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INTERVIEW
WITH EUGENIA PAULICELLI**

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Good morning, Prof. Paulicelli. Thank you for your interest and for agreeing to this interview for the issue of *Popular Inquiry* on popular culture and feminism. I would like to start our conversation with an introductory question. How would you define feminism? Do you think that today's post-feminism differs from previous waves?

Eugenia Paulicelli (EP)

Thank you for this question. To answer it, I will focus on a few points. First of all, several movements and developments that have taken place in the history of women allow us to talk in the plural and use the term “feminisms.” As you know, there have been several debates concerning white feminism bearing on race, class and postcolonial studies which identify and intersect within a domain of studies, such as critical race theory, postcolonialism and gender studies, and involve the LGBTQ+ movement (which is very important to articulate and problematize questions such as labor and gender within the history of women). Other intersections, in this kind of domain, concern justice, respect and environmental change. All these intersections and fields of study have taken place in a close relationship with women's movements in various locations in the West and the East. We find points of communication and integration in the ongoing debate even when we do not agree on particular topics, because, when we talk about women, it is not just about sex, but also about race, gender, class and other kinds of issues. This debate is important and very crucial for fashion studies and the study of fashion. It bears recalling that the two terms “fashion” and “feminism” were once thought to be antithetical, especially if we think of the radical feminism of the 1970s, in which using make up was considered to be “cattiva coscienza” (a “dirty conscience,” so to speak). But things changed

quite a bit in the 1980s, when we had a reaction to this kind of radical feminism that had been important, of course, insofar as it raised issues such as sexuality, women's bodies, abortion rights and so forth, issues which we thought had been solved, although it turns out it was not the case. Anyway, in the 1980s a different reflection on feminism took place, integrating other kinds of stories, with the result that fashion was not understood as just something imposed from above on to us all. Of course there is a system, and we are part of a capitalist society, but the idea of caring for the body for women has been historically conflictual and is still so today. So, what I am saying is that caring for your body and beautifying yourself is not a sign of a "cattiva coscienza" aimed to fulfill the male gaze. It's something much more profound than that. In history, critical feminism went back to rethink, in different fields such as literature, art, philosophy, etc., periods of the past in which women were kind of invisible, and then how they became visible because of this need that they had to attract attention as subjectivities and not just as passive objects of the gaze. Redefining women's agency in history has been an interdisciplinary collaboration and enterprise, and in this way fashion became part of the conversation on popular culture.

Fashion is not just *couture*, even though now the notion of *couture* (high fashion) has changed so much thanks to social media. *Couture* is a reconsideration of the everyday, not just in the glossy magazines, which are part of the conversation, but more in daily activities: the way you dress up, go to work, speak with people. It's a lot more than that and, in this way, we find a popular dimension, starting especially from the 1950s that I think is very important to take into consideration. Popular music affected immensely the perception of the body, sexuality, make-up, gender, dressing up, dressing down and how people interact with each other, and so forth. We have to talk in the plural form, and as a consequence we have to take into consideration all these domains, how they really enrich our understanding of women's lives, their gender definition, their role in society and family, their intimacy with other people, and the role that women had and still have as mothers and caregivers. Today, we are in a very different moment because of the complexity and positive developments of the feminist movements. But, you know, we are also in a time that is very challenging: for example, we know what happened in the United States, where the Supreme Court for the first time abolished the right to abortion at the federal level. So, our time is very scary. The decision of the Supreme Court is a huge defeat for women in general, especially for women from the minorities, who do not have adequate recognition within society and suffer from racial issues that still persist among many groups, particularly African Americans. There is still a big struggle in the United States for these groups to be recognized and to have the same quality education and prospects at work, especially in those States that are not as culturally and politically advanced as New York, for example. There exist

many gaps between different areas. It is very worrisome that this is happening today, in the 21st century, and we need to fight back as women, again and again. Speaking about the USA, where I live and work, I find it particularly concerning that we have, on the one hand, this terrible situation where children are shot and where there is little or no gun regulation, and then, on the other hand, you talk about children who are not even born: it is a sort of schizophrenic dynamic. That is why we need to fight back and be alert to these kinds of situations.

