



Women in Clothes

By Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits, Leanne Shapton

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Women in Clothes is a book unlike any other. It is essentially a conversation among hundreds of women of all nationalities—famous, anonymous, religious, secular, married, single, young, old—on the subject of clothing, and how the garments we put on every day define and shape our lives.

It began with a survey. The editors composed a list of more than fifty questions designed to prompt women to think more deeply about their personal style. Writers, activists, and artists including Cindy Sherman, Kim Gordon, Kalpona Akter, Sarah Nicole Prickett, Tavi Gevinson, Miranda July, Roxane Gay, Lena Dunham, and Molly Ringwald answered these questions with photographs, interviews, personal testimonies, and illustrations.

Even our most basic clothing choices can give us confidence, show the connection between our appearance and our habits of mind, express our values and our politics, bond us with our friends, or function as armor or disguise. They are the tools we use to reinvent ourselves and to transform how others see us. *Women in Clothes* embraces the complexity of women's style decisions, revealing the sometimes funny, sometimes strange, always thoughtful impulses that influence our daily ritual of getting dressed.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Poems, interviews, pieces that read like diary or journal entries—all these responses help the editors fulfill their aims: to liberate readers from the idea that women have to fit a certain image or ideal, to show the connection between dress and ‘habits of mind,’ and to offer readers ‘a new way of interpreting their outsides.’ ‘What are my values?’ one woman asks. ‘What do I want to express?’ Those questions inform the multitude of eclectic responses gathered in this delightfully idiosyncratic book.”—*Kirkus*

“Thoughtfully crafted and visually entertaining, this collection, edited by Heti, Julavits, and Shapton, uses personal reflections from 642 contributors to examine women’s relationship with clothes in a deceptively lighthearted and irreverent tone....it also inspires meaningful questions...the prose is spliced with striking visuals...[a] provocative time capsule of contemporary womanhood.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“[A] delirious assortment of conversations, essays, journal entries, and photographs...This big, busy book feels like a thrift store brimming with jumbles of clothes and accessories and alive with women’s voices. Their comments and stories are canny, funny, incisive, twee, surprising, and caring, as thoughts and anecdotes about clothes touch on everything from gender to beauty, sex, mother-daughter relationships, aspirations, money, human rights, health, work, creativity, and violence. A uniquely kaleidoscopic and spirited approach to an irresistible subject of universal resonance.”

—*Booklist*

“This is the wisdom of the crowd, and while it’s not authoritative or prescriptive, it’s reassuring and fun.”
—*Associated Press*

“This charming patchwork expands the scope of fashion writing by looking not at forerunners of style but at how those outside the industry think about what they wear....The range of women involved [is] dazzling...a welcome addition to writing that often focuses on a single trend for all.”

—*Madeleine Schwartz, The Boston Globe*

“[A] thoughtful, droll, and often moving tome...*Women in Clothes* is the pulchritudinous addendum to Mr. Twain’s famous quote—clothes make the woman.”
—*Sloane Crosley, Interview*

“[A] winningly zine-like compendium.”
—*Meghan O’Grady, Vogue.com*

“*Women in Clothes* dares to dive into the realm of heels and chiffon to suss out the deeper underpinnings of what we wear.”
—*Bustle.com*

About the Author

SHEILA HETI is the author of five books, including the critically acclaimed *How Should a Person Be?* She writes regularly for the *London Review of Books* and is an editor and interviewer at *The Believer* magazine.

HEIDI JULAVITS is the author of four novels, most recently *The Vanishers*, winner of the PEN/New England Fiction Award. She is a founding editor of *The Believer* and an associate professor at Columbia University.

LEANNE SHAPTON is a Canadian illustrator, author, and publisher based in New York City. She is the author of *Important Artifacts* and *Swimming Studies*, winner of the 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography.

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INTRODUCTION

QUESTIONS

The book is based on a survey we invited women worldwide to complete. The survey consisted of an ever-evolving list of questions.

