

TITLE: Dressing resistance: Gender, fashion, and culture

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[Music Intro]

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[BS] This is Barbara Sobol and you're listening to Frequencies, a podcast from the Library at UBC Okanagan.

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[BS] Today we are joined by Ilya Parkins, associate professor with Gender and Women Studies at UBC Okanagan.

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[BS] So thank you for joining us today to talk about your research as we prepare this podcast that will be released as part of International Women's Day.

[IP] Great, thank you for having me. I'm really looking forward to talking about it.

[BS] Could you provide us with a brief outline of your research and what you focus on?

[IP] Sure, so for a long time I've been working on things that are, have been considered to be outside the purview of what we think is important in this culture because they're feminized. So for a long time it was fashion, exclusively almost, that I was working on. And then it's turned to be a little bit broader, uh, more broadly interested in other things that are feminized, aspects of popular culture, um, that are really associated with women and femininity. And I've been interested in those things because I think that they are really important ways to understand the culture that we live in um so I've been trying to recenter them and to ask if we think about culture through the perspective of these things what can we learn about the culture that we live in? So that's what I would say. And now I'm working on wedding culture actually, which of course is incredibly feminized right? We don't think about men getting married we think of brides. That is the figure at the centre of wedding culture. So that is also about trying to recenter a figure who has tended to be not only kind of marginalized but reviled often I think, the bride.

[BS] Interesting thank you. And how does that play out in the context of your classes? What kind of focus do you have in the courses that you teach and how do those research themes get integrated into your classroom?

[IP] So I teach really quite broadly all over the map as a kind of generalist in many ways. So I teach introductory courses, I teach theory courses that are sort you know,

theory requirements. Um so I would say that it finds its way in in the sense that I'm asking students all the time to interrogate the way that we look at the world right. And just like I do in my research I'm asking us to rethink the way that we look at the world from a particular kind of perspective I would say that broadly, that informs my teaching as well. But there are opportunities that I have to teach courses that really do take up these interests. So I teach a course on um, women in popular culture which will shortly actually going to become gender and popular culture and I teach a course on gender and fashion so um both of those places are, you know, are where we really get to work out and apply these kinds of questions and what I find and this is especially the case when I'm teaching about fashion, is what's so interesting about it is that students respond um, really well to the opportunity to talk about these things that have been considered to be outside and so, so deeply peripheral to uh the kinds of things they're asked to do at the university all the time. So it actually acts as an amazing catalyst an exciting thing for students in that sense.

[BS] So I'm wondering if you can explain to our audience how you would describe your feminist approach to research, how do you frame that?

[IP] This goes back to some of the stuff that I was saying earlier about recentering things that are deemed peripheral um, and are outside of the conversation that we have about theory. I was trained as a theorist and so there's a really um, crucial way that theory gets set up as this, I mean I would say a masculine preserve, and it's certainly, because it's considered to be abstract and disconnected from the world and there's a whole history of that being imagined in a kind of a masculinized sense so when I, when I insist on bringing that kind of theoretical traditional together with things that are written off as uh fluffy and feminine I think that that is doing important work in recentering and pushing back actually against the ways that we conceive of theory that are in this kind of masculinist tradition. I would say that is the biggest way in which I think of this as feminist work. I really do. I think that fashion, that studying fashion in the academy especially studying it theoretically is like a political act I would say, a feminist political act. I really feel that.

[4:56]

[BS] So much of your work to date has focused on studying femininity and gender in relation to modernity. Would you be able to give our audience just a brief intro to what that means. What does that word modernity mean in the context of how you're considering it?

