

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Be a feminist or just dress like one’: *BUST*, fashion and feminism as lifestyle

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In recent years, a body of critical scholarship has emerged that interrogates the discourses of ‘new’, ‘sexy’, and ‘girlie’ feminisms. *BUST* magazine (1993–) has become emblematic of ‘girlie’ feminism, a form of ‘third-wave’ feminist engagement that revalues activities and interests traditionally associated with femininity, such as knitting, fashion, and make-up. In 2006, the magazine’s fashion issue aroused controversy for its inclusion of a fashion spread devoted to ‘fashionable feminists’. Taking *BUST*’s fashion issue as a case study, this article contextualizes *BUST*’s particular take on fashion within both a broader history of feminist perspectives on the politics of dress and the negative backlash against feminism that gained particular strength during the 1980s. It argues that *BUST*’s fashion issue is an ambivalent text that offers, on the one hand, a homage to feminism’s ‘past’ and, on the other hand, a rather simplistic view of that history. Finally, this article considers the critical debate about *BUST*’s fashion issue by feminists online. It asserts that, while *BUST* may offer a simplistic version of feminism conceived of as individual lifestyle choices, the online debate demonstrates that readers frequently engage this material in complex and nuanced ways.

Keywords: third-wave feminism; fashion; popular culture; feminist magazines; girlie; lifestyle

‘Be a feminist or just dress like one’, announced the 2006 fashion issue of *BUST* magazine (1993–). Inside, the third-wave publication presented looks inspired by six of feminism’s so-called ‘fashionable feminists’: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Camille Paglia, Angela Davis, and Kathleen Hanna. *BUST*’s fashion issue is an ambivalent text that I read as *both* an ironic, tongue-in-cheek commentary that implicitly critiques negative, backlash versions of feminism and feminists *and* as a presentation of a dehistoricized, decontextualized, and deracialized version of feminism that effaces difference and contestation. The *BUST* fashion spread is symptomatic of a set of larger trends within third-wave feminist praxis, which include both the reclamation of feminism as stylish and sexy and the representation of feminist politics as a set of individual lifestyle choices. That is, *BUST*’s fashion issue casts feminism in a positive light, as fashionable and desirable, a position clearly contrary to most mainstream media representations of feminist movements. However, the publication also risks inscribing feminism *solely* in terms of personal style.

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The *BUST* fashion issue provides a case study from which I wish to probe two much broader questions: first, how does capitalist print culture enable and constrain feminist interventions into the realm of the popular? And, second, what are the possibilities and limitations of girly or ‘lifestyle’ feminism of which *BUST* is emblematic? This article thus explores the ‘promise of popular feminism’ (Farrell 1998) and takes seriously Alexandra Chasin’s (2001) claim that ‘the market eventually undermines the radical potential of identity-based social movements’ (p. xvii). It also contributes to a growing body of scholarship on third-wave feminism exemplified by the work of Astrid Henry (2004), Amber Kinser (2004) and Stacey Gillis *et al.* (2004), in order to make a case for the important ways in which feminist periodical culture builds and shapes – and is built and shaped by – ongoing manifestations of the ‘third wave’. The intersection of feminism and fashion is an ideal place from which to engage these concerns. Given the complex and historically fraught relationship between dress and feminism within the US, an examination of the dynamics of fashion and feminism, and the *BUST* spread particularly, crystallizes my broader interest in the politics of representation, recuperation, and money within contemporary popular feminisms.

I address these questions in a two-part discussion. In Part 1, I argue that *BUST*’s casting of its own approach to fashion as ‘different’ from ‘traditional’ feminist approaches to this domain validates, rather than challenges, misrepresentations of feminist thought on the politics of dress. That is, I contend that there are a variety of feminist perspectives on fashion, which are glossed by *BUST* in favour of a caricatured representation of feminism and feminists. At stake in this discussion is how the mixed legacies of the feminisms of the ‘past’ are represented and negotiated in the present, particularly within the domain of commercial culture. In Part 2, I analyze *BUST*’s fashion spread and its reception, arguing that the spread presents a version of feminism in which historical specificities and analyses that consider, for example, class and race subjectivities, are effaced. I close by considering the implications of the journalistic craft traditions employed, and the kind of ‘lifestyle feminism’ promoted, by the publication.