What is the most transformative conversation you have ever had with someone on the subject of fashion or style? • With whom do you talk about clothes? • Do you think you have taste or style? Which one is more important? What do these words mean to you? • Do you have style in any areas of your life aside from fashion? • Do you have a unified way of approaching your life, work, relationships, finances, chores, etc.? Please explain. • Would you say you “know what you like” in the area of fashion and clothing? If so, do you also know what you like in other areas of life, that is, are you generally good at discernment? If you’re not so sure about your clothing choices, would you say you’re better in other areas, or the same? Can you say where your discernment comes from, if you have it (or where the lack comes from, if you don’t have it), and why? • Can you say a bit about how your mother’s body and style have been passed down to you or not? • What is your cultural background, and how has that influenced how you dress? • Did your parents teach you things about clothing, care for your clothing, dressing, or style? What lessons do you remember? Did they tell you things directly, or did you just pick things up? • What sorts of things do you do, clothing- or makeup- or hair-wise, to feel sexy or alluring? • What are some things you admire about how other women present themselves? • Many people say they want to feel “comfortable,” or that they admire people who seem “confident.” What do these words really mean to you? • Do you care about lingerie? • Do you notice women on the street? If so, what sort of women do you tend to notice? What sort do you tend to admire? If not admiration, what is the feeling that a compelling woman on the street gives you? • If dressing were the only thing you did, and you were considered an expert and asked to explain your style philosophy, what would you say? • What is really beautiful, for you, in general? • What do you consider very ugly? • Are you generally a good judge of whether what you buy will end up being worn? Have you figured out how to know in advance? • When you look at yourself before going out, and you are trying to see yourself from the outside, what is this “other person” like? What does she like, dislike, what sorts of judgments does she have? Is this “outer eye” based on someone you know or knew once? • What’s your process getting dressed in the morning? What are you considering? • What are you trying to achieve when you dress? • What, for you, is the difference between dressing and dressing up? • If you had to wear a “uniform,” what would it look like? • What would you say is “you,” and what would you say is “not you”? • Do you remember a time in your life when you dressed quite differently from how you do now? Can you describe it and what it was all about for you? • What sorts of things do you do, clothing-, makeup-, or hair-wise, to feel professional? • How do you conform to or rebel against the dress expectations at your workplace? • How do institutions affect the way you dress? • Do you have a dress code, a school uniform, or a uniform that you wear for an extracurricular activity? • Are there ways in which you conform to or rebel against these uniforms? • Is it comforting or

constraining to have a uniform? • Was there a moment in your life when something “clicked” for you about fashion or dressing or makeup or hair? What was it? Why did it happen then, do you think? • Are there any dressing tricks you’ve invented or learned that make you feel like you’re getting away with something? • What are some dressing rules that you wouldn’t necessarily recommend to others but that you follow? • Are there any dressing rules you’d want to convey to other women? • What is an archetypal outfit for you, one that you could have happily worn at any point in your life? What do you like about it? • Do you ever wish you were a man or could dress like a man or had a man’s body? Was there ever a time in the past? • If there was one country or culture or era that you had to live in, fashion-wise, what would it be? • Do you consider yourself photogenic? • When you see yourself in photographs, what do you think? • Send a photograph of your mother from the time before she had children, and tell us what you see. • Are there any figures from culture, past or present, whose style you admire or have drawn from? • Have you ever had a dream that involved clothes? • What would be a difficult or uncomfortable look for you to try to achieve? • Have you stolen, borrowed, or adapted any dressing ideas or actual items from friends or family? • Have you ever successfully given someone a present of jewelry or clothing that you continue to feel good about? • Were you ever given a present of clothing or jewelry that especially touched you? • If you were totally comfortable with your body, or your body was a bit closer to what you wish it was like, what would you wear? • When do you feel at your most attractive? • Is there anyone you are trying to attract or repel when you dress? • Do you like to smell a certain way? • What do you think of perfume? Do you wear it? • What’s the situation with your hair? • Please describe your body. • Please describe your mind. • Please describe your emotions. • What are some things you need to do to your body or clothes in order to feel presentable? • How does makeup fit into all this for you? • What are you wearing on your body and face, and how is your hair done, right at this moment? • Is there a certain look you feel you’re expected to like that you have absolutely no interest in? What is it? Why aren’t you interested? • What are your closet and drawers like? Do you keep things neat, etc.? • Can you describe in a basic way what you own, clothing- and jewelry-wise? • What is your favorite piece of clothing or jewelry that you own? • Tell us about something in your closet that you keep but never wear. What is it, why don’t you wear it, and why do you keep it? • Is there any fashion trend you’ve refused to participate in, and if so, why? • Looking back at your purchases over the past five to fifteen years, can you generalize about what sorts of things were the most valuable to buy? • Is there an item of clothing that you once owned but no longer own and still think about or wish you had? What was it and what happened to it and why do you want it back? • If you had to throw out all your clothes but keep one thing, what would you keep? • If you were building up your wardrobe from nothing, what would you do differently this time? • What’s the first “investment” item you bought? Do you still own or wear it? • Was there ever an important or paradigm-shifting purchase in your life? • What item of clothing are you still (or have you forever been) on the hunt for? • Do you remember the biggest waste of money you ever made on an item of clothing? • Was there a point in your life when your style changed dramatically? What happened? • Do you address anything political in the way you dress? • Did you ever buy an article of clothing without giving it much thought, only to have it prove much more valuable as time went on? What was the item, and what happened? • Did you ever buy an item of clothing or jewelry certain that it would be meaningful to you, but it wasn’t at all? What was it, and what happened? • How and when do you shop for clothes? • Do you have any shopping rules you follow? • How does how you dress play into your ambitions for yourself? • How does money fit into all this? • Are there any clothing (or related) items that you have in multiple? Why do you think you keep buying this thing? • Is there an article of clothing, some makeup, or an accessory that you carry with you or wear every day? • Can you recall some times when you have dressed a particular way to calm yourself or gain a sense of control over a situation that scared you? • Do you remember the first time you were conscious of what you were wearing? Can you describe this moment and what it was about? • Did anyone ever say anything to you that made you see yourself differently, on a physical and especially sartorial level? • In what way is this stuff important, if at all?

