "main site of fashion in China during the Nationalist period," the *qipao* "became a stage for debates about sex, gender roles, aesthetics, the economy, and the nation" (141).[31] Writing about the cheongsam during the 30s, by which time it had achieved its current silhouette, Hazel Clark states that "in reality, most women would not have worn the very fitted or revealing versions depicted in the [advertising art] posters. Nevertheless, the poster images, were, like the movies, influential on what the ordinary woman would wear, or, at the very least aspire to, through their reference to contemporary life" (158). Valery Garrett's *Chinese Dress from the Qing Dynasty to the Present* declares the cheongsam's stereotypical quality by stating, the cheongsam is "the iconic garment by which Chinese women are still known throughout the world." In addition, it "provides constant inspiration for fashion designers in the West" (147). Like the sari, the cheongsam is iconic, but unlike the sari, the cheongsam stirs up resentment. Also like the sari, the cheongsam inspires fashion beyond the borders of its origin and therefore illustrates the way in which the East influences the West. In fashion, it's often taken for granted that influence moves from West to East, though there is much evidence to the contrary.[32]

The cheongsam, which is associated most strongly with Hong Kong, where "it has become the equivalent of a 'national dress'" (Steele and Major 155), is an icon of Chinese womanhood. Steele and Major point out that while the qipao, better known in the West by its Cantonese name, the cheongsam, is widely regarded as 'traditional' Chinese dress," it is actually "a hybrid design, combining elements of Chinese, Manchu, and western clothing" (47-8). The cheongsam, which means long robe, has had an extraordinary evolution, and its significance varies widely according to time, region, construction, and use. Hazel Clark puts the matter this way:

> The Cheung Sam has gained special associations with Chinese women during the twentieth century. Introduced at the end of the Qing dynasty, in the late nineteenth century, it history is bound up with social, economic, and political change, and with patterns of migration. In mainland China its popularity has risen and fallen, but Chinese communities outside the mainland have ensured its continuity. (155)

Some scholars trace the evolution of the cheongsam to the Manchu qipao. The Manchus were, of course, a semi-nomadic, horse-riding people who conquered the Ming dynasty in 1644 and ruled until their fall in 1911. Their usual dress had consisted of a "long loose-fitting robe, which covered their feet and had an overlapping front flap that fastened with loops and toggles at the right shoulder" (Clark 155). The garment also had long sleeves to keep the hands warm and covered, which was considered proper. There were also side vents to provide for freedom of movement, an important consideration for an active, mobile people. Undergarments were worn to prevent the display of skin beneath vents. Both men and women wore a similar robe. Qipao means banner gown, which referred to the fact that

the women associated with qipao were those who were associated with the Manchu banner system in which troops were dispersed throughout China in order to maintain control. Individual troops were distinguished by their own flags or banners. During those times, the qipao was practical (much less voluminous than the traditional gowns worn by Chinese men) and figure-concealing. It was also quite androgynous because it "had similar structure for both men's and women's costume, differentiated by gender-specific ornamentation" (Chang 119). Therefore, when Han women under the banner system adopted the garment, it carried connotations of gender equality rather than those of female sexuality. Manchu women dressed much like their men and they did not bind their feet.

During the nineteen-twenties, many women, particularly "women of the emerging middle class," adopted a long robe-like garment that replaced their traditional two to three piece ensembles of loose trousers, jacket, and/or skirt. Some suggest that the new long gown was adopted from the long robe worn by Han men, and yet others believe "the qipao may have evolved from the long, sleeveless vest called the *majia*" (Steele and Major 48). The Manchu gown, the Han robe, and the *majia* are all male attire, so even though it is impossible to impose a strict and linear genealogy onto the cheongsam, it is sure that the early garment contained an impulse toward androgyny. And whatever its origin, "the style became popular among young urban women" (48). When the Qing dynasty ended, the loose-fitting qipao was worn in Southern China and Hong Kong by wealthier women and was also adopted as a girls' uniform in some schools (Clark 156). According to Garret, "[i]n 1927, when Nanjing became the capital of the Republic of China, two styles of clothing were designated formal wear for women. One was "a black jacket and blue skirt cut in the style of earlier outfits," and the other was the cheongsam (147). As the 20s rolled into the 30s, the dress changed due

to notions of modernity and Western influence. The dress became increasingly fitted and was worn with modern accessories, such as silk stockings and Western high heels. Images of women in cheongsam proliferated in China and elsewhere through films, which were enormously popular in China, and also through the production of hugely popular calendar posters, which were a Shanghai art form circulated to promote a variety of products. Throughout its heyday in the 30s and into the 40s, the cheongsam was worn by many urban women in different classes and life stages; the fabric, the length, the sleeve style, and the presence of leg slits varied according to fashion, the season, and the wearer. Though popular associations with cheongsam are "exotic chinoiserie and eroticism," the dress has also been worn with simplicity and modesty. Chang points out that during the 30s, "women with an emerging Socialist consciousness continued to wear theirs in with simplicity" (119, sic).

During the 50s and 60s, the cheongsam's popularity waned and it was outlawed by The Cultural Revolution (1966-76), which considered it too feudal, too capitalist, and too sexy. How odd that a single garment during a moment and place in time can be considered as too feudal and too capitalist at once! Like the banning of books, the banning of garments attests to their power to signify and to disturb. However, the cheongsam "gained popularity in Hong Kong in the 1950s because of the similarity of the shape to western fashion, which, in turn, influenced the cheung sam" (Clark 159). Hong Kong cheongsams were custom made by skilled tailors, many of whom had emigrated from Shanghai. Because of its restrictive fit and because of the advent of the western miniskirt in the 70s, the cheongsam's popularity even in Hong Kong faded. It came to be seen as "old fashioned and too obviously 'Chinese,' especially for the younger generation who wished to be seen as 'modern'" (Clark 161).

Today, however, its style is worn as a uniform by many women who work in service industries, and it continues to be worn in beauty contests.