Part 1: addressing feminist history

BUST girls don’t wear Birkenstocks

In her editorial column for *BUST*’s fashion issue, Debbie Stoller (2006a) locates *BUST*’s position on fashion in relation to other feminisms and, tacitly, in relation to the backlash against the US feminist movement. Her comments also indicate *BUST*’s implied reading audience, which is here constructed as predominantly non-Muslim women capable of choosing (in the liberal humanist sense) the aspects of fashion they wish to either support or eschew. Stoller asserts,

For our fashion issue, we thought we’d take a different approach than might be expected of an outspoken feminist magazine. Rather than criticize fashion, we decided to focus on the aspects of dress that we find embraceable. The culture of clothing has been central to women’s lives for centuries, and we think it’s as important to find out what could be right with it as it is to pinpoint what’s wrong. Consider the alternatives suggested by those who’ve wanted to save women from the tyranny of fashion: surely we wouldn’t be better off with everyone in suits, or in Birkenstocks, or – God forbid – in burkas. (2006a, p. 6)

In this passage, Stoller refers to perceived ‘traditional’ feminist approaches to fashion, which criticize it as tyrannical. While these perspectives on fashion do exist within feminist criticism, they are not the only approaches that have been taken to the analysis of women’s dress. The perspectives to which Stoller makes reference are caricatural in this

context. That is, her comments about the suits and Birkenstocks reference a set of stereotypical images of feminists clad as either androgynous, power-suit-wearing working women or, alternately, Birkenstock-wearing, hippie, 'granola' lesbians who, according to popular discourse, feel they occupy a particular moral high ground. Although indeed there are and have been feminists who have evinced versions of these particular wardrobes and their attendant political positions, the negative connotations with which they are imbued here seem squarely influenced by the backlash against feminism that gained strength in the 1980s with the rise of neo-conservative movements. In this sense, the discursive mode through which Stoller offers an alternative approach to fashion reinforces rather than challenges a particular 'backlash view' of feminism.

These backlash-influenced depictions of anti-fashion feminists are the foil against which *BUST*'s alternate view of feminism and/as fashion is articulated. Within the context of the editorial, the Birkenstock- or suit-wearing feminist is cast as the Other through which *BUST* constructs its implied audience as 'hip'. But according to *BUST*'s cheeky rhetoric, the Birkenstock and the suit are not the worst possible 'solutions' to the 'problem' of fashion; rather, it is the burka that garners this distinction. The positing of the burka as a tyrannical imposition neither takes into account the complexities of and ambivalent meanings associated with veiling practices among Muslim women nor the rise of fundamentalisms as a global issue in which the West is implicated. *BUST* readers are constructed against such symbols of Otherness, here Islam. The broader political context in which Stoller is writing is also significant; namely, the continuing US-led 'War on Terror' in which the rhetoric of saving burka-clad women from the Taliban was continually deployed as an excuse to invade Afghanistan by politicians who had otherwise shown little interest in issues of women's rights, or who had actively participated in the withdrawal of support to women's groups and feminist organizations. In contrast to the promoters of bad fashion (that is, second-wave feminists and the Taliban), *BUST* readers are constructed as hip feminist women whose consumption of fashion may be read as a symbol of their status as 'liberated'.

Feminist perspectives on fashion and dress

In American popular culture, one of the most evocative and enduring signifiers of feminist views on women's fashion is the theatrical protest against the 1968 Miss America beauty pageant during which participants threw 'instruments of oppression' like bras and copies of *Cosmopolitan* (1886–) and *Ladies' Home Journal* (1883–) into a 'freedom trashcan'. Although no bras were ever burned at this protest, the women who participated, and those involved in the broader Women's Liberation Movement, were labelled as 'bra-burners' in mainstream media publications. While the protestors took issue with the ways in which the pageant valued bodies over minds and presented an objectified version of female bodies for a voyeuristic male gaze, their actions have also been memorialized as a statement against fashion. At a glance, this 1968 protest seems representative of the kind of 'Birkenstock' feminism Stoller dismisses in her editorial. Indeed, some feminists have claimed that particular garments, like bras or high-heeled shoes, are both symbolically and literally constraining, restrictive impositions. However, the feminists at the 1968 Miss America pageant were not necessarily anti-fashion. Rather, these women advocated a different kind of aesthetic, which was influenced by countercultural trends in the US during the 1960s.