COLLECTION

CLAUDIA DEY's fedoras

ON DRESSING

GOOD MORNING

ELIF BATUMAN

Last summer, when I was living in Istanbul, Sheila Heti asked me to compliment a series of women on their clothes and record our subsequent conversations. The women were supposed to be strangers, and I was supposed to meet them in elevators. There were many, many reasons why I never did end up asking strange women about their clothes in elevators in Istanbul. The only place where I used the elevator was at the gym. I felt like the women at my gym already weren't that crazy about me, and to be honest, their clothes were nothing special. I did once compliment the Pilates instructor, a former ballerina, whose insistence on relaxing and natural breathing seemed somehow fraught with anxiety, on her amazing earrings: one of the tiny silver studs was connected, by a long, fine chain, to an equally fine necklace. I didn't have a tape recorder, but luckily she just smiled politely. She was folding "resistance bands."

Later that week, I had lunch with the writer Elif ?afak. We had first met some months earlier, when she accidentally walked into me at a huge dinner in London. She had been walking backward, for some reason. This was our second meeting. She was wearing marvelous clothes, about which I remember only that each article had a different texture, everything looked expensive, and all of it was black, though it was July. When I told her how wonderful she looked, she gave me a look full of compassion and, reaching across the table, wordlessly squeezed my hands.

All summer, antigovernment protests raged in Istanbul, and in cities all over the country. My apartment was often full of tear gas, and also full of journalists and protesters and, on one occasion, a protester's small, demanding dog. One journalist had come from Bulgaria; most mornings starting at seven, he was reporting to Bulgarian national radio, speaking very loudly, since it wasn't a good line. Every day, one or the other of my parents called, urging me to come home to the U.S. early. Nobody was sleeping, or getting any work done. Feeling overwhelmed, I packed a bag and took a commuter ferry to Heybeliada, an island in the Sea of Marmara. Though Heybeliada is in the Istanbul municipality, stepping off the boat was like landing on a different planet. There were no police vehicles, no police, no protesters, no gas masks, no gas, no graffiti. It was as if the past weeks had never happened.

"Where are all the police?" I asked when I reached the pension where I had booked a room.

"We have four police on the island," the owner replied. "They mostly concern themselves with picnickers."

When I stepped outside the next morning, a beautiful orange cat rubbed up against my leg. The sun seemed to pour over your whole body in a way that was full of love. Walking downhill toward the sea, past the ruined white Ottoman houses that resembled, with their gingerbread trim, heaps of old lace, I came upon a woman sitting on the curb. In her forties, deeply tanned, she wore a headscarf, and a severe expression. As I approached, I felt that she was actually glowering at me.