CT

Thank you, Prof. Paulicelli, for this long and detailed reply to my first question on feminism today. My next questions will be more specifically focused on some of the essays that have been included in the important volume *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, published in 2021, and edited by Veronica Manlow, Elizabeth Wissinger and you. Let us start from the contribution entitled “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as fashion icon: Addressing nationalism and feminism with style,” written by Floriana Bernardi and Enrica Picarelli. Considering the case of Adichie, reported in this essay, do you think that social media have changed the feminist message?

EP

As far as fashion is concerned, there is a lot that can be done and that is being done in different kinds of politics. Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie says in her essay “We all should be feminists” how important dressing was for her. It’s interesting to see how the sorts of rituals she describes are significant for people and even more for people who are underrepresented in society. The idea of underrepresentation, as I wrote in the concluding essay of the *Companion* dedicated to Dapper Dan and Gucci, has also worked for women in history: to care for the image, to care for themselves and to make a statement became a political act, as long as the political valence of that was made clear. Especially for underrepresented subjectivities, like black people, there has been a long history of cultural style, which was crucial in popular culture, music and so forth, that has influenced mainstream fashion, as we can see in brands like Gucci and Balenciaga, to name but two. I have an example that links Chimamanda Ngozi to feminism and fashion: in fact, the Creative Director of Dior, Maria Grazia Chiuri, presented in her first collection the phrase “We all should be feminist” on a t-shirt. This is an interesting case study, because Chiuri continued to be very much involved in promoting women’s work and talked openly about the relationship between fashion and feminism. As I mentioned earlier, once this was a relationship that was considered antithetical. But now the two terms are accepted and used in a variety of ways by different kinds of brands that have generated projects to fund women’s initiatives, work and the battles against violence. How come? The fashion and the luxury industry, now more

than ever, becomes part of the popular discussion around these kinds of items. Think, for instance, of the open statement about defending freedom of expression and democracy in the latest political election in Italy (September 22, 2022)¹ and I would say in the world in general. I also think it is important to bring in the role of consumers, among whom we can find women of different ages and classes and races, black and Asian communities, who are much more involved and vocal in their choices. The role of social media is and has been crucial for the expansion of the discussion about fashion, its politics and its accessibility. Everybody now watches collections, films etc., online and I think that this fact, on a certain level, has facilitated the involvement of consumers in their fashion choices, commenting on, reacting to and even criticizing particular models or collections. For example, I am familiar with “Diet Prada,” which is a page on Instagram that allows its followers to criticize and to be heard but also offers provocative views of contemporary fashion. This has changed the picture quite a lot.

CT

My next question deals with the essay “Crafting Care through childhood: Education, play and sustainable ethical fashion,” written by Melinda Byam. Her article aims to explore the relationship between childhood educational practices and the fashion industry’s commitment to sustainability practices. What the author also argues is how, in our adulthood, “calls for actions” do not have enduring consequences in our purchase behavioral patterns, despite our knowledge about the unethical and unsustainable issues of the fashion industry. From your point of view, how should fashion improve consumers’ patterns of behavior so we are more informed, from childhood on, to be more sustainable and ethical?