In her account of the Miss America protest, Candace Savage (1998) argues that the perspectives on the relationship between feminism and fashion were ambivalent in this

period. For example, Carol Hanisch, who had participated in the Miss America protest, wrote one year later that their protest had failed to take into account their own investment in the culture of beauty, as well as the way that the criticism of women who participated in the pageant could not foster sisterhood (Hanisch 1969, cited in Savage 1998, p. 8). Both the Miss America protest and the contemporary debates about it demonstrate that fashion is an overdetermined site through which feminists have debated the significance of different modes of dress, as well as – more broadly – the relationships between feminist and non-feminist women and the politics of conventional femininity. The differing perspectives on the Miss America protest encapsulate what Elizabeth Wilson (1985) has identified as two early feminist approaches to fashion: one was a condemnation of fashion as an oppressive tool of the patriarchy; the other, a kind of populist liberalism, suggested that it would be elitist to criticize a pastime enjoyed by so many women (p. 230).

In *Adorned in dreams*, Wilson criticizes both these approaches to fashion. The first, she asserts, is a puritanical argument relying on the logic of utility, which does not acknowledge either the pleasure or creativity of fashion. Further, ‘those who see fashion as one form of capitalist “consumerism” . . . fail to understand that women and men may use the “unworthiest” items of capitalist culture to criticize and transcend that culture’ (Wilson 1985, p. 244). According to Wilson, the second argument, that women should be free to wear whatever they wish, contains an implicit assumption about ‘free choice’, which fails to acknowledge the way in which choice occurs within contexts that are socially constructed and are thus always already constrained and limited through that context. Wilson advocates a theory of fashion that takes ‘play’ into account. That is, through fashion, we fashion ourselves, and have the opportunity to create and explore alternatives (Wilson 1985, p. 245). This notion of fashion as ‘play’ is adapted most prominently by Judith Butler (1999) in her discussion of drag, which incorporates dress into the parodic performance of gender identity. According to Butler, drag functions to reveal the constructedness and contingency of gender. That is, through the hyperbolic iteration of conventional gender codes, ‘drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic spaces and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity’ (Butler 1999, p. 174). Drag is thus one example of the potential ways in which dress can play a role in broader projects of resistance and/or subversion.

The relationship between feminism and fashion extends back much further than the 1960s, however. In her study of the relationship between consumer culture and nineteenth- and early twentieth-century suffragists, Margaret Finnegan (1999) argues that there was a multiplicity of feminist views on fashion. Some suffragists embraced the fashion of their time as a sign of gentility. According to Finnegan: ‘Accounts of woman suffrage conventions repeatedly describe women “elaborately gowned in the height of the fashion”, and some suffragists obsessively followed the latest styles’ (p. 18). Others advocated various forms of dress reform, such as bloomers, which are perhaps the most well-known example of ‘rational dress’. These bifurcated garments allowed women more freedom of movement than the crinolines of the mid-nineteenth century. The motivations for dress reform were varied and, as Gayle Fischer (2001) asserts, to call dress reform a ‘movement’ is misleading, insofar as there were a variety of reforms that occurred at different times and for different reasons (p. 4). In her discussion of feminist dress reformers, Linda M. Scott (2006) argues that the Puritan or aristocratic roots of these feminists shaped their views on fashion, leading them to treat any sign of luxury as either a symbol of moral corruption or a threat to class status. In this sense, dress reform was both ‘a form of social control and a reaction against such control’ (Fischer 2001, p. 5). While some suffragists embraced fashion and others worked to reform it, in both cases the broader issues at stake involved:

the relationship between consumerism and politics; the relationship between feminism and femininity; and the relationship between women of different class statuses. In many ways, these relations continue to shape contemporary debates around feminism and fashion.