"Good morning," I said cheerfully, hoping to defuse the atmosphere, even as I wondered whether the woman was religious, and how the people who lived here felt about women traveling alone.

The woman's face was suddenly, utterly transformed, by what I realized was a smile. "Good morning," she said, beaming. "I was just admiring your skirt. That's why I was looking at you like that."

SURVEY

WOMEN LOOKING AT WOMEN

"Sometimes I'll see a woman dressed in a way that makes me think we must be similar, like in another world we'd be friends." —SASHA ARCHIBALD

ANN IRELAND Often, I'll spot a woman crossing the road who is wearing just the narrow gray-black pants I want. Or sneakers that are just one color with no ugly stripes. Maybe I could get away with that Indian dress! Those Jesus sandals are just the ticket—I bet they're comfortable, too. Then I crave it, a sort of low-level fever that won't lift until I've located the desired item and seen whether it works for me, too.

VANESSA BERRY A woman selling vegetables at a market stall once complimented me on my wool shirt. Every time I looked back she was looking at me. I took it as a good sign that I should wear this shirt when I want to impress someone.

ALESIA PULLINS I like complimenting other black women—women of color in general—because I feel like a lot of times the only people giving us compliments are other women of color. It's not a conscious thing where I'm like, "I'm going to go in here and find the two black girls and load them down with compliments." It's just something I tend to do because I realize, "Look, I see what you're doing over there, I see what you're working with, and I like it."

ANA KINSELLA When I was about nineteen, my friend and I were sitting outside the lecture theatre, smoking cigarettes and commenting on every girl who walked by and what she was wearing. We thought we were very cool and trendy and edgy. In retrospect we were idiots and I in particular looked like a fashion-crazed fool. But after an hour or so we figured out that the girls we considered the best-dressed were not the girls who wore the clothes we may have coveted most, but the ones who had a consistent style, a steady palette, and knew the silhouettes that worked best for them. I realized then that style is about knowing what you like and why you like it, more than anything else.

GRACE DENTON In university, there was a girl who lived on my floor. She once came to my room and asked if her outfit looked okay. In the natural way young girls have with people they don't really know yet, I said, "Yeah, you look great!" She was probably wearing something middle-of-the-road and vaguely hippy. Then I asked, "How about me?" as a kind of social exchange. She said, "Hmmm, yeah, I don't know. You kind of look like you're trying to look wacky." This was a horrific revelation. Who the fuck . . . ! Why did she . . . ! I was wearing a polka-dot spaghetti-strap dress I loved, with a T-shirt underneath. It later became apparent that she had multiple social strangenesses, but the comment stuck. I still occasionally look at myself with her eyes and think, "Okay, trying too hard, take it back a step." This makes me sad.

JILL MARGO In my early twenties, there were a bunch of girls who swapped clothes or, rather, borrowed clothes from our most alpha female, who was very communally minded. They were considered lucky clothes—the ones that got us laid. Recently, I saw a photo from back then of my friend in one of the outfits. There is no way those things looked as good on any of us as they looked on her. What were we thinking?

OLLA NAJAH AL-SHALCHI In high school, I started wearing a hijab, and was still trying to find a way of dressing like my peers, while also respecting my religion. So I would wear black pants, a beige shirt, a vest that was black and beige, and a beige hijab. But I love color, and this outfit was boring and lacked color. However, one day my friends told me that my outfit looked “sophisticated.” This got me thinking about how I didn’t really need to care about dressing like my peers. Dressing “sophisticated” made me feel better about the clothes I was wearing.

KELLEY HOFFMAN It’s not just my clothing that changed my first year working at *Vogue*. I also picked up cues on how to speak and act. Whenever my editor would ask me to do something, I’d say casually, “No problem!” But when I heard another intern, who was much more sophisticated than I was, say, “Of course,” to this same editor, I thought it sounded much more refined, so I started saying “Of course,” too.

JOSS LAKE My ex-girlfriend said, “You don’t have style, you have styles.” I’d always felt like I was failing to construct a coherent style—so it became a sort of Whitmanian mantra, not only for fashion, but for my personhood: “I contain multitudes. I contain multitudes.”