EP

This is crucial, not only for fashion studies, but in general. It is a reflection about the bases we give to children and how we teach them, in the family and in school, to understand certain values. These values also have to do with gender, such as respect, equality and how we treat boys and girls. It’s about the awareness that now gender is also plural, that we have identities that don’t necessarily fit into one category or another. These are all issues that we didn’t have to face so much before, when there was a sort of silence about this. Education is crucial. How do you teach children certain principles such as sustainable and ethical fashion? There are many ways this can be done and Melinda, who is particularly concerned with sustainability, gives some examples, such as games, dialogues or different activities. Melinda started developing this idea during a seminar that I was teaching entitled “The Fabric of Cultures,” which is an ongoing project I direct

(www.thefabricofcultures.com). I was very pleased to see how she started to develop this idea, thinking of children. We usually don't talk too much about children in relation to fashion, but this is another important issue to face: how to make them better citizens in the future. It is interesting that Melinda refers to Maria Montessori too, an important Italian revolutionary for her times, whose pedagogical method is well known and respected in the USA. In fact, there are many schools here that instill those principles and values. Another author that I admire, Richard Sennett, talks about the importance of connecting the mind and the hands, and about values and ideas of activism that belong to our Italian tradition and history (such as, for example, in the Renaissance) and how these kinds of reflections and values can become transnational, not necessarily related only to Italian life, but also potentially connected to fashion, as in the case of the Montessori educational method. So, consumption is of course part of the system, but there are different levels of awareness that we can develop and I think that this goes in line with ethical values, social justice and respect for people of any gender, color, race and class. That has to be part of the political agenda today and fashion has to take an active role in it.

CT

In the essay "College students' fashion activism in the age of Trump," included in the *Companion*, Charles J. Thompson reflects on the role of students' clothing. Scholastic formal attire became so popular that today it is a well-established style in fashion, the so-called "preppy" style. As we can understand from the article, students started very quickly to change the rules, introducing new clothes, meeting their desires to express their personality through their image and dress choices. Today, school is still an active battleground of the dress code. On the one hand, teachers reproach students for wearing skimpy outfits, defending the idea of decency in certain spaces whose primary function is not to show off to peers. On the other hand, we can also observe a strong supportive collective response by students who, in order to defy the established authorities, dress in even more eye-catching clothes as a political act, thus protesting against those rules in the name of the freedom to express one's personality and identity. In your opinion, are people – and, more specifically, the young generations – still willing to accept a restrictive way of dress to respect an appropriate dress code for certain situations? Or should we consider the idea of disrupting dressing, using fashion for activism, as a legitimate political act?