There is also a body of work on the working conditions within the garment industry, as well as the struggle for women workers to unionize, that is exemplified in studies such as Annie Phizacklea's (1990) *Unpacking the fashion industry*, Angela Hale and Jane Willis' (2005) *Threads of labour*, and Edna Bonacich *et al.*'s (1994) *Global production: the apparel industry in the Pacific Rim*. As Lucie Cheng and Gary Gereffi (1994) note in their discussion of US retailers and Asian garment production: 'There is a link between US women consumers and Asian women workers in the garment industry' (p. 77). However, the relationship between the consumption of fashion and the material conditions under which clothes are produced remains an under-explored field.

Although Stoller's editorial presents a fairly one-dimensional view of feminist approaches to fashion and dress, there are in fact a variety of ways in which feminist critics have studied this aspect of culture. These perspectives include, but are not limited to: criticisms of the exploitative conditions under which most first-world clothes are produced; analyses of the potentially oppressive aspects of women's clothing; and examinations of the ways that dress intersects with identity performance. As Wilson argues, 'fashion is ambivalent – for when we dress we wear inscribed upon our bodies the often obscure relationship of art, personal psychology, and the social order' (1985, p. 247; see also Gibson 2000). Feminist perspectives on fashion are similarly ambivalent, a trend which has continued into the 'third wave'.

Part 2: *BUST*'s fashion spread and its implications

Representing fashion, representing feminism

BUST's fashion spread opens with a single page containing small, labelled pictures of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug, Camille Paglia, Angela Davis, and Kathleen Hanna. The accompanying headline announces that the fashion spread consists of looks inspired by these 'fashionable feminists'. The subsequent six-page spread devotes one page each to models that physically resemble the profiled women (with the possible exception of Stanton) and wear new clothes (available for purchase) that are updated versions of the period dress worn by each of the women. Every fashion photograph is accompanied by a short quotation attributed to the feminist whose 'look' is represented.

BUST's selection of American feminists indicates an attempt to be somewhat representative of a range of time periods, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. Iconic feminists from each major 'wave' are depicted, as well as other feminist figures, such as Camille Paglia who does not fit so easily into the wave structure (or, I might add, into particular definitions of 'feminism'). Both the inclusion of a quotation from each of the represented women and the use of labelled, archival photographs on the opening page of the spread suggest that *BUST*'s fashion spread functions not only to present fashion but to also document feminist history. That is, the spread works to introduce readers to particular iconic figures within American feminism and suggests that fashion and feminism need not be viewed as antithetical to each other. In this sense, the spread may effectively work as an entry point into feminism, for readers who may not otherwise be acquainted with the history of the American movement.

If the *BUST* fashion spread serves as a document of feminist history, then it is important to ask what kind of version of feminist history is being presented. To borrow from Susan Friedman: 'Whose story of feminism gains currency? What interests does

it serve? Whose story is lost, marginalized? Why? The same questions feminists have asked of masculinist history about the erasure and distortion of women's lives must be put to feminist histories' (1995, p. 20). That is, the question of how we remember our histories is always also a political question. It is a question that is particularly germane to the lives of women and other marginalized groups whose histories have been systemically and systematically erased and/or undervalued and who have experienced first-hand the consequences of not knowing our own histories.

The version of 'feminism' presented in *BUST*'s fashion spread is quite limited. This becomes particularly apparent when examining a group of quotations that accompany the fashion pictures: from Kathleen Hanna, 'While sexism hurts women most intimately, it also damages men severely' (cited in 'Our Outfits' 2006, p. 61); from Gloria Steinem, 'I have yet to hear a man ask for advice on how to combine marriage and a career' (cited in 'Our Outfits' 2006, p. 60); from Bella Abzug, 'The test for whether or not you can hold a job should not be the arrangement of your chromosomes' (cited in 'Our Outfits' 2006, p. 59); from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal' (cited in 'Our Outfits' 2006, p. 58); from Angela Davis, 'To understand how any society functions, you must first understand the relationship between men and women' (cited in 'Our Outfits' 2006, p. 57); and, from Camille Paglia, 'Woman is the dominant sex. Men have to do all sorts of stuff to prove they are worthy of woman's attention' (cited in 'Our Outfits' 2006, p. 56). While generational and ethnic difference may be evoked visually within the spread, the quotations from each of the feminist figures efface these differences. That is, each of the above quotations offers versions of feminism in which gender – and more specifically the relationships between men and women – is the only consideration. As a group, the quotations present the categories of 'men' and 'women' as coherent, unmarked groups (which thus implicitly marks these categories as white and heterosexual). Historical specificities and analyses that consider, for example, class and race subjectivities are effaced in a version of feminism that seems based on a notion of universal sisterhood that transcends time, locality, and difference.