STELLA BUGBEE Sometimes when I see a woman with particular charm or confidence or just interesting personal habits, I actually want to be her. And it’s not one kind of woman. Wildly different people inspire that kind of interest and awe. I never think that way about men, though.

AREV DINKJIAN For the past few summers, I worked at an Armenian Youth Federation camp. My outfits consisted of gym shorts, a dirty T-shirt, old tennis shoes, a messy bun, and a face with no makeup. It’s less than glamorous, yet I leave each year with more confidence than ever. I’m surrounded by girls who look up to me, who mimic my every move, who want to look and be just like me. They tell me every day that I’m beautiful and ask me to do their hair and pick out their dresses for the dances. I feel at my best because they look up to me in my most natural state. And I find them just as beautiful.

LILI OWEN ROWLANDS I live with four girls and our wardrobes are an extension of each other. However, I find there’s a competitiveness in it. I love to borrow but hate to lend. Sometimes I make up excuses about wanting to wear items of my own wardrobe so others can’t wear them. I never understand where this sheer meanness comes from, but it happens and I hate it. I fear our slow homogenization. I’ve started wearing lots of yellow because I have told myself it suits only my colouring. I like to make a point of this sporadically at dinner: “Yellow only really works with a dark fringe.”

KRISTI GOLDADE Last August, I was at an art fair and there was this Russian woman. She looked so pretty and dainty, her hair was cut in this shiny black bob, and she had a scarf around her neck. She was with her husband and kid. More than her look, I wanted her essence—it was so artistic and effortless. So in November, I cut my hair into a bob and now I try to do the seamless, sophisticated thing. I’m into it as a form.

UMM ADAM When I was thirteen, I dressed like all my friends in a simple shalwar kameez with a dupatta around my neck. There were a few girls in my school who wore the hijab, but I thought that was a little too extreme. I did not look down on them or think they were old-fashioned. I respected their style, but felt that style was not for me. One day, my mom was showing me pictures from her trip to the U.S. and I was a little surprised to see that there were Muslim girls there who wore hijab. My mom said, “I wish you could cover like them.” That’s when I put my dupatta on my head and decided to wear hijab.

SZILVIA MOLNAR I love noticing women who have a panoramic view of their environment when they’re walking down the street. Women who are engaged in the moment and are interested in looking at who or what is around them.

HEATHER MALLICK When I was a child, we were on the subway in Montreal and I saw a beautiful black-haired young woman with perfect skin. She was in a red skirt with polka dots and was biting into a pistachio ice cream with her perfect large white teeth. I stared in awe and thought, “One day I will move to the city and live in my own apartment and dress like her.” Who was that woman? I think about her often.

AMANDA M. At school, a Muslim girl spoke about why she chose the burka. She said, “You American girls have it rough. You constantly have to be thinking about what looks good on you, how to look hot, how to hide flaws. You’re slaves to fashion. I’m never self-conscious about how sexy I look.” When I see women in full coverings now, I wonder, “Are they freer than I am?”

HELEN DeWITT Once in Paris a woman pulled up to the curb in a red Ferrari to exclaim over a pair of black stretch trousers with a white faux-Chinese-character pattern which I had bought for ten quid in the Roman Road.

DIANA BECKER I was in line at the Guggenheim with my favorite cousin, who is a stylist. There was a woman in front of us and we couldn’t understand her. She had a beautiful sixty-something face but she felt like a girl. Her outfit was perfect, her body svelte, not yoga-tight or anything extreme. We were obsessed with her and labeled her one of the “young-old.” We still hunt for them and wonder if weather or cultures inspire more of them. What’s their secret? Do they have good taste, or is it their mental state, diet, exercise? And why are they mostly not American?

COLLECTION

LYDIA BURKHALTER’s gray sweatshirts

SURVEY

Leopoldine Core

What do you admire about how other women present themselves?

I admire well-groomed women whose clothes are clean and fit them perfectly. Conversely, I admire women who rock a more feral look. I can’t decide which of these women I’d like to be. Clean or dirty? I pinball between the two.

When do you feel at your most attractive?