[IP] So I'm thinking about um most of the work that I've done has been focused mostly on the 20th century. So when, the modernity that I'm talking about is the era of both cultural modernism so a kind of experiments in culture forms, aesthetic forms, but really crucial responding to changes in the world on the ground. So industrial, the industrial

revolution and all that wrought in capitalism, etc etc. So you need to think of these things as two poles of the same phenomenon. That's how I think of modernity. Um, which is coming from a tradition that is defined by Marshall Berman who is a particular Marxist cultural critic. But so you know, we can locate that as early as the early 19th century but I'm really focusing on the early 20th century, which is a period I would say between about sort of the inter-war period, so between the First World War and the second roughly. Um when you have a kind of, a sense of massive cultural change especially in terms of understandings of gender right. So after the First World War, in the what we call the global north or the western world or however you want to define it, you have a shifting of gender roles as a response to what happened in that war and a kind of, we sometimes say a reconsolidation of them. So there's anxiety about what do women, what are they doing now, now that everything's changed? How do we reimagine femininity? And there's a real also obsession, this is how I got interested in this period actually, with the potential of the new. Because you know the kind of hallmark of modernity is newness right. It's this sense of quote unquote progress and constant innovation and invention and that kind of thing. And that's what drew me actually to this period, is, what is it, my initial question, and this was 20 years ago, was what does it feel like, what did it feel like to live in a period when you thought you were living the new. And I think there was, I had a kind of envy at the moment, I was like "wow imagine what it would feel like to think that you were on the precipice of revolution all the time!" Um so ya, so that's important. That sense of innovation, the sense that things, and also of change. The sense of constant change has been really important to the way that I've thought about modernity and femininity in relation to it.

[BS] And so what is it about fashion in particular that provides a lens into that modern time that gives us a unique set of insights that are not available from the other ways in which that time period has been studied?

[IP] Right, great question. So I think what it, I mean there are a few things, one of the things is the fact that it is that fashion is change. I'm quoting there Elizabeth Wilson who is an important fashion scholar. But that's what she wrote in 1985, in a sense fashion is change. And so in that sense it materially kind of enacts that logic I was just talking about of modernity, the sense of constant change, constant newness. That's what fashion depends on for its very being right. And things become obsolete the second they're introduced etc. etc. right so the tempo of constant shifting and changing. And so that when you've got a feminized form, what you have is that being attached to women and women's bodies, that being imagined in relation to women. So it's a way of thinking about women as constantly in flux actually, you know, and a notion that women are able to change who they are by changing their clothes etc etc. And that was, that is something you can locate in the period that I'm talking about. And actually quite a bit of anxiety about that. So some you know feminist, self-defined feminists who said clothing was an important thing and they could make change with the clothes that they put on their bodies and other people reacting against saying, "Oh my goodness. Look what

people are doing with the clothes that they're wearing. They're changing their lives. Oh no!" Um so I think the fact that fashion is a thing that allows to see change but also crucial allows us, attached change to femininity basically because of the way that it was so deeply feminized. And attached change to women's bodies and also allows us to think about not in abstract terms but actually about bodies and lived experience and that kind of thing. That's, that's I think important too.

[BS] So when you're looking back on that time period and through this lens of fashion and there are all of these good reasons that you've just articulated for why this is relevant to understanding what women's lives were like at that time. Does the lens also provide insight into what men's lives were like at that time? And how does that, how are those two things reconciled?

[IP] Right, so I think it does. My um...the book that I wrote that came out in 2012 by Schiaparelli and Dior, "Fashion, Femininity and Modernity" is about how three fashion designers narrated um, wrote about really, wrote about and represented women in their lives and femininity in their lives. Now one of those was a women but the other two were men and I absolutely found that it was, that their talking about women, whether it was about muses or models or inspirations or the workers who worked for them in their fashion houses or a kind of general, the modern women or whatever it was, was a way actually of talking about themselves. You know, they used that, those representations of women, to shore up visions of themselves in particular kinds of ways. Visions of themselves for example as masterful geniuses, which was an important thing that fashion designers were starting to do in the early 20th century, late 19th early 20th century, they really wanted to stake out a claim that fashion was an art not a craft, that it was on a par with other kinds of fine art and that kind of thing. And that meant that they had to paint themselves as artist geniuses. Ways that they talked about femininity allowed them to do that for example. So if we think of gender as always relational, so femininity is always being articulated in relation to masculinity, that's always going to be the case then. That when you are talking about femininity there are always consequences for masculinity and vice versa.