The association with beauty contests and service provided by women is contrary to feminist ideals and contributes to the cheongsam's disregard, what Antonia Finnane calls its "sorry state"; however, such disregard is complicated by the garment's use by women in politics who represent China and Singapore and by women who are celebrating special occasions and/or who want to assert their cultural identities. The cheongsam also enjoyed a rehabilitation of sorts due to Hong Kong born and New York based designer Vivien Tam, who during the 1990s featured lovely long gowns and relatively loosely-fitted gowns inspired by the cheongsam. In its focus on the qi pao, Beverley Jackson's Shanghai *Girls Get All Dressed Up* lists couture designers who "look to Shanghai's past for inspiration": "Designers from Dior to Saint Laurent to Lacroix, Valentino, Prada, and Galiano, Vivienne Tam, Amy Chan, and Shanghai Tang" (77).[33] And the cheongsam's reemergence in Singapore is such that Chua Beng-Huat actually uses the phrase "power cheongsams" in his discussion about dress and the process of Asianisation. In the face of global capitalism the cheongsam is able to assert an image of tradition and traditional Chinese values in opposition to Western values and change. Finally, in 2007 Hong Kong artist Wessie Ling created an installation accompanied by a book called *Fusionable Cheongsam*. The installation was interactive and worked to challenge popular and simplified conceptions of the cheongsam and its significance. The cheongsam is a garment with remarkable staying power, and its history is indeed indicative of a garment's capacity to mark political and cultural upheaval and flux. Though its history is much too complex to entirely relate here, these basic developments along with the advantages of the big picture and hindsight reveal that

Wittman's dismissal of "girls who wear cheongsam" is reductive. Because it is also typical in Asian American letters, it also reveals that sartorial significance is always conditioned by its context.

China Men and Sartorial Style

Just as the cheongsam in China was a late and non-traditional garment that came to be a quintessential signifier of Chinese femininity, the queue in China was a non-Han hairstyle that came to be a quintessential signifier of Chinese masculinity. In *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, the queue is imagistically equated in the narrator's mind with her father's long-ago persona as a Chinese male. Because Maxine's father, BaBa, does not talk about his past in China, she has only the sparest of details and therefore must construct that past, as she does for No Name Woman. She has heard immigration stories that include official questions about queue-cutting. For instance, upon her interrogation at Ellis Island, Brave Orchid had been asked by an immigration official, "What year did your husband cut off his pigtail?" (96). It is interesting to note that between *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, a similar queue-question immigration account is narrated a full four times, revealing how heavily it weighs in the mind of Maxine and how in the absence of her father's history she relies on "the power of images and the imagination in construction of believable 'reality'" (Ko "Bondage" 6).

The queue's history in China is exceedingly old; it does not originate with the Manchus. Similar hairstyles were worn by tribes in the west and the north as far back as the Han period, which flourished between 206 B.C.E and 220 C.E. (Godley 54). Throughout the queue's long history, it had marked foreign (read tribal) presence. According to Godley's "The End of the Queue," "[i]n its efforts to purge the country of alien influences, the Ming

dynasty (1368-1644) reverted to what was seen as Chinese dress and hairstyle. Emperor Taizu . . . forbade those who wanted to be considered genuine 'Han' Chinese to wear foreign queues" (55). As the Manchus (1644-1911) advanced their rule and displaced the Ming, they enforced queue-wearing: "Han Chinese men were legally required to shave the front of their heads and wear their hair in a single plait" (Steele and Major 29), and there were various edicts and struggles surrounding hair style as a sign of submission, which sometimes resulted in the execution of patriots who refused to shave their heads. Godley writes, "Indeed, well into the eighteenth century it was held politically dangerous to yearn, euphemistically, for the old cap and gown of the Ming, since hair was the obvious sign of resistance—a fact which can only have hardened Qing determination to enforce its particular band of uniformity" (57). As in the case of the cheongsam, the queue's history is very complex, and there are many accounts of resistance to head-shaving, a resistance that signifies ethnic conflict. For example, participants in the Taiping movement were referred to as "long hairs" or "hairy rebels," and in "1853, the rebel leaders issued a proclamation: 'The Chinese have Chinese characteristics; but now the Manchus have ordered us to shave the hair around the head leaving a long tail behind, thus making the Chinese appear to be brute animals. . . . You are all Chinese people; how can you be so stupid as to cut your hair and follow the demons?'" (qtd. in Godley 61). And Godley also quotes "Arthur H. Smith's [1894] best-selling *Chinese Characteristics*," which sets forth a Westerner's conclusion:

> It was inevitable that such a conspicuous and tangible mark of subjection should have been bitterly resisted, even to the death by a great number of the Chinese. But the Manchus showed how well they were fitted for the high task which they had undertaken, by their persistent adherence to the requirement,

> compliance with which was made at once a sign and a test of loyalty. The result is what we see. The Chinese are now more proud of their cue[sic] than any other characteristic of their dress. (64)

Thus, the queue was gradually though never universally accepted, and by "the 1800s, queues could be found throughout East Asia" (61). Though there was hairstyle variation in remote locales and though those in rural areas could go for relatively long periods without shaving, the queue had become generally worn by all Chinese, including Han Chinese. By the time of the Opium War, Chinese surrender to foreign power was marked by the cutting off of queues, which at the time was "a mark of deep disgrace to a Chinaman" (qtd. in Godley 64). One of the interesting aspects of this situation is that it required a great deal of barbering. When perusing photos from the late Ming, one notices that street scenes often include an itinerate barber shaving the head of a seated customer. As the Qing dynasty began to topple, however, reformists such as Sun Yat-sen began to question the queue's significance as a sign of bondage and also as a sign of outmoded feudalism. As a result, queue-cutting was resurrected to signify defiance, modernism, and patriotism, and by 1910 had become something of a mania. Succumbing to the inevitable, the Qing government "resolved overwhelmingly [in December of 1910] that the throne permit all Chinese students, diplomats, government servants, and soldiers to remove their queues" (68).

While historians always present the queue in terms of political significance, *China Men* is unusual in its association of the queue with fashion (or lack thereof). From *China Men* comes the following:

> "When did you cut off your pigtail?" asked the translator.
>
> "In 1911," said the legal father. It was a safe answer, the year he

> would have picked anyway, not too early before the Republic nor too late, not too revolutionary nor too reactionary. Most people had cut their hair in 1911. He might have cut it for fashion as much as for revolution. (58)

Frustrated by her father's silence and her lack of detail, Maxine writes, "You only look and talk Chinese. There are no photographs of you in Chinese clothes nor against Chinese landscapes. Did you cut your pigtail to show your support for the Republic? Or have you always been American?" (14). In order to be Chinese, one must look Chinese—dress the part. In *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, shear repetition of the association of the queue with BaBa's Chinese past renders a style detail that reinforces the image of Chinese maleness with queues. This association is also worked into Maxine's construction of her father's participation in "the last Imperial Examination ever given" (24). Frederic Wakeman, Jr. notes, "the last traditional exams were held in 1905, and although Kingston's real father would have been far too young to have sat for those, her mythical father takes them" (209). The "far too young," seems an overstatement though Maxine's description of the examination "ordeal" is very certainly "fancifully described" (Wakeman 209).