I feel attractive when I don’t have any zits and when I’m having a good hair day. Hair and skin are the top priorities for me. But I feel spectacular when I’m wearing a dress because I like the air on my legs and I can wear my boots with the little heel. If I wear a dress and have exposed legs, I like a big sweater on top, kind of hanging off me, like a Kurt Cobain sweater. I can also feel very attractive in jeans and sneakers and an old stained hoodie with no makeup. That feels very youthful, and I’m turned on by the idea of someone being drawn to the face I actually have, the clothes I actually own. If someone likes me all raggedy, I feel powerful, like I don’t need much, and that’s hot. Okay, I’m now realizing when I feel the most attractive. It’s when I’m wearing someone else’s well-chosen and wonderfully lived-in clothes. Like when I borrow a friend’s shirt or pants or shoes. I look in the mirror while wearing these clothes and think, “I would never have known to buy this.” And then I walk out into the world wearing whatever it is with a certain feeling—a

sexy feeling.

Are there any clothing (or related) items that you have in multiple?

What I have a lot of is pajamas. Nightgowns are important to me, too, because I spend more time inside than out. Being in bed feels the most natural to me, I even write in bed. I grew up in a very cluttered apartment; my mother was a hoarder. The only uncluttered place was my bed, so I learned to do everything there. I have many flannel pajama bottoms and many large sleep shirts, which are just oversized T-shirts that are soft from being washed so many times. I also call these shirts “eating shirts” because it doesn’t matter if you spill, they are already so stained. I think I keep collecting these things because I like being naked but not totally naked. I like for there to be a loose wall between me and the world. I can’t wear regular clothes while I’m home. It doesn’t matter what time it is, when I get home I immediately strip down and put on pajamas or just underwear and a robe. I find regular clothes really restricting. I can’t really relax until I’m wearing something loose and crawling into bed.

How long does it take you to get dressed?

It actually takes me a very long time to get ready, but I never feel a sense of urgency in the morning. I often leave late and with the sense that I look like shit. A good breakfast is very important to me. Making my egg and toast and tea comes first, then I make my way to my dresser and start rooting around. I think it takes me forty-five minutes including all the distractions along the way.

What are some dressing rules you wouldn’t necessarily recommend to others but you follow?

I follow my mood and that can get me into trouble. I’ll arrive somewhere and suddenly feel like a slob. The thing is that I can’t get all tarted up if I feel depressed or lazy or if I’m too immersed in a creative project or a TV show. I wouldn’t recommend this personality or soul or whatever it is that chooses my clothes. I’m hopelessly inconsistent and weirdly vain. I’ll curl up with myself at home and think, “God, you’re gorgeous,” then at the party I’ll realize it really would have been a good idea to take a shower.

What are some dressing or shopping rules you think every woman should follow?

Don’t buy anything to prove yourself to a sneering salesperson in a fancy store. In upscale stores I’ve so often felt judged to the point of purchasing clothes I didn’t truly want or need. I did this to prove I wasn’t poor or a thief (even though I am poor and used to be a thief). Sometimes that devil head is my own and it’s telling me I need a \$300 sweater. But I don’t. That said, I think it’s important to get a few really nice, sometimes pricey items. I have these Swedish clog boots that were sort of expensive but I adore them and wear them everywhere. I think the biggest mistake you can make is to buy a lot of crap, like thirty things off a sale rack rather than a few beautiful items. I think it’s our demented way of getting to feel rich, buying tons of cheap little junky dresses. It feels so much saner to have a lean wardrobe you dig.

Is there a dressing thing you wish women would stop doing?

I wish women would stop fetishizing notions of perfection. Look at American *Vogue*—it’s so safe. We are ashamed of our excess and that is the saddest thing in the world. It’s why women keep getting nose jobs. They take the most beautiful thing about themselves and lop it off so they look like everyone else. In fashion it’s the same. Anyone who gets an outfit perfectly right turns me off. Or I don’t even notice them. It’s “offness” that is key in fashion, I think. On a more specific note, I find the “It Bag” repulsive. Often I’ll see one swinging on the arm of a wealthy woman in a tracksuit—it’s a charmless staple of female wealth. And think about what a purse really is: an externalized pussy or womb. So to have the “right” one and the most expensive one—that sends a chill up my body. Taste is a wink, not a thud.

Are there any dressing tricks you've invented or learned that make you feel like you're getting away with something?