[11:17]

[BS] So in a really basic way, each of us gets up in the morning and needs to get dressed and fashion is not necessarily the way that all of us would describe our attire but we're all none the less wearing clothing. What's the distinction there between fashion, especially when you're talking about it in this way that is in relation to an artistic understanding of clothing, versus a sort of functional need to be warm and since it is minus seventeen today this is a very important need. Um and so how, what is the distinction there that comes out in your research as well?

[IP] I would say that in my research what's been important is to not, is to actually not stress that distinction and to think that there is no way to step outside of fashion. That even when we're getting dressed for warmth, the choices that we're making, are because we are mostly buying clothes somewhere and not making them, and even if we are making them, the choices that we're making don't happen in a vacuum so that even our most basic you know dog walking fleece and whatever is a particular color because that is the color of the decade at least or whatever. Um so that I don't think that the distinction between fashion and dress necessarily holds. And when you look at subcultures they're often, and like style subcultures you know goths or whatever, um they're often articulating themselves against fashion, like against dominant trends in fashion, but in doing that, in saying I'm anti-fashion you're acknowledging fashion right. You're putting itself in your orbit. So I don't think it's very, it's possible to think about dress outside of fashion in this cultural context very easily. I will say though that there has been a shift since the period that I was just talking about. So in the 1960s what you have is an acknowledgement, like a more explicit acknowledgement that fashion comes from the quote unquote ground up right. And you know the early 20th century you still had this model of couturiers dictating and I think there were points at which they were taking inspiration from what they saw I think crucially especially what they saw among um racial minorities which is still something we see happening. But in the 60s you really see a shift in that and you see a um, like there's a giving way to recognize that what people are doing in their everyday dress, sub-culturally and often in ways that are trying to be resistant, ah is actually having a huge impact and so it's flowing up a little bit. So that's a shift that I think is actually quite meaningful.

[BS] I'm trying to articulate a question here that jumps off of what you just said that is the, some of the, to get at some of the distinction between that time period between the war and uh...kind of more mass consumerism of that time versus the time that we live in now where there's a much more differentiated or subculture approach as you were just saying to how people present themselves through fashion, and how that has shifted for, or how that has shifted alongside more fluid gender roles become the norm. Does fashion provide us with that same lens or does it become more difficult to apply that fashion lens to understanding gender now?

[IP] I think probably the proliferation of things to buy means a, like maps on to the proliferation of identities to be honest. So I think it actually does probably. That's still relevant. Like the way the market functions still defines gender to some extent, to a large extent actually um...Ya and this isn't, I'm not actually making a judgement about this. I think it's an important thing to acknowledge though. It's a great question. It's a chicken and egg thing. Where does it start right? Does it start from people wanting products? Does it start from products being offered to people that you know, who then take them on and use them to rearticulate and play with the boundaries of gender? I'm not sure but I think, I mean I think there's some continuity there in the sense that yes it's

a different moment but the market is responding to and helping to create what we think of as gender. Does that answer your question?

[15:25]

[BS] It does. And in part, um...what was brewing in my mind there is that I have a young son who loves color and when we're shopping for clothes for him at an average children's store the colors are very differentiated in the boys section and the girls section. And in fact reinforce in a very 1960s kind of understand of gender or earlier, what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. I'm surprised by how often people in general in society comment on his clothing. And he's not running around wearing dresses, this is color based exclusively.