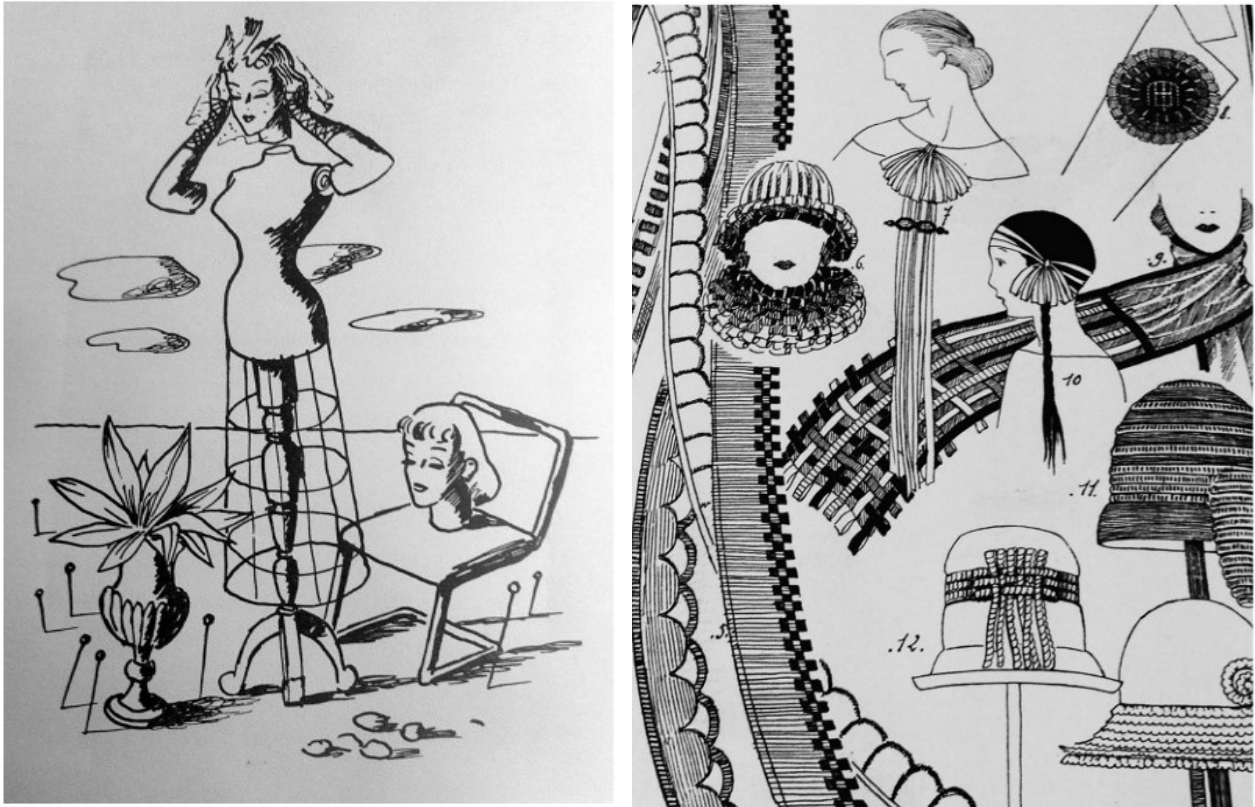
EP

This is a case study about a particular time period, and so we still don't know. It is still an uncertain political situation because of Trumpism and different forms of white nationalism and

fascism, and not only in America, given that it's a global issue that we have to come to terms with. In college, as well as in high school, there are different contexts in which, through dress, you are judged to be part of this group or that, or not in any group. Thompson reports on how clothes could affect this particular situation of acceptance and interaction among students. There are certain codes and rules that are unwritten. I would say that a lot of things have changed because of the online situation that we are still dealing with, and due to which we cannot see people face to face. And also, what is decency? Decency seems to be something that is redefined each time. Fashion has a lot to do with it. For example, while I was in Bologna (during my research sabbatical leave in 2021-2022), I noticed while walking in the street that many students exposed their skin, especially the midriff in wintertime when it was cold. It certainly replicated the current fashion and they seem comfortable with it. For me it's fine, it does not disturb me. It would be interesting to know other people's reactions to this, as in schools, for instance. The idea of exposing certain parts of the body has always existed in fashion, so there is an interconnection here. The notion of decency seems to me always in constant redefinition and that fashion has a lot to do with that concept. But we always need to consider the specific context: in some cases the environment can be very strict, in other cases it can be more liberal, and becomes a site of struggle and clothes truly and always become part of this struggle. This is especially so in countries and cultures in which orthodox religious and moral codes are in place.

CT

In her essay "Violence and fragmentation in interwar fashion and femininity," Lucy Moyses Ferreira writes about the horrific realities of war and how, for instance, mutilation of limbs became a new "normal." Fashion was not immune to this new "normal" as during this period fashion magazines published images of distorted feminine bodies. For example, as we can see in one of the images included in the article, faces with missing parts – usually eyeballs – appeared; illustrations where the head was detached from the rest of the body were common, too. From these sketches we can appreciate how fashion worked as a tool to represent a widespread sense of fragmentation and persistent social anxiety. Today, we are not directly involved in war, but we are going through several different human crises: let us just think about the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change or the struggle to fight a male-dominated society. So, how would you say that fashion is accompanying, influencing and having a real impact on all these challenges of today's society? What is the social role and responsibility of fashion today?