As he journeys on foot to the place of the exam, the fourteen-year-old BaBa sleeps in "a reaped field." He "spread his bedroll" and the "wooden pillow under his neck lifted his thick braid, which Grandmother had woven tight to last for days, and it trailed on the ground" (24). Thus, *China Men* imagines that typically novelistic thick and luxurious head of hair, even when a good percentage of the hair would have been shaved. When he arrives at the examination site, BaBa stays up all night in an effort to continue studying until the last moment. He uses his queue to stay awake: "He looped the end of his pigtail into the ring [in a beam overhead] and tied it tight. Then he sat in his chair to study some more. When he

dozed, his own hair jerked his head back up" (26). After this method fails to keep him awake, BaBa stabs his thigh with an awl, all of which, though imaginary, accords with the historical record regarding the exam's extraordinary importance as a means of improving one's socioeconomic situation in old China.

Kingston's story of BaBa in China is the product of myth and imagination, while the story of him as a young immigrant in the United States is fed by both Brave Orchid's accounts and, more importantly, the movies and photographs. Kingston writes of BaBa's time in New York when he lived with roommates, since Brave Orchid had not yet immigrated:

> On Saturday Ed [BaBa] and Woodrow went to Fifth Avenue to shop for clothes. With his work pants, Ed wore his best dress shirt, a silk tie, gray silk socks, good leather shoes with pointed toes, and a straw hat. At a very good store, he paid two hundred dollars cash for a blue and gray pinstripe suit, the most expensive suit he could find. In the three-way mirror, he looked like Fred Astaire. (63)

Thus, through sartorial detail, Maxine's father is imagined as transformed into a Western man of fashion, though the transformation will not protect the father from financial difficulties or from racial prejudice. Perhaps just as significantly, however, through sartorial detail, Maxine's father is transformed from a rural peasant into an urban man-about-town. In China, as in the United States, the urban/rural divide is marked by sartorial difference, and men in urban China had begun to wear Western accessories, if not Western suits (Finanne 80).

As many critics have noted, the China Men's encounter with racial prejudice and stereotyping is figured and foreshadowed in *China Men's* opening chapter,"On Discovery." Like Kingston's rendition of the Mulan story in *The Woman Warrior's* "White Tigers," "On Discovery" is another retelling of Chinese cross-dressing invoked to accommodate cross-cultural identity. However, as Donald C. Goellnight points out, while "On Discovery's" cross-dressing premise and its existence as a "controlling myth" within *China Men* parallels the Mulan story's function in *Woman Warrior*, its privileged position as the opening tale of the book means that the "Tang Ao story also has affinities" with the opening story of *Woman Warrior*, "No Name Woman":

> Just as the no-name aunt is forced into a position of powerlessness and silence, both physically and linguistically (for her indiscretions, she is driven to suicide and denied a name) by the traditions of Chinese patriarchy that deny her existence once she has transgressed its laws, so too Tang Ao the sojourner finds himself forced into a position of powerlessness and silence by the Laws of the Ruling Fathers (the white majority). (230)

Tang Ao is the protagonist of the mythical "On Discovery," Kingston's significant new title for "The Women's Kingdom," which is a chapter from a Chinese novel titled *The Romance of the Flowers in the Mirror* by Li Ju-chen (1763-1830). "The Women's Kingdom" tells the story of Lin Chih-yang, who, on a journey across the sea, comes to the Land of Women, which is governed by transvestite women. The queen captures Lin, and her maids pierce his ears, bind his feet, and begin a routine of cosmetic application so that he may be prepared to become the queen's (or king's as she is referred to in Ju-chen's translated text) Royal Concubine. This is a remarkable story, humorous and pathetic at once. By detailing the

torturous and eventually silencing debasement to which Lin is subjected, the author effectively defamiliarizes the treatment to which millions of Chinese women were routinely subjected. Once Lin has been installed as Royal Concubine, we get the following:

> Such melancholy does not become this gay occasion. It is of course a misfortune to be born female; that conceded, you have risen as high as any in the world. Just think! You are now First Lady of our realm. What more could you ask for? For the future, if you bring forth children, your days of happiness will be lasting. Rather than go about pretending to be a man and so contravene the law of nature, is it not far better thus resume the feminine role and share our throne like a queen? (Mair 1056)

Addressed to a man, such directives as "smile—don't look unhappy" and reference to "the laws of nature," which is ironically opposed to the idea of "the feminine role," recall Victor Shklovshy's words in "Art as Technique": "Habitualization devours words, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. 'If the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been.' And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony" (20). Thus, Kingston opens *China Men* with the retelling of a male-authored Chinese text that already adheres to her feminist ideals. Her revision is minimal but significant, and it is to her credit as an artist that she can imply so much so economically. Tang Ao's humiliation is an extremely shortened version of Lin's. It barley occupies two pages of text and only the sartorial/somatic adornments at the hands of the women are appropriated. As Chueng notes, Kingston explicitly introduces the concept of silencing when an old woman wielding an ear piercing needle jokes that she is going to sew Tang Ao's lips together (*Articulate Silences*

102-3). So threatened, Tang Ao says nothing after that. (It takes much longer and more brutal methods to silence Lin. He manages to escape eventually, however, with his feet miraculously unharmed, big and manly.) Thus, through the imposition of feminine sartorial conventions onto a male body, Li before her and now Kingston enlarge the "discovery" of a new land to also signify the "discovery" of what it means to suffer the body of a woman, particularly a body trussed and confined by social and sartorial restrictions.

The most striking and painful of Tang Ao's transformation to womanhood is of course the binding of his feet. Kingston's description of the process goes like this:

> They bent his toes so far backward that his arched foot cracked. The old ladies squeezed each foot and broke man tiny bones along the sides. They gathered his toes, toes over and under one another like a knot of ginger root. Tang Ao wept with pain. As they wound the bandages tight and tighter around his feet, the women sang footbinding songs to distract him: "Use aloe for binding feet and not for scholars." . . . Every night they unbound his feet, but his veins had shrunk, and the blood pumping through them hurt so much, he begged to have his feet re-wrapped tight. They forced him to wash his used bandages, which were embroidered with flowers and smelled of rot and cheese. He hung the bandage up to dry, streamers that drooped and draped wall to wall. He felt embarrassed; the wrappings were like underwear, and they were his. (4)

One striking aspect of this description is the way it ends by suggesting what Dorothy Ko considers the most important aspect of the bound foot: the unseen. The process of footbinding was exceedingly private and restricted to feminine space. As such, its somatic

reality—the pain, the smell, the disfigurement—all become intensely intimate, private, and hidden. Ko writes that prior to the nineteenth century "[visual representation of the bound foot, even fully shod, . . . was taboo even in the ars erotica" (*Cinderella's Sisters* 41). She also notes the multiple layers that were worn to cover and to adorn the bound foot: "binding cloth, sock, soft-soled slippers, and outer shoe or bootie. Leggings, leg-binders, ankle bracelets, and pants or a long skirt completed the ensemble at the lower body" (*Cinderella's Sisters* 221). Thus the flesh is remarkably encased, and to emphasize the extremely intimate nature of the bound foot and its cover, Ko writes that the "embroidered slipper, especially the sleeping shoe, was such a synecdoche of a woman's sexuality that its very possession by a man other than her husband sufficed to intimate illicit union" (215).