[IP] I think there's so much investment again in some ways because it comes down to fashion being something that you put on your body. I really I hear what you're saying. I think there is a panic about it, and I think that really arises, you really see that for example John Lewis the UK based retailer, it's sort of a high end department store, they stopped distinguishing between girls and boys clothes in late 2017 and there was an absolute panic. So now clothes are just children's clothes and there's no labels and they're not separated in the store and so on. Um and that was a real, a very recent example of an absolute panic and my sense is that part of that is the putting on the body. It's not abstract, it's bringing, it's not just what so and so likes or whatever, it's putting that on their body so that they walk through the world in a particular way and when you walk through the world you're affecting the world right and it has resonances for other people and that kind of thing. So it's again where fashion is so interesting because it's something that we wear and something material and something that people, also that people connect to. Like your son feels strongly about colors and passionately about colors right. Um and that feeling gets poured into the way that he wears clothes and that kind of thing. So I see all of that as really amazing strengths of fashion actually.

[BS] You mentioned at the beginning of our conversation that your current research focuses on wedding culture and nothing I think could be more personal than the way that wedding dresses are portrayed in their importance to the person wearing them. What can you, what can you tell us about this project that you're embarking on around wedding culture?

[IP] So it's very early days for me and it's a significant shift in the sense that it's very, it's working with contemporary moment right. So most of my research, not all of it but most of it, has been about that earlier, the early 20th century context. Um so this one is going to start by looking at some digital media, some online magazines and blogs that are really well trafficked and have quite an important presence that are defining themselves as feminist wedding outlets basically. Um so it's going to start there by reading the text

against the images actually. I'm interested in the tension between text and image because um these blogs often, I mean they're, I think it's clever because they get, they have a great business model in the sense that sometimes they get their content by photographers just giving them photos right. So they don't have to pay for them because it acts as promotional, promotion for the photographers. So they look in that sense often very conventional, like conventional wedding media. Um some of the, you know there are certainly more same sex couples and especially on one of these outlets it's a real commitment to racial diversity and ethnic diversity as well so it's not as white and straight as regular wedding media but in most ways these are stylized pictures, more often than not featuring a white clad woman as a bride and that kind of thing. So you have that and then you have the textual content which is saying something often very different and um is saying you know we want to rethink weddings we want to you know have them reflect our values as **intersectional**? feminists or queer folks or whatever, and embody our differences and so on. And then you have on the other hand this visual archive that looks like pretty same same samey. So I'm interested in that, in that tension between text and image to some extent. I'm trying to do a reading of this that is very open and generous, uh as I think there has been for a long time a lot of hostility and if not that at least dismissiveness around weddings and marriage among feminists and queer scholars and activists and for good reason a lot of that has been. But I think that this is an interesting moment that is actually, where you're really seeing people in action trying to articulate their feminist values in relation to a tradition so I'm trying to be really open to listening well to what I see there in terms of what people are saying.

[20:18]

[BS] So thinking back to your earlier research focused on that time period of modernity and the role that marriage played at that time is a much more dominant social structure than it is now, do you see a continuity in looking at marriage in the contemporary moment, or wedding fashion if not marriage writ large in the contemporary moment, as tying back to your earlier research of that time? Or have you considered it in that way?

[IP] I haven't thought of that. I haven't really been focused on that particular aspect but I do see some continuities actually. So in a couple of ways. One of them is just that interest in text and image in feminized media. So my most recent work about the early 20th century stuff has been reading women's fashion, women's sort of magazines, um and mining them for the tensions between text and image often. And so I see that being something that's crossed over. Um the other piece I think is just the moment that we're living in has interesting similarities or parallels with that interwar moment in terms of the explosion of new forms of readily available, visually mediated stuff. [Laugh]. So you know, you talk about the early 20th century as a period when you have the, I mean really the birth of film, and it's taking off, it's not you know it comes in the last few years of the previous century but really it takes off in the first two decades of the 20th century. And

you have increased availability of photography in magazines and media outlets generally, an explosion of new technologies that allow for the proliferation of images of women basically. Um you know on billboards in cities, that kind of thing. So just images of women's bodies were everywhere, newly in that period, 100 years ago'ish. And this is what's happening right now through social media and so on right. So that's also a parallel and I wonder, and I'm not very far in thinking about this yet, but it is, it's where I've been going over the last couple years with my early 20th century work, is starting to ask myself, what insights from that period of an explosion of images of women can be applied to the new one, to this period? Like what can we learn from that period and how that played out? Uh you know I recognize that there are a whole bunch of different things going on right now but I wonder if there are things that we might learn from that earlier period. I can't say much yet about that but it's a question that is driving what I'm doing and it's driven me to, it's driven me away from the early 20th century stuff to really consider over the last couple years, how can we think about this moment culturally in comparison to that moment in general.