The photographic image inspired by Angela Davis' 'look' is exemplary in this regard. Davis has written about a host of subjects, including prison abolition, the intersections of Marxism, feminism, and anti-racism, and notably, for the purposes of this article, the ways in which photographic images of herself from the 1970s have been mobilized in contemporary fashion magazines.¹ According to Davis (1994), 'it is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo' (p. 37). The *BUST* image inspired by Davis conjures up a particular moment in American history while simultaneously emptying the image of its political significance. That is, the image of Davis, with afro, leather jacket and raised fist, evokes her involvement with the Black Panthers. The use of black-and-white photography for this image (all the other fashion photographs, with the exception of Stanton, are colour pictures) suggests a newspaper clipping or her 'wanted' poster. Yet, these visual traces meant to evoke the past seem hopelessly decontextualized here, as the political significance of the model's hairstyle, wardrobe and pose are codified solely in terms of fashion. The accompanying quotation ('To understand how any society functions, you must first understand the relationship between men and women') mutes the historical specificities of the time period represented in the visual image and deracializes its connotative meanings.

The representation of feminism through fashion allows *BUST* to present a particular version of what constitutes 'feminism' to its readers. This iteration of the movement reduces it to a story that is only about gender difference. The particular narrative thus

elides important contestations and dynamic exchanges that have made feminist movements exciting, mutable, and not always 'safe' for those in power.

Craft traditions and feminist politics

BUST's fashion spread draws on two journalistic conventions within the magazine industry: the use of individuals to stand in for collective identities and the use of the 'quip' (the written equivalent of the soundbite) to represent a broader set of social sentiments or political positions. One of the benefits of the former strategy is that it encourages readers to identify personally with the represented figures, to read themselves into alignment with a particular person and their views. *BUST* achieves this through its use of 'Our' in its headline 'Our Outfits, Ourselves', which evokes a kind of collectivity that includes the editors, the readers, and the represented feminists in the spread – and, of course, references the Boston Health Collective's *Our bodies, ourselves* (1976). But the use of this generic convention also has certain limitations. From the perspective of some critics, the positing of particular feminists as leaders is a problem in and of itself, given that this strategy inscribes a hierarchical structure through which the opinions of certain figures are imbued with more authority than those belonging to others. Moreover, the use of individual figures has the potential to elide the notions of collective struggle entirely. To return to her discussion of the ways in which her image has been mobilized in fashion photography, Davis argues:

What is also lost in this nostalgic surrogate for historical memory – in these 'arrested moments', to use John Berger's words – is the activist involvement of vast numbers of Black women in movements that are now represented with even greater masculinist contours than they actually exhibited at the time. (1994, p. 43)

Although I think Davis is referring here specifically to the ways through which Black women have collectively been written out of the histories of, for example, the Black Power and Communist movements in the US, her comments are also pertinent for the consideration of how the use of 'celebrity' feminists erases the everyday work of countless women and men for activist causes.

The generic convention of the quip raises a set of similar concerns. The inclusion of aphoristic quotations allows *BUST* to link the fashion sense of individual feminists with the political views of those same figures. In this sense, *BUST* is not presenting 'just fashion'; but the use of these quips also inevitably results in a simplification of the political views of these figures and an elision of their own views on fashion. For example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton had happily taken up bloomers in the mid-nineteenth century, but eventually abandoned them. She wrote of her decision: 'Yet such is the tyranny of custom, that to escape constant observation, criticism, ridicule, persecution, mobs, one after another gladly went back to old slavery and sacrificed freedom to repose' (Stanton 1881, cited in Scott 2006, p. 54). It is interesting that Stanton's represented 'look' in *BUST* features her not in bloomers, but in clothing reminiscent of a style she may have found, to some extent, 'oppressive'.