EP

It's fascinating to see Moyses Ferreira analyze images in magazines of war time and how they connect to a parallel discourse of bodily violence with what was going on at that time. I would say that, yes, fashion can express or accompany the challenges of society today and, of course, there are implications between fashion and the actual historical moment. But sometimes things are much more complicated. Regarding the pandemic, as I was thinking the other day, we have so many things to process, because we have been living through these years going forward and forward, but all the changes that really affected us will manifest themselves sooner or later, even if not immediately. Sometimes, when you have to live in the present, you have to face the situation quickly and respond almost immediately to it, and the response is always a survival response of fighting back. We are humans, we are not passive, so we have resistance and so draw on that drive to fight back to transform things. I think there was, on the one hand, a great deal of discussion, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, about how people started to become more aware of social issues and climate change. There was a whole discussion about that: people wanted to dress in a simpler way because they were not going out, they were meeting on Zoom, etc. In addition, some market research showed how people invested in vintage. The vintage market is huge. Through the pandemic, it developed even more, and now people want to invest

in certain pieces. On the other hand, there were a lot of alarming discussions about the production processes and the supply chain, and I am still not sure what the impact is. There is also the war, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so I think it's kind of an open question: there is always an implication. Fashion is culture, it shapes culture, it is a multibillion manufacturing industry, but it is also a very powerful, symbolic force. That's why fashion is much more complicated. It is an industry, like many other industries we have, but it affects the body very much, and that makes it more difficult to classify. It could be very slippery but, at the same time, I think it's very, very important to study various phenomena and see how they can be related to understand culture and the popular culture of our time. The other day I was browsing shows and saw, for example, that the way luxury brands present *couture* has changed so that it doesn't look so exclusive anymore. I am talking about marketing strategies that also changed with the pandemic. There is, after a moment of darkness, a will to go back to life, and this sense of desire is present in fashion, but also in cinema [and in other artistic realms], for example. So, there is a sense that it is part of our being human, to enjoy and to have a sense of going back to life. I also refer to popular culture and to communities: people want to share certain experiences and enjoy the fact that other people like that particular item. I think that high level brands have been changing. A sign of this is how they are bringing their collections to places and involving the community, creating an experience for all of us. Even watching fashion shows is available to anyone, is not as elitist as it once was.

CT

Otto von Busch writes in his essay “Bullying and barren fashion: An affective perspective on the psychopolitics of dress,” that we not only *know* fashion, but we also *feel* it. Fashion plays on emotions and, quoting him, it “forces us to appear and thus be judged by others.” He also suggests that we have two possibilities. On the one hand, we can choose what he called a “barren fashion”: in this case we comply with a low risk dress code of boring sameness, choosing conformity over freedom and eventually not exposing ourselves to peers’ judgments and discriminations. On the other hand, we have “vital fashion,” which is described as a courageous choice to take the risk of dressing differently and with passion, following our personal style more than obeying unwritten social rules, leaving our comfort zone to step into something new. Considering also the historically unstable relationship between feminism and fashion, I would like to ask: how, in your opinion, can the feminist movement include dress within its cause and adopt it as a means for inclusion rather than exclusion?

EP

Yes, dress became part of the struggle: in fact, bullying through dress in high school is something that happens all too often, depending on the kind of school, if it is more restricted or not. I also think bullying happens everywhere, in Italy too. It's not a phenomenon restricted to the US. So, dress is truly an important ornament, and for this reason it is a big part of the struggle concerning identity. I'm sure there are certain things that need to be respected, because, if not, it would lead to suffering, mostly for young people, as there also exists an anxiety that concerns a struggle for teenage identity. Certain things that are not important for one age group, are important for teenagers, who are searching for their identities. Sometimes they have to experiment, probably more than other people, because things are not always so clear; and other times they just want to belong to a group. Belonging to a group means to conform to or to fit in with the image of that particular group and in contrast to groups that dress differently. It is a very difficult process on a cultural and aesthetic level. From the point of view of gender, if you don't fit in the categories that are offered in that particular environment, it is especially hard. This struggle is also well explained by Georg Simmel, who describes the fact that, on the one hand, one wishes to belong to a group, a community, that also gives one a sense of identity; on the other hand, each one of us is different, any person cannot just repeat what other group members do (as we are unique individuals), and this fits the desire to distinguish yourself from the group, erasing your uniqueness. These psychological processes are very strong, important and difficult during the teenage years; and fashion, clothes, ornamentations (and everything that has to do with the body, including tattooing and piercing) are part of these processes. There also must be an awareness from educators and families to understand without judging those desires, even if, of course, what their children and students do is not the way they would do it.