Ko has thoroughly examined material and textual records in both the West and the East and determined that once the bound foot became publicly visible, its demise was inevitable because its attraction was in its "concealment" and its literary idealization. She situates anti-footbinding movements into China's new awareness of its global position under the gaze of a host of other nations, so that the practice had become an embarrassment to be eliminated as quickly as possible. Ko also writes about the "great length" to which Westerners had gone in order to see the foot unshod by providing the following example: "John Thomson, the photographer of things Chinese," who, though "assured by Chinamen that it would be impossible . . . by the offer of any sum of money, to get a Chinese woman to unbandage her foot," finds through persistence and the offer of an unsaid yet presumably large amount of money a woman who agrees "to countenance an act of such gross indecency as unbandaging the foot of her charge." (qtd. in Ko, "Bondange" 21)

The photographer recorded his reaction: "Once ridded of its ornate façade, however, the bound foot was a let down that could not live up to its analogical splendor: 'And yet, had I been able, I would rather have avoided the spectacle, for the compressed foot, which is figuratively supposed to represent a lily, has a very different appearance and odour from the most beautiful and sacred of flowers" (21). The quotation testifies to the differences between the bound foot of the literary imagination and the bound foot of corporeal reality.

Prior to the nineteenth century, Chinese discourse surrounding the bound foot was considered dubious and was produced almost exclusively by men, so that the discourse worked to create and perpetuate the idealization of the "lotus," though it also at times deplored the practice. Much of the musing was concerned with locating an origin, which is impossible to pinpoint and is thus, as Ko writes, discursively produced. Typically, scholars say footbinding began sometime between the end of the Tang dynasty and the beginning of the Song. Legend has it that an emperor's favorite consort "danced for him having bound her feet to represent a new moon." The practice was copied by ladies of the court and radiated outward to the gentry and finally to most all Chinese women (Garrett 116). In his written search for origins, Hu Yinglin (1551-1602) commented on literature's influence on fashion: "Even in the early years of the Song [eleventh century], the majority of women did not bind their feet. Then in the Yuan dynasty, poems, *ci*-lyrics, songs, and dramas all harped on the subject, leading to its extreme popularity today" (qtd. in *Cinderella's Sisters* 129).[34] During the Qing dynasty, the practice became almost universal (132).

According to Ko, women's voices do not come into the record until the very late nineteenth and early twentieth century with anti-footbinding rhetoric, but even then the voices are filtered through the writing of men, who, whether connoisseurs or reformers,

present the body as an abstraction, so that the "erasure of the physicality of the female body, so prevalent in the anti-footbinding discourse, rendered any realistic description of pain difficult" (*Cinderella's Sisters* 28).[35] Antonia Finnane's account presents the Western point of view and demonstrates it is likewise a discussion that considers the feet but not the women. From her book, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation,* comes the following: "Along with the commentary came pictures: bound feet shod and bound feet bare, as much isolated from their owners as the limb that was removed from the drowned woman in the Pearl river and sent back to England for scientific analysis" (30). Ko discusses a reformist novel in which anti-footbinding rhetoric is presented in an equally disembodied manner. *Huang Xiuqui* by Tang Yisuo, depicts the patriotic letting out of the feet of its eponymous heroine, whose recovery is quick and miraculous. Ko puts the matter this way:

> To the novelist, the bound foot is an external sign useful in its symbolism, not an embodied reality. Xiuqiu's feet cease to be an issue after she "liberates" them: she travels, reasons, and acts, willfully ignoring the pile of bent bones, the donut twist that could not be straightened or uncooked. The body of the footbound woman appears as though feet were a change of clothes that could be refashioned at will. Huang Xuiqiu's agency is built on her will at the expense of her absent body. (29)

While feminist writers work to revise the record of both footbinding and its demise by considering the silenced voices emanating from the bodies of women, Kingston's Tang Ao's experience is an embodied experience, and in addition to suffering the somatic indignities that render his body feminine, he also discovers that once his feet have been bound, it is difficult and painful to reverse a process that cannot be undone: "Every night

they un-bound his feet, but his veins had shrunk, and the blood pumping through them hurt so much, he begged to have his feet re-wrapped tight" (4). To unwrap is to suffer so that just as "the women sang footbinding songs to distract" Tang Ao, unwrapping songs were used to distract women suffering the reverse process.

The issue of unwrapping recalls the crazy woman with the mirrored headdress in *Woman Warrior* whose "bindings had come loose" (94). The story takes place during the Japanese invasion of China which occurred between 1937 and 1945. As Ko's studies point out, the demise of footbinding was not a clean break or a straightforward linear progression; rather, it occurred over many years, and the change was marked by bizarre situations, such as the employment of foot inspectors who imposed upon women's extreme and hitherto respected senses of privacy and who levied fines against women, patriarchs, and match-makers who continued to countenance the process and product of footbinding; school boys wearing cloth banners declaring, "I refuse to marry a footbound woman"; and bureaucrats who collected piles of used binding cloths and aired them for public viewing—odors, blood, sweat, and tear stains notwithstanding. In the anti-footbinding atmosphere, the footbound woman was re-figured; she now represented one of China's "Three Ills": "opium smoking and gambling" and footbinging (Ko 51). The footbound woman's subjectivity was now attached to a body of shame, and she was considered both "parasitic" and "infantile." Not only were such women declared by the state to be unmarriageable, but Finnane's account says that "[r]evolutionaries in their droves abandoned small-footed wives for large-footed, educated women." Examples of "abandoning husbands" include "Sun Yatsen, Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Chen Duxiu, and Chiang Kaishek" (83). Therefore, the foot-bound women of post-imperial China were often women of severe social and economic displacement, and

Kingston's crazy woman stands in testimony to their terrible plight, a plight typically overlooked in the history of footbinding and its end.