Although the selection of quotations does not present a homogenous view of feminism, the parameters of difference among the represented positions are quite narrow, given that gender difference is the only axis through which feminist politics is considered. In her discussion of the elision of radical politics from news-magazines, Carolyn Kitch (2005) argues that the absence of alternative stories that trouble unified understandings of history demonstrate the ways in which magazines shape both collective memory and collective amnesia. She asserts that: 'While these errors have political implications, they most likely

have narrative causes: it is not the unpopular but rather the incongruous that gets left out' (2005, p. 29). I suggest that *BUST*'s use of quips functions similarly, in that they erase important contestations and debates within feminist movements. I raise this not to accuse *BUST* of intentionally manipulating the images and writings of feminist figures for any kind of malevolent purpose, but rather to explore what kinds of interventions into the realm of popular culture are possible through the existing craft traditions within which *BUST* is working.

Feminist responses to the fashion issue

The release of *BUST*'s fashion issue generated controversy among various feminist readers. Although no critical letters on the issue were printed in *BUST* itself (and it is possible that none were submitted), a debate ensued online on several blogs and websites. Following the release of the fashion issue, 'Twisty' (2006) – who writes the radical feminist blog, 'I Blame the Patriarchy' – asserted that '*BUST*, a young women's indie-hip lifestyle magazine with a purported feminist slant, merely re-brands materialism as "feminism"; that for all its empowering sass, it's really just another philosophically empty fashion rag hawking "girly stuff" in the traditional style'. *Salon.com*'s Paige Rockwell (2006), writer of the column *Broadsheet* responded to Twisty's claim, by arguing that

the *BUST* approach may not hit all the right notes – the promise that it'll help me 'feel good about being a girl' does make me recoil a little – but its genuinely pro-woman approach still makes it a smarter read than many major mags. Even the fashion and beauty features, which run without emaciated models, thousand-dollar shoes and plastic surgery advocacy, represent a small step in the right direction. And, like it or not, there are still women who are on the fence about feminism; *BUST*'s light hand and inclusive stance may be a useful introduction to the great world of patriarchy blaming.

Both Twisty and Rockwell make persuasive arguments that demonstrate the ways in which the same issue of *BUST* may be read as alternately 'radical' or 'not radical enough', depending upon its reading audience and reading context. That is, read alongside other women's fashion magazines, *BUST*'s fashion spread certainly makes available more socially progressive messages about women's bodies and feminism than those offered within higher circulation magazines for women. Within this context, it is at least an unusual if not a radical statement to deem feminism 'fashionable'. When examined in relation to other feminist periodicals, however, it is evident that, while *BUST*'s perspective on fashion shares some overlap with third-wave publications, such as *Bitch* (1996–) and *HUES* (1992–1999), it also diverges from them in significant ways. *Bitch* and *HUES* have respectively presented more critical articles on fashion and reworked the magazine 'fashion spread' in an innovative manner. Thus, when examining these magazines comparatively, it is important to consider their relationship to the marketplace and to readers. That is, while *Bitch* assumes an audience of women who already identify as feminist, or are sympathetic to feminism, and *HUES* targets a readership who are rarely represented in mainstream fashion spreads, *BUST* attempts to reach young women who may not necessarily identify with feminism. In this sense, *BUST*'s use of the feminist fashion spread may be read as a way of making feminism 'accessible' to a particular demographic group.

In terms of both Rockwell and Twisty's critiques of the *BUST* fashion issue, what interests me particularly is why this issue struck a nerve in the first place. *BUST* has published fashion pages since 1998 and, in its Winter 2000 'Feminism Issue', the periodical devoted a two-page spread to 'fashionable feminists'. However, unlike the 2006 fashion issue, this depiction of 'fashionable feminists' features archival photographs of the represented women and does not provide information about where to purchase similar

clothing, in order to 'dress like a feminist'. That *BUST* made feminism itself the focus of a fashion spread featuring clothes available for purchase surely contributed to the controversy caused by this particular issue. In a sphere in which there exist few positive representations of feminists and feminism, the issue of how feminisms are represented is for some critics, such as Twisty and Rockwell, one in which a great deal is at stake. That is, implicit in the arguments of both Twisty and Rockwell is an assumption that the realm of commercial culture is important, and that the representations generated therein have at least some potential influence on readers.