CT

Your essay "Fashion and race: Translating cultures in Dapper Dan and Gucci" is the last contribution in the *Companion*. Here you analyze what happens when an Italian brand like Gucci meets an African American designer. In the very first paragraph of your essay you write about the word "translation" and its roots. As you explain, the term suggests a movement, a sort of process that is especially important for those identities that have been excluded from the main narrative of history. Among the many minorities that have always been marginalized from cultural representation, we find the LGBTQ+ community. In particular, the dialogue around homosexuality seems to be fairly accepted, but we still face many resistances in addressing transgender identity. Besides, as you named the word "translation," I would like to note that we can derive from the very same root also the word "transgender" – and, exactly as in translation,

we are faced with a process of change. How can transgender people be better represented by dress to express their identity? And how would you say that Gucci (but also other fashion brands) created greater freedom to cross-dress?

EP

The Gucci/Dapper Dan encounter and collaboration is particularly important especially from the perspective of race and the notion of race in the context of fashion studies. First, Dapper Dan was able to turn the tables on the fashion industry. Once accused and punished for “copying” luxury brands for which his flourishing Harlem atelier was closed and his expensive machines taken away, he was in the position to accuse the Gucci brand of having copied his 1990s coat design for Dianne Dixon without acknowledging him. In fact, I chose to use “translation of cultures” in order to understand the complexity of these mechanisms in fashion that sometime are simplistically called “cultural appropriation.” In addition, it is important to consider who are the players and what is their position in society and in the industry. Since this episode, for which Gucci apologized publicly and has initiated several initiatives on inclusiveness and diversity, Dapper Dan and his business have found a new Renaissance. A common concern for luxury brands and not only Gucci, of course, is the inclusion of race and the creation of programs, in the US, for instance, of scholarships for African American designers, or initiatives on sustainability, and others dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community. The question of inclusion in terms of gender, class and race are part of our culture and strongly involve younger generations. This is something that the fashion industry as a whole knows well and these are issues along with climate change that are going to shape our future. Hopefully structures are also going to change. We are witnessing a real demand for change in terms of inclusion, in terms of work and conditions of work. There is an opportunity to develop ideas that would really create an impact in production and in the supply chain. About women, also, there are many things ahead of us that would be, in one way or another, part of this conversation (such as the right to a legal abortion) and they actually are part of it even in the fashion industry, at different levels. We cannot avoid this kind of talk and now we will see the results, we are witnessing a constant drive to address these issues. Plus, different models, which were created by the people, are responding to industry. This is a constant dialogue that we have in education, in studying, criticizing and writing. But what I think it is important is that all these issues are very much part of the global fashion conversation. Again, I would like to go back to the idea of the popular, of community involvement and participation and democracy if you wish, which is also perhaps connected to *Popular Inquiry*. This notion of the “popular” and how fashion could respond to cultures, different subjectivities, involves all these domains.

CT

Amazing, thank you so much Prof. Paulicelli. That was very useful. I find what you have been saying to be very inspirational and insightful. I also think that a lot of other themes can be linked to many of the concepts that came out today and are worth analyzing in greater detail. Maybe the next time it would be very profitable to think about them with you. Thank you again.

¹ Instagram Post of Pier Paolo Piccioli, Creative Director of Valentino, September 22, 2022. “Un uomo di sinistra.”