“Skater” dresses are hugely flattering on me. They hug the ribs, with a free-flowing skirt over the lower belly, so I can eat a huge dinner and my bloated stomach will be obscured.

What is the most transformative conversation you have ever had on the subject of fashion or style?

I remember talking to my ex-girlfriend about our experience of each other when we first met. I was wearing a striped button-down shirt, jeans, and navy Keds. My hair was tamely side-parted and I had daubed the purplish caves under my eyes with concealer. She said I looked like an intense private-school girl. “So I looked smart?” I asked. “Oh, definitely.” I’ve had so many conversations like that, where someone describes me to me and I think, “How could that be me?” I looked intense to her because I was nervous. Although I am intense, I mean, she was right. Instantly she struck me as a genius because of all the things that she said. It didn’t matter that she was wearing a holey old T-shirt, she was an intellectual. She was the intellectual in the old shirt and it made the shirt special. I still remember that shirt. It was gray and battered and sheer. It’s burned in my mind.

Would you rather be perceived as having great taste or great style?

When I think of taste, I think of the home. People with great taste have the right furniture, that kind of thing. It seems like a whole religion. “Style” feels looser to me, and sexier. I think of partial strangers saying this: “You have such great style!” It’s the thing we say about the traveling circus that is our bodies. I love for people to look at how I move through the world and think, “Wow.”

Do you consider yourself photogenic?

No. I think I look moon-faced and shadowy in photographs. Ghoulish and sad, like someone who works in a factory. The truth is that I panic when someone whips out a camera. And of course I try to suppress that horrible ringing feeling but I can’t. It’s the face of fear that represents me in most photographs. I think I’m beautiful in action, so that loss of my animation has always been deeply unflattering.

What is your favorite piece of clothing or jewelry that you own?

This might sound absurd, but right now it’s my bra. I’ve had horrible luck with bras but this one fits like a glove. It’s a Lithuanian bra my ex bought for me last year when she was teaching there. I still can’t believe she just looked at it and knew. I think it’s a teen bra, and it’s hideous, purple with yellow, orange, and blue stripes, but it feels perfect.

What’s the first “investment” item you bought?

A pair of \$200 shoes for my high school graduation. They were black with ribbons that tied up my legs, and my toes spilled out the front. They were a mistake, but at the time I was proud of how expensive they were.

Was there a point when your style changed dramatically?

When I was fifteen, my mother and I parted ways. Before, I had lived in an apartment in Manhattan with her, where she slowly went crazy. Eventually she was so dysfunctional that she had to move to L.A. and live in her brother’s guest room. I moved with a friend of the family upstate to finish high school. I went from going to LaGuardia High, where you could wear a bathing suit without getting in trouble, to a really repressed high school with a dress code and no queers in sight. I went from dressing in an exciting way to dressing in a

bland, brand-hungry way. It was sad. Before I moved there, I was making shirts out of stockings. I had oxblood Doc Martens, cool vintage old-lady coats, and weird little dresses that were my mom's from the '70s. I was awesome. But upstate I became this nobody in, like, Steve Madden platform boots.

What is the difference between dressing and dressing up?

Dressing is just finding something comfortable and leaving the house. Dressing up is a more strenuous journey. It means rubbing scented oils into my frizzy hair and putting on some makeup. It means wearing a dress and my little clog boots and some sheer black stockings (Wolford are the best).

Do you care about lingerie?

I do, though not in an ambitious way. If someone were to buy lingerie for me I would wear it. But I'm more interested in finding well-fitting underwear and bras. I think cotton underwear can be sexier. Sometimes lingerie feels old-ladyish. I also don't like how certain "sexy" underwear is so tiny. I like more coverage on my ass.

What are you trying to achieve when you dress for the world?

Some days I want to be invisible. Other days I want to look interesting and pretty and like an animal. Looking unraveled but not too unraveled feels sexy and smart. It's part of being a writer. I like looking like someone who was probably lying around with her thoughts for a while and then took a shower and groomed herself a little.

How has your background influenced how you dress?

I grew up in the East Village in the '90s. It was a dirty, stylish time. The goal was always to stand out and look different, not to aspire to be one kind of woman. Punk felt right. When I was young and pretty, there was a part of me that wanted to destroy that image. I was realizing that the corridor of women is all YES and I wanted to say NOOO. But I also wanted certain boys to want to fuck me, so it got confusing. I wore a lot of eyeliner and hoped to be ravaged.