[BS] That sounds, that definitely sounds interesting especially with the control and constraints over how media was presented, mass media was presented in that earlier time period versus the ability to put one's own wedding photos up for example, um on the internet and to have those the topic of conversation um and for everyone to see.

[IP] Right, right. So the sense, so that's an important difference and I want to ask how different it is really uh the sense that people are in control of their own mediations now versus the sense that they were being spoken to and that mediation was much tighter in the early 20th century period. For sure.

[BS] Ok so one of the topics that we, I don't think we've touched on yet really, is the way in which in your research you've looked at how fashion really impacts or um...speaks to different groups within society differently and whether those groups are marginalized or the you know um high culture fashionista kinda approach that you were alluding to earlier, but what can you tell us about what fashion offers as a lens to understanding social inequality or folks that are marginalized within our current or historical culture?

[24:22]

[IP] So I think it's sort of double barreled right. I think fashion is famously stratified right, so its famous, you know, it's great for allowing us to think about class about social class, especially in the early 20th century that you know, when you had a much more, a much tighter and controlled model where fashion was being dictated like I was talking about earlier, from above in some ways, um and you know it's a terrain where people, where it's so easy to give yourself away as someone who doesn't belong in a particular class right. It's a terrain of play and performance often where you know, people try to dress themselves into a particular group. Ah but it is unforgiving I think often because it

doesn't work on its own right you need to, its not just about putting clothes on your body you also have to adopt codes and that kind of thing to let yourself into a group from which you've been excluded. So I think it really allows us to really think about class stratification. I think though historical there's a wonderful wealth of examples of people using fashion in resistant ways. People who are marginalized, very particularly. So um for example in the 1940s groups of Latino youths in Southern California using, who were called Pachucos and Pachucas using zoot suits and associated kinds of styles to really, really take up space in interesting ways and again this is about bodies. Like zoot suits are huge and they broaden your shoulders and they make you look like a bigger body right. So to wear a zoot suit and stand on a street corner when you're looked at askance because you're a Latino in Los Angeles or whatever is a resistant act right. It is about taking up space and I think there's a lot, a long history of examples of people using the fact that this such a visual medium but also that again, that putting it on your body to allow their bodies to be seen in particular ways or in particular spaces. I think that's a real potential of it. I mean I think also that can get really watered down right. The way that we see for example this last few years the trend of you know, I'm a feminist or this is what a feminist looks like t-shirts or whatever that I don't think do very much at all that's in line with feminism to be honest. So it really is contextual but I think there's definitely a rich history there of people doing that kind of work.

[BS] I've always marvelled at the sort of hierarchy of fabrics and what is acceptable. We all have a sense of what you could wear to, or what you should wear to an opera. Versus what you would wear to work if you worked at um, some sort of an industrial setting and the way that those fabrics are not intertwined in any way, they're completely separated, they have no place in each other's orbit. It always has struck me as something that is very interesting.

[IP] Ya ya! Again it comes down to the materiality. Like that's what's so interesting about this field of inquiry right. It's the materiality of fashion again, so it's touchability and so on, is so interesting. It's what makes it mean things to so many people. Uh and it's you know, as you point out it gives it a new dimension. Like it gives our understanding of what we could just sort of write off as a visual phenomenon, it gives it a real richness and a dimensionality I think.

[BS] So we're fortunate enough today to be joined by one of our students Steven who is participating in this project as part of his work here at the library.