In "On Discovery" the tables are turned on the male-authored discourse of footbinding so that rather than a man writing about a woman's body and its sartorial presentation as ideal, a woman writes about a man's body experiencing the materiality of that presentation. In *The Woman Warrior's* "White Tigers," Kingston also evokes the mythical as a means to feminist ends. "White Tigers" re-imagines the famous woman warrior Fa Mulan, who disguised as a man in a suit of armor, takes her father's place as a conscript and subsequently conquers despotism. Mulan's cross-dressing parallels Tang Ao's and yet is much different because for a woman's body to be sartorially constructed and therefore perceived male is to increase her social/cultural/political capital while for a man's body to be sartorially constructed and therefore perceived as female is to decrease his social/cultural/political capital. Mulan's cross-dressing leads to intense action and the fulfillment of filial piety, whereas Tang Ao's cross-dressing, which is anyway forced upon him, leads to passivity and silence. If the needle as metaphorical pen fixes women's writing into the realm of the feminine, Mulan's sword as a metaphorical pen imaginatively facilitates a more cutting and radically militant voice. The protective armor and Maxine's imaginative accessory of choice, the sword, provide a psychological shield from the slings and arrows of misogynist sentiments and racist bosses against whom Maxine's voice is small and ineffective (*The Woman Warrior* 48). The imaginary military garb outfits her as a s/words-woman, rather than merely a woman writer, who, released from the trappings of femininity, will find a powerful and liberating female voice, after which she drops the armor in exchange for a softer, cozier shawl, a token that she still needs protection of sorts from deeply

ingrained misogynist words and sentiments: "When I visit my family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl," (52) writes the adult Maxine, who has found not only her voice, but also the worth of her existence, though she bares the scars of racist and sexist slurs and actions that continue to affect women of color.

As one of her final deeds, Maxine's Mulan rescues from the palace of the fat baron she has beheaded (who recalls the fat bosses of Maxine's working life) a group of footbound women who are so immobilized that "some crawled away from [Mulan], using their elbows to pull themselves along" (44). After their rescue, however, the weakened women somehow recover to become legend with a legend: "They wandered away like ghosts. Later, it would be said, they turned into the band of swords-women who were a mercenary army. They did not wear men's clothes like me, but rode as women in black and red dresses" (44-5). In this imaginative flight of fancy, women magically recover from the violence of footbinding and their construction as, at best, weakened subjects and, at worst, passive objects. Challenging the notion that women must dress like men to be equal to men, they do not cross-dress, yet they enact the sort of power wielded by men, which becomes manifested in acts of aggression and war. In *The Woman Warrior*, the ultimate female revenge is enforced by women dressed as women, who "as witch amazons . . . killed men and boys" (45). In *The Woman Warrior*, the male/female power divide is turned on its head because "White Tigers" finally imagines radical power as distinctly and sartorially female. Thus, Kingston, like Walker, Atwood, and myriad other writers, imagine the fictional body as a clothed body. In this way, fiction registers the extraordinary significance of sartorial style in the construction of human identities, real and fantastical.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: FASHION AND FEMINIST RESPONSIBILITY

Maxine Hong Kingston, Alice Walker, and Margaret Atwood are all women writers representing North American voices during the mid-to-late twentieth century. Differing quite radically in terms of geographic and cultural backgrounds, they share a feminist outlook that attends to clothing as a postmodern site of contested identity constructions. For Atwood, the culture of clothing is a site of intense fascination, but the necessity to dress and expose one's self to the gaze of others instills anxiety; for Walker, fashion paradoxically represents repression on one hand and independence and joy on the other; and for Kingston, clothes are especially significant in the construction of historical, cultural, and national identities. In all cases, clothing is very clearly implicated in issues of gender, the empowerment and disempowerment of women. And in all my study's texts, attitudes toward clothing are mixed—positive sometimes, negative others, but never neutral. During these writers' heydays of second wave feminism, concerns for clothing were almost universally cast by mainstream feminism as negative, and yet their fiction remained multivalent, reflecting a keen consciousness regarding the inability to simply ditch dress as frivolous and overly-feminine.

Times have changed a lot and we now live in an era in which preoccupation with fashion is evident in both academic and popular culture. On the book tables in Costco sit piles of pulp-ish, pink paperbacks whose titles love the word "shopping." Such display presents a popular and surface celebration of conspicuous sartorial consumption which is opposed to popular anti-consumption movements and culture jamming, while at the same

time, serious fiction and scholarship work to reflect and construct clothing attitudes and histories in the material and literary records in a more balanced, nuanced register.

In the meantime, women working to advance their numbers in the tough worlds of education, business, and politics continue to be judged according to their wardrobes as men almost never are. We've all heard the comments about women in politics: Madeline Albright looks like an old battle-ax; Hillary Clinton's pants-suits are dowdy and predictable; Michelle Obama is tastefully stylish; Sarah Palin is characterized by the left as an over-spending clothes-horse and by the right as a babe, a term Rush Limbaugh famously gushed. This focus on the somatic and sartorial style of women, no matter how they choose to dress, should be exceedingly disturbing to women. It is the very stuff of anxiety in dress, and the attention to Palin's wardrobe simply perpetuated the dress double standard while distracting from the far more substantive issue of her appalling ignorance in matters of state. And while it's certain that Barak Obama spends a great deal of money on his impeccable suits, it does not occur to the viewing public to couple its judgment of his political acumen or performance with judgment of his wardrobe, though that wardrobe no doubt lends to his dignified bearing. Other than a buzz about John Edwards' pricey haircut, men's sartorial styles and choices simply go unremarked. Whatever position a feminist thinker occupies on the political spectrum, whether she enjoys the aesthetics of fashion and the culture of clothes or not, she (or he) would be hard-pressed to countenance this sartorial double-standard. Women are berated for what they wear and then berated for "giving a hoot." The fact is that very often not giving a hoot is luxury they cannot afford, as *Cat's Eye* relates. The literature of Atwood, Walker, and Kingston all register this sexist social situation implicitly, yet clearly. Matters of dress are a feminist issue.

Labor is also a feminist issue that surrounds clothing because, as United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) points out, "90 percent of garment factory workers are women" (Featherstone 70). My study's introduction posited a question regarding whether or not its subject texts address the exploitive tendencies of fashion production, and by the end, I realize that they do not, except in the case of Walker's Roselily, who upon her contemplation of marriage to the Muslim man from the north, refers to the job she will no longer have to endure. Walker writes it like this:

> She wonders what it will be like. Not to have to go to a job. Not work in a sewing plant. Not to worry about learning to sew straight seams in workingmen's overalls, jeans, and dress pants. Her place will be in the home, When she is rested, what will she do? (7)

The passage does not suggest the sensational sort of sweatshop conditions that are sometimes exposed by the press and that correctly cause outrage. But rather it suggests a tedious, non-creative sort of routine that workers in all kinds of employment positions have to live with. It also expresses the sometimes unconsidered situation whereby some women working in garment factories gain a sense of independence they are loath to lose. In regard to the narratives and clothing-related labor they set forth, one might also point to the Hongs' laundry businesses as work of an intense and laborious sort. Certainly one could go into an analysis of the association of such work with immigrant and Asian populations, but that is a job for another study. The point is that my subject texts all focus on clothing as it relates to the construction of identities rather than as a labor problem, which is appropriate as the two issues are just that—two different issues.