Finally, the magazine's cover line 'be a feminist or just dress like one' may have contributed to the controversy, given that it suggests and seems to advocate the possibility of claiming a feminism that is almost devoid of politics. Is it possible to be a feminist by 'just' dressing in a particular way? How does one define feminism in this context? Of course, it is possible to read the cover line as an ironic commentary on both perceived feminist attitudes towards fashion and the reputation of feminists as 'unfashionable'. *BUST*'s tagline inverts these stereotypes, through its suggestion that dressing like a feminist is fashionable and desirable. As a rhetorical device, however, irony always carries both primary and secondary meanings. '[Irony] suggests both complicity and distance' (Hutcheon 1985, p. 67). It is thus important to read through the double vocalicity of *BUST*'s cover line.

When stripped of its ironic connotations, the phrase 'be a feminist or just dress like one' delivers a message that is consistent with the neo-liberal discourse of 'choice' that pervades the magazine. That is, with its 'be a feminist or just dress like one' cover line, *BUST*'s editorial slant seems to shift towards an 'either/or' discursive mode through which the magazine invites the reader to pick and choose which aspects of the magazine she wishes to embrace; this may involve ignoring or rejecting the periodical's feminist elements entirely. This position marks a change in both *BUST*'s previous editorial stance and its target audience. In its October/November issue of 2006 for example, Stoller writes:

We know that in the life of today's modern gal, there's room for crafting and sex and music and fashion and politics and, most importantly, that an interest in one doesn't preclude an interest in the others. Of course, we devote space in our pages to typical 'feminist issues' such as abortion and equal pay, but we're also determined to create a truly embraceable women's culture, so that reading *BUST* can help you feel good about being a girl. (2006b, p. 6)

Although they set up a problematic dichotomy between 'serious feminist issues' and 'fun', Stoller's comments nevertheless invoke a 'both/and' discourse in regard to the ways in which *BUST* positions itself in the marketplace. This shift demonstrates the publication's continued expansion of its implied readership from feminist to both feminist and non-feminist women. Paradoxically, *BUST* seems to posit feminism as the heart of the magazine, while simultaneously downplaying its importance.

Lifestyle feminism and the politics of fear

The fashion spread in *Bust* is symptomatic of a set of larger trends within third-wave feminist praxis, particularly 'girlie feminism', which include both the reclamation of feminism as stylish and sexy and the representation of feminist politics as a set of individual lifestyle choices. These discourses merit critical attention, given the ways in which they have implications for how people understand, and engage with, feminist politics. Further, in light of the limited number of feminist periodicals available within the commercial marketplace, it is important to examine how and why particular publications are 'successful' in a context in which it is frequently difficult for feminist publications

to maintain financial viability (in financial terms, *BUST* is the most 'successful' third-wave magazine).²

In critically examining *BUST*'s presentation of feminism as *style*, I do not wish to suggest that there is no room for a feminism that uses fashion or style to convey a political position. As the work of Judith Butler (1999) and others has demonstrated, there are ways that fashion and dress can be subversive. It is also not the intention of this article to criticize *BUST* for not being 'feminist enough' or for presenting a pseudo- or post-feminist position that is devoid of politics. *BUST* is not a radical or socialist feminist publication, and to criticize the periodical for something that it does not set out to do in the first place would be a straw man argument. Rather, I wish to question what kinds of feminist discourses are made available to readers within the sphere of commercial periodicals and to consider the potential implications of any limits. In the case of *BUST*, I suggest that the discourses of choice and feminism-as-lifestyle pervade the 2006 fashion issue, and are indicative of a broader cultural trend within a branch of third-wave feminism. These narratives of choice and lifestyle are very much in conversation with other feminisms, and the anti-feminist backlash and neo-liberal ideologies in general.