[SV] Thank you Barb. Happy to be here. I'm not really sure if what I talk about can really be framed as a question but I spent a year abroad in Japan and society and culture there is very regimented as far as gender roles in society and things like that. And I was fortunate enough to attend high school there and obviously school uniforms are a big thing there. Um and I saw students taking unique ways of sort of personalizing their dress as far as you know, they'd untuck their shirts when they weren't meant to or

they'd wear the blazer in a unique way or hang it over their shoulder or anything. So do you have any comments or I don't know, discussions on that?

[IP] Ya I think that, it's so interesting that you bring up school uniforms and the ways that schools kind of function to police dress actually. And this is something that students respond to in droves when I bring this up and we do some reading about this in my fashion course, a fourth year course. Students are so...they have so much to say about this. Uh that in itself I feel like we can have a course on schools and dress. Um what's so, I would say a couple things about that. In my, in the North American certainly context, the ways that this plays out, and I'm not so much talking about uniforms but dress codes, is overwhelmingly has tended to be used to police only girls dress. And so there's actually a voluminous literature about this, scholarly literature about this because it ends up being a site of um, policing girls' sexuality actually. And so girls are tasked with, you know their job is to not distract the boys with their dress for example. Which has a whole bunch of inbuilt assumptions about sexuality, uh you know in terms of you know assuming everybody's heterosexual but also assuming that it's, that men and boys have active, out of control sexuality and women's job is to shut that down. Like talk about [laugh] an ancient troupe of sexuality, um..and ya so these are really highly gendered tools and I've been heartened to see that you know when this has been taken up by students it's been a really rich terrain of resistance for them actually. As you might have seen in media, you know sometimes girls really push back against this in really successful and wonderful ways and use this, I guess it fits with what I was saying earlier about there is this history of moments of important resistance that takes dress and uses it as a tool to speak back to power I would say and this is, so school dress codes in this cultural context is one of those I would say. And in terms of what you're talking about, what you asked about specifically was uniforms and the kind of creative play that people engage in around them, I know this happens here too. You know we don't have as many schools that have uniforms but I certainly remember it growing up and it would be an interesting site of experiment for people and also a site where kids would stratify themselves right. And people would signal, you know if they were the ones who wore their skirt as short as they possibly could it was often done as very explicitly in order to signal membership in a group and that kind of thing which is really interesting. So I think it gets used in all sorts of rich ways, as resistance but also as conformity. Um ya it's great. Thanks for the question.

[31:01]

[SV] Ya cool. Thank you so much. Sort of an interesting reversal of that. There's an elderly gentlemen living in Japan and he very interestingly took a traditional school girls uniform and wore it out on the town and initially he had a very interesting sort of push back to that but then over time he became sort of a local celebrity with, you know people would come up and take his picture and you know he became sort of this famous guy. So what do you think about that?

[IP] I think that's so interesting and also I think from what, I don't know much about Japan, but there's some interesting style cultures there and for a society that, as you say, is so regimented, what I find so interesting is the proliferation of um.. of play with style right. Like there are, you know massive subcultures, as you know, who are on the streets in those cities who are engaging in the most kind of outrageous play. Delightful, sartorial play that um is you know far beyond what we see on a regular basis here. So I think...I mean this says something about the ways that conformity produces resistance or that constraint produces play and all of that kind of thing is what I think about that really.

[BS] So thank you so much for sharing all of these insights about your research and about how your research plays out in your classroom and we really appreciate you taking the time to meet with us.

[IP] Thanks so much for having me. I've loved some of your great questions. It's been great.

[BS] Thank you.

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[BS] You have been listening to Frequencies, a podcast from the library at UBC Okanagan. Your hosts today were Barbara Sobol and Steven Vas. Editing by Karin Haug and Mathew Vis-Dunbar. Music by Trevor Neill. Artwork by Alison Ward. Additional support provided by Arielle Lomness. Thank you for listening.

[Music ends]

[End]

[33:02]