Nevertheless, a feminist study that focuses on the cultural aspects of sartorial style runs the risk of coming off as insensitive to the plight of garment workers in free trade zones and rogue American shops that disregard fair standards of pay and working conditions. However, labor literature, such as Andrew Ross's "The Quandaries of Consumer Based Activism" and Liza Feathersone's *Students against Sweatshops* (co-authored with student activists), points out the problems that result from conflating moralistic anti-consumption rhetoric with labor activism. One of these problems is related to class division and therefore is akin to the point made above between those (usually men) who can afford to not give a hoot and those (usually women) who cannot. Expanding upon the point that it is remarkably more effective and certainly less paternalistic to work towards workers' self-organization than to attempt the policing of consumer behavior and of factories from the outside, Featherstone writes about the affluence of typical anti-sweatshop student activists, who have been very effective in pressuring elite schools to clean up their sweated labor licensing agreements with offending clothing manufacturers, and who have learned along the way that sub-standard working conditions exist in myriad industries and jobs, including the high tech manufacture (people are seemingly never lambasted for consuming technology) and service industries:

> The sweatshop issue is, in a sense, a natural one for affluent students. Like many First World anti-sweatshop campaigns, the student movement arose in part out of a sense of privilege. The group was born in a period of economic prosperity, when affluent students were feeling unusually fortunate, and less worried about their careers than their predecessors in the jobless early 1990s. . . . While less affluent students are more likely to organize on their

> own behalf, against tuition hikes or campus racism, upper-middle-class white students have the luxury of organizing against their own privilege. Ironically, that sort of radicalism can be challenging for working-class students, who may feel they're in college not to critique privilege, but to court it. "All these problems are caused by an elite," says Liana Molina [a student who grew up near a manquila and grinding poverty in Juarez], yet we're striving to be part of that elite. I came [to school] to get a degree, to get a better job. (94)

The impulse to improve one's material lot in life is also apparent among women working in the factories of the global south. While it is certainly important to continue to pressure for corporate responsibility, the closing of factories is sadly too often the result of media campaigns, which, rather than work in tandem with union organization, simply and often sensationally inform consumers about abuses. Consumers, who are rightly outraged, become mollified by retailers who simply switch production to another factory, thereby saving their own reputations but leaving in their wake unemployed women who had depended upon their jobs. The disconnect between the haves and the have/nots in regard to attitudes about consumption is also noted by Ross, who cites Schor: " 'voluntary simplicity' is widely viewed as an option for secure middle-class people who can afford the status loss that results from eschewing materialism" (775). Therefore, "those bent on integrating labor concerns more into the sphere of cultural politics" (772), though undoubtedly sincere in their anti-consumerist rhetoric, are often unaware of the intensely complicated situations surrounding clothing production and consumption, globalism and capitalism. Atwood, Walker, and Kingston, writing prior to the advent of the North American Free Trade Agreement and global manufacture, all write work that is very aware of the significance of clothing as an

aspect of culture which is as old as civilization itself and as important to human identity as language.

The problem of sweated labor (and it is a problem) remains a feminist/labor subject for different texts and different studies. Conscientious consumers who realize that they would have to construct their own clothing or go naked in order to avoid buying garments can do best by attending to the information provided by or becoming active within one of the several anti-sweatshop organizations represented on the Worldwide Web, including Europe's Clean Clothes Campaign, Great Britain's Labour Behind the Label, and The United States based Sweatshop Watch. Such organizations provide admittedly inadequate information regarding offending companies, but they are helpful. For instance, from anti-sweatshop websites, I have been alerted to avoid buying products from Levi Strauss, Ralph Lauren, or Tommy Hilfiger, though these companies may change their practices at some point, given the fact that consumer pressure can affect profitability. American Eagle, on the other hand, is known to stock its stores with clothing made by American Apparel, a company that bases its reputation on clean labor. But simply ditching the culture of clothing is not conducive to solving the plight of sweatshop abuses. While feminist writers present the culture of clothing as it relates to both group and individual consciousness, feminist sociologists, economists, labor lawyers, and activists are in a position to lend their time and expertise to the self-help strategies of women in the garment industries, women who want the same things we all do: a living wage for themselves and their families, decent housing and healthcare, and in all likelihood, a few lovely garments.

Endnotes

[1] Leitch qualifies his use of the "triumph," noting that while cultural studies are being reinvigorated, they have been so only in a theoretical sense and have not so-far resulted in good employment situations for graduates because "university programs often bear skimpy evidence of [cultural studies'] success" (8).

[2] "Used and abused" is a term used by Hutcheon in *The Poetics of Postmodernism* to indicate the self-conscious appropriation and ironic or parodic use of established art forms.

[3] In *Lunar Park*, a strange and raunchy, part fact, part fiction, mock memoir horror story narrated by the satirical and self-absorbed voice of Ellis, he writes that Gloria Steinem's criticism of *American Psycho* led to NOW's boycott, and "In a world filled with black ironies, Ms. Steinem eventually married David Bale, the father of the actor [Christian Bale] who played Patrick Bateman in the movie" (160). David Bale has since died.

[4] In *Sex and Suits*, Anne Hollander writes that the "integrated," "relentlessly" modern style of the man's suit is "often an affront to post-modern sensibilities," which "tend toward disintegration." Suits are "neither post-modern nor minimalist, multicultural, nor confessional" (3). This accords with *American Psycho*, in which suits effectively present a disintegrating and confessional self as visually intact. The book amounts to the confession of a disintegrating character, but because his suited appearance is so together, no one within the world of the novel acknowledges any of Bateman's confessions.

[5] In *The Study of Dress History*, Lou Taylor objects to the "loose" use of the word "tribal" to refer to urban group identities. Due to Ted Polhemus' popular text *Street Style*, the term has "unfortunately become lodged in the common parlance of the media and the popular press" (212). Taylor prefers Daniel Wojcik's carefully defined term "neo-tribalists" because it works to distinguish between counter-cultural urban styles and ethnographic tribal styles, which are very different in their practices and meanings.