According to Elpeth Probyn (1995):

The popular selling of choice to and for women is a tricky subject for feminists. For a start, it's hard to complain too loudly in that the commercialization of choice and women is arguably one of the most evident signs of an incorporation of feminism into popular culture. (p. 263)

It is important therefore to question the kinds of choices that are offered within the realm of popular culture of which *BUST* is a part. For example, Stoller's editorial comment that for their fashion issue they 'decided' to focus on the embraceable aspects of fashion culture is consistent with the popular discourse of choice. However, as Sasha Roseneil and Julie Seymour assert, 'the act of choosing [is] circumscribed by a wide range of social constraints . . . it is easier to be a Spice Girl than a riot grrrl' (Roseneil and Seymour 1999, cited in Holland 2004, p. 29). While the notion of choosing particular aspects of fashion culture, and not others, seems compatible with ideas of ambivalence and play discussed within the work of Butler and Wilson, in this particular context, the idea of choice seems to exist only at the level of individual acts of consumption, and is thus quite limited. As Ellen Riordan argues, in relation to the consequences of 'girl power' rhetoric and the construction of consumption-as-politics,

individual empowerment . . . can perhaps move us slowly toward a shift in attitude about girls, but the process is very slow and fails to address structural issues that oppress girls. Consequently, social relations do not change, especially issues of class, which are obfuscated by the normalization of consumption as a means to empowerment. (2001, p. 295)

In a recent article for *Briarpatch* magazine, Becky Ellis (2007) concludes that: 'Instead of focusing so much energy on recasting feminism as non-threatening, we should reclaim our right to be angry about sexism and other forms of oppression' (2007, p. 3). The development of non-threatening or what I call 'lifestyle' feminism in the 1990s and 2000s emerges out of a conjunction of forces, whose epicentre is the United States, including the 1980s Reagan/Bush era, the movement to defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, and the growth and increasing influence of the Christian Right. Given the impact of these forces, I argue that the development of lifestyle feminism is motivated by, at least in part, fear of the power of this 'backlash' against feminism. As a consequence, in the case of *BUST*'s fashion spread, the re-presentation of feminism through both fashion and relatively benign quotations casts feminism as unthreatening and minimizes some of its 'uglier' – yet important – dimensions: anger, criticality, and dissent. While arguably

this strategy does make feminism more accessible to a broader demographic and sidesteps standard backlash criticisms against feminism and feminists, it also limits the possibilities for critiques of systemic and institutionalized forms of discrimination.

Conclusion: feminist publics?

This article has considered the implications of lifestyle feminism as articulated within *BUST*'s 2006 fashion issue. While lifestyle feminism arguably provides a version of feminism that is friendly and accessible, it does not offer an analysis of collective injustice and cannot serve as a basis for activism beyond individual acts of consumption. In a sense, lifestyle feminism buys into, rather than challenges, stereotypical versions of feminism perpetuated through the backlash.

Consequently, this analysis raises the question of how we are to envision the formation of feminist publics through print culture, if the circulating texts construct readers as atomized consumers. While this may be the case, it does not account for the ways in which readers interact with a given text. As the online exchange between Twisty and Paige Rockwell demonstrates, readers do play an active role in interpretation and may challenge or reject what they encounter. This online exchange exemplifies the kind of public that Riordan discusses, when she argues that 'feminism perhaps gains from the commodification of girl power, as its underlying assumptions are contested publicly by a larger and more diverse group of feminists' (2001, p. 295). In this sense, the effects of lifestyle feminism as articulated through popular print culture remain to be seen.

Notes

1. Davis was implicated in the murder of Judge Harold Haley, through an attempted prison break by members of the Black Panthers. After 18 months as a fugitive, she was captured, tried, and acquitted of all charges. During the period in which Davis was in hiding, she was named as one of the FBI's most wanted criminals. The 'wanted' posters circulated on a mass scale and the representation of Davis on these posters has become iconic.
2. While 'success' is defined here as the ability to continue publication, this is not the only way in which 'success' might be understood. A magazine like *HUES* for example, which is no longer in print, was highly successful in bringing content relevant to the lives of women-of-colour into circulation. 'Success' is thus a concept that I do not define solely in economic terms. However, the economic viability of these periodicals remains an important consideration for the study of feminist print culture in the capitalist public sphere.

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