[6] It's interesting to note that the Watch Bird also comes up in Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey*. *Tripmaster's* protagonist Wittman Ah Sing is contemplating a how-to-dress-for-a-business-interview cartoon at the unemployment office when he remembers the Watch Bird. The cartoon addresses hand grooming and Wittman reacts: "Do other people really push that bit of nailskin down and cut it off? This is a Watch Bird watching a Nail Biter; this is a Watch Bird watching you" (246).

[7] Canadian fashion historian Caroline Routh writes, "The very competitive fashion industry of Montreal by the eighties had arrived at the point where clothing accounted for more than forty percent of all manufacturing jobs in the city" (178).

[8] That the phrase "making a spectacle of yourself" resonates for women opens Mary Russo's article "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory." Russo writes, "Theres's a phrase that still resonates from childhood. Who says it? The mother's voice—not my mother's perhaps but the voice of an aunt, an elder sister, or the mother of a friend. It is a harsh, matronizing phrase, and it is directed toward the behavior of other women: 'She' [the other woman] is making a spectacle of herself" (213).

[9] For a good discussion of the evolution of beat style, see Linda Welters' "The Beat Generation: Subcultural Style." Though Welters does not focus on Canada, she quotes a University of Toronto alumnus who "recalls a black wool jersey top she wore with a black skirt to coffee houses and jazz clubs from 1956 to 1958. The alumni's "friend, an art major took the black concept further: she wore black turtlenecks, skirts, stockings and shoes – and she had long straight hair" (157). Atwood discusses the beat/cashmere sweater with pearls style dichotomy in *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*: University students wearing "camel-hair coats, cashmere twin-sets, and pearl button earrings" are opposed to "the others," who "wore black turtlenecks and . . . black ballerina leotards under their skirts, panti-hose not having been invented yet and skirts being mandatory." According to Atwood, this was a "terrifying" look, and "you didn't have to do anything in particular to inspire this terror: you just had to understand a certain range of likes and dislikes, and to look a certain way – less manicured, paler in the face, gaunter, and of course more somber in your clothing, like Hamlet – all of which implied you could think thoughts too esoteric for ordinary people to understand" (18).

[10] For a discussion that interrogates psychoanalytic theories of the gaze and suggests feminist possibilities through presentations of alternative female ways of seeing in popular culture, see Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment's *The Female Gaze: Women Viewers of Popular Culture.*

[11] Arnold E. Davidson maintains that the "unraveling sweater" worn by Elaine's brother Stephen "foreshadows his later work on cosmological string theory, work he comes to doubt just before his death" (35). Davidson's interpretation seems a stretch to me.

[12] According to Alice Palumbo, "*Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), and *Alias Grace* (1996) focus on the relations between the present, the past, and the functions of memory" (73), and Lorna Irvine writes that "*The Robber Bride*" dramatizes the psychological hold the past has on the present both in the lives of individuals as well as in the passing decades of the latter part of the twentieth century" (211).

[13] Rebecca Arnold notes that attention to appearance in military settings could be construed as effeminate behavior but is not because of the soldier's connection to action and violence. She writes, "military narcissism and attention to the details of outer appearance are legitimized by their link to potential violence, to duty discipline and power . . ." (38).

[14] Donna L. Potts, who mistakenly writes that Tony is the least concerned of the three protagonists with enhancing her appearance—that distinction belongs to Charis—notes how Tony's name and qualities resemble those of Athena. It's very interesting to note, however, that no one, so far as I know, has commented on the resemblance of Tony's name, Antonia Fremont, to the name of historian Antonia Fraser. Atwood reviewed Fraser's book, *The Warrior Queens,* in a 1989 *Los Angeles Times Book Review* entitled "The Public Woman as Honorary Man," which is reprinted in Atwood's *Writing with Intent*. Fraser's book retells the historical accounts of many women who led armies and indeed countries in times of fierce and extremely violent conflicts. Fraser's history, like Atwood's novel, denies the sisterhood feminist idea that women are non-aggressive and non-violent, and several of Fraser's warrior queens are mentioned in *The Robber Bride*,

including Zenia, whose name is a form of Zenobia. Atwood's Antonia Fremont, like Antonia Fraser, is fascinated with matters of violence and war, a fascination that she as a woman is not supposed to possess.

[15] Carol Ann Howells writes that "Zenia seems to be real but she has a double existence for she belongs to two different fictional discourses, that of realism and of fantasy." Most notably for Howells and others, Zenia inhabits the "fictional discourse" of gothic fantasy (81).

[16] Kyoko Amano's short article, "*The Robber Bride*: The Power and the Powerless," argues that while many critics "see Zenia as the one who is in possession of power because of her female sexuality," Tony, Charis, and Roz gain power from their lack of Zenia-style sexuality because "they gain personal space in the absence of their men" (7), which is quite true as each of the protagonists does indeed acquire not only a room but a home of her own.

[17] See, for example, "'Nothing Can Be Sole or Whole that Has Not Been Rent': Fragmentation in the Quilt in *The Color Purple*" by Judy Elsley; "Sister's Choices: Quilting Aesthetics in Contemporary African-American Women's Fiction" by Margot Anne Kelley; "Serving, Quilting, Knitting: Handicraft and Freedom in *The Color Purple* and *A Women's Story*" by Catherine E. Lewis; "From 'Text as Quilt' to 'Quilt as Text': Alice Walker's Rewriting of *The Color Purple* as Film Script" by Stefanie Sievers; "Alice Walker: Community, Quilting, and Sewing" by Jae-Hyuk Yeo; "Alice Walker's American Quilt: *The Color Purple* and the Literary Tradition."

[18] It is interesting to note that Celie also follows in the steps of real-life and real success-story African-American modiste Elizabeth Keckley, who bought freedom from slavery for both herself and her son through sewing and later realized self construction through her position as dress-maker for Mary Todd Lincoln and her subsequent authorship of *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*. Keckley's history suggests Celie's rags-to-riches scenario is not so implausible as critics have charged. A more recent figure is that of Ann Lowe, who though broke in the end, "spent fifty years creating fashions for the nation's top society" and who "outfitted the entire Jacqueline Bouvier/John Kennedy bridal party" (Alexander 50).

[19] In Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*, Celie's granddaughter Fannie addresses black preference for color in a conversation with her therapist. Discussing Celie's house as opposed to a neighboring poor white family's house, Fanny remarks: "I think part of the reason they paid black people barely enough to keep body and soul together was because they were afraid that if they ever had the slightest excess of funds they would paint their houses. They knew how black people love color and how we look good in it" (297-8).

[20] Though black fashion is often considered in the popular imagination as neo-African, some of it is uniquely American. For instance, Korbena Mercer's "Black Hair/Style Politics" shows how both the Afro and Dreadlocks are specific to the New World in the sense that "Neither style had a given reference point in existing African cultures, in which hair is rarely left to grow 'naturally'" (256). "Natural" as a positive aesthetic emanates from Western Romanticism, not Africa. And, though both styles are perceived as natural—an Afro is also call a natural—they are both, to some extent, cultivated, as almost all hair is.

[21] Atwood's novel *Surfacing* illustrates this fact well by showing a protagonist who dumps the trappings of human culture—goes back to nature—as completely as she can in order to gain insight concerning her own condition and placement within that culture. Part of her drop-out includes replacing her clothing with an animal skin, a movement that seems primitive and therefore more natural, and yet the skin is not natural to her somatic selfhood. Of course, she cannot survive outside of culture and returns to an indeterminate future.

[22] Walker's Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* experiences a life trajectory which is the inverse of Celie's. That is, just as Celie gains beauty, Mem loses it due to grinding poverty and abuse from her husband who becomes disgusted with his wife's body as it changes from plumpness to skinniness. Once she is skinny, her husband Brownfield is able to validate his treatment of her because her body has been devalued, reduced to being "ugly."

[23] Atwood discusses her Puritan ancestry in a conversation with Canadian writer Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, published in *Two Solicitudes*.

[24] Walker's interest in hairstyles extends to her non-fiction. In her collection of essays *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* is a selection called "Dreads," in which she recounts her own experience and delight in sporting dreadlocks.

[25] The idea of "choice," commonly set forth by Muslim women in both the East and the West, is countered by Russell J. Rickford's 2003 biography of Betty Shabazz, the wife and widow of Malcolm X. Rickford's research reveals that Betty Sanders did not choose Islam; rather, Betty Sanders chose Malcolm X. One of the Shabazz daughters reported that the first thing her mother had done after Malcolm's murder and after "leaving the Nation was undo the top button of her shirt." Rickford also notes, "It was a humble transition that in that first year [after Malcolm's death] consisted of little more than dangling jewelry and colorful dresses, a slow emergence from the veil and a lass bashful deportment" (269). Though Shabazz remained a Muslim, "She rejected the notion that women should be unyieldingly docile as a matter of piety, an idea that many Muslim men of all colors and backgrounds embrace," and "She belonged to that growing school of Muslim womanhood that refuses to equate Qur'anic edicts of feminine modesty and virtue with submission to patriarchy" (342).

[26] Though *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* have been respectively identified and promoted as memoir and non-fiction, they both include imaginative and mythical flights of fancy that render their generic placement problematic, misleading, and contentious. Linda Hutcheon notes that postmodern fiction lays "claim to historical events and personages." She identifies such mixed-bag texts as "historiographic metafiction" and writes that their "self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs . . . is made the grounds for [their] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (5). *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* are both intensely self-aware of such constructedness and therefore defy simple generic placement, as do the works of Atwood and Walker. Kingston discusses the genre issue in her "Conversation" with Laura E. Skandera-Trombley.

[27] Clothes-readers would take exception to the fact that while *Tripmaster's* Wittman sports a black turtle neck, Kingston's "Cultural Mis-Readings by American Reviewers," from which Banerjee quotes, reports her wearing not a turtleneck, but a sweatshirt, a garment with decidedly different connotations than the turtleneck. Critical

articles such as Patricia P. Chu's "*Tripmaster Monkey*, Frank Chin, and the Chinese Heroic Tradition," which note the resemblance between Wittman and Chinese American writer Frank Chin, along with Daryl J.Maeda's "Black Panthers, Red Guards, and Chinamen: Constructing Asian American Identity through Performing Blackness, 1969-1972," may suggest that Wittman's black turtleneck signifies the performance of black masculinity; however, Wittman's sartorial statements are eclectic and therefore resistant to stereotypical pigeon-holing of any sort. For instance, over his turtleneck he wears a "blue chambray workshirt," a garment associated with field and factory work rather than the Panther field jacket with its military connotations. Wittman never dons the quintessential Panther headgear, the beret, but rather takes pride in his long hair, which he ties back in a "samurai-Paul Revere-piratical braid" (44). Here, Kingston subtly reminds us that ponytail/pigtail like hairstyles have been worn by brave, military, defiant, and heroic men of both the West and the East. When he dresses for work, Wittman is most un-Panther like. He wears a Brooks Brothers suit he had purchased from the Salvation Army, along with an unmatching Wembley tie and Wellington boots.

[28] It is interesting that the dressing of novel characters is noticed by "scholars of Chinese fiction [who] are familiar with the long, seemingly endless descriptions of clothes of almost every new character introduced to the readers" (Zamperini, qtd. in Finnane 64).

[29] For discussions of silence in Asian American and African American women's writing, see " 'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*" and *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa*, both by King-Kok Cheung.

[30] Jung Chang's compelling memoir *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* tells of how in 1924 her grandmother became the concubine of "General Xue Zhi-heng, the inspector general of the Metropolitan Police of the warlord government of Peking" (25). Chang's grandmother, who was fifteen at the time, was considered desirable for her beauty, her bound feet, and her "long, shiny black hair," which was "woven into a thick plait reaching down to her waist" (23). Chang notes that the general, who spent very little time with his new concubine, did not speak to her of anything other than the most trivial matters, which was in keeping with "the traditional saying: 'Women have long hair and short intelligence" (32).

[31] Qipao (banner gown) is the Mandarin word for cheongsam (long gown).

[32] Of course, this sort of thinking is not restricted to fashion. In his re-consideration of Edward Said's *Orientalism,* Arif Dirlik writes, "while we have no difficulty thinking of 'Westernized Chinese,' which is the subject of much scholarly attention, we do not often think of the 'Sinified Westerner'" (101).

[33] Aficionados of global fashion are well aware that Shanghai is the fashion capital of China.

[34] Ko's text does not identify the time of the Yuan Dynasty, which was a Mongol conquest dynasty of the years 1279-1368.

[35] In this vacuum, I was given an account by my husband's popo (grandmother). Popo was a Chinese American woman born on the Big Island of Hawaii. She was as silent about her history as Kingston's father, thereby standing as testimony to the frequent theme of silence in Chinese American letters. She did, however, tell me the story of her mother Tu Sam, who had immigrated from a Cantonese village with her husband Yap Tuk. Tu Sam had an older sister whose feet were bound. As a witness to her sister's suffering, she decided she would not have it for herself. For unknown reasons, her parents acquiesced. As a result, she had to marry outside of her class. Unlike Tu Sam, Yap Tuk was Hakka, a mountain people who did not bind their women's feet. Yap Tuk and his wife immigrated to Hawaii where they both worked on a rice farm. They had nine children.

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