Have you ever dressed a certain way to gain a sense of control?

When I feel too exposed, I put on a loose button-up sweater and instantly relax. My skin is pinkish, and color floods to the surface if I'm having a feeling. It's like looking right into my thoughts, and that can make me nervous. Frequently at an event I'll cover my naked arms.

What are you wearing on your body and face, and how is your hair done, right at this moment?

Shu Uemura oil on my hair and coconut Skin Trip lotion on my body. Then I put aloe gel on my face to calm the pinkness. I'm wearing an illuminating concealer under my eyes, some mascara and blush. I also use a Chanel eyebrow pencil to shape and define. Some days, I won't wear any makeup at all.

What are some things you do to feel presentable?

Shaving my armpits is important. It feels so good to get clean and smooth there. I need to wash my face and clean my teeth. I always floss. My shirt should be clean because a dirty shirt is a stinky shirt.

Is there a part of your body that feels most distinctly you?

I like my back. It's slender and muscly and pretty. I think it's the most sexual part of me.

Would you ever do anything like cosmetic surgery?

No, that scares me too much. Cosmetic surgery is actually really dangerous. You open yourself up to all sorts of infections. And then usually you look crazy.

How do you care for your body?

I don't exercise much. I try to eat lots of vegetables and lean meats and I take various green pills. But I have off months of swigging coffee and eating lots of candy. It takes its toll on me when I do that. I try to steer clear of inflammatory foods. Cucumber juice is excellent for my mood and skin.

Do you have a unified way of approaching your life, work, relationships, finances, and chores?

I think I'm a bird in a wind tunnel, and I'm working on it. I'm not as organized as I'd like, but my passions are deep and true and they move me to work really hard. I'm an intense little candle. If I love you it's really like a light coming from the bottom of my soul and you have my full attention. Same with a poem or story. Then other parts of my life suffer. I'll forget to pay Con Ed and suddenly it's dark.

How important is all this?

I hate when people say they don't care about clothes, because it's a lie. It's like when writers say they don't care about plot. Lie. We are always asking for something when we get dressed. Asking to be loved, to be fucked, to be admired, to be left alone, to make people laugh, to scare people, to look wealthy, to say I'm poor, I love myself. It's the quiet poem in the waiting room, on the subway, in the movie of our lives. It's a big fucking deal.

Please say anything you like about yourself.

I'm a feminist. I'm bisexual. And at twenty-eight, I'm more myself than I've ever been. What I mean is that the inside is pouring out more than ever before. Maybe twenty-eight is the magic year. The year of my lion heart.

CONVERSATION

YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT I DEAL WITH

THE WOMEN FROM THE PODCAST **BLACK GIRLS TALKING**

ALESIA: What are your favorite fabrics?

FATIMA: Leather.

AURELIA: Leather is always great.

ALESIA: Yeah. Leather, chiffon, lace, sequins. . . .

AURELIA: Tulle, I love tulle. I have no place in my life for tulle. But I love it.

RAMOU: Oh, I totally want to have a tulle wedding dress. My wedding dress is gonna have to have tulle.

AURELIA: I love the Pinterest boards with girls wearing tulle skirts and jean jackets, but that wouldn't function in my life.

ALESIA: I own a custom-made tutu! It has like three different pinks: hot pink, regular pink, and like a petal pink. And it has a black bow belt. Really, it's awesome. It was my birthday tutu. I think for a while I was going through some shit and I just really needed something that made me feel all right, and I was like, "I'll get a tutu!"

RAMOU: Now I wanna wear tulle for my birthday this year!

AURELIA: You should. But I will just say, with the tutu—you can either wear a tiara on your birthday or a tutu. You can't do both.

(Everyone laughs.)

FATIMA: Aurelia, how would you describe your personal style?

AURELIA: Oh my god, I don't know. Maybe a post-apocalyptic Audrey Hepburn My Little Pony sort of thing.

FATIMA: That sounds amazing!

AURELIA: Yeah, I kinda landed somewhere between Audrey Hepburn and Stevie Nicks.

ALESIA: I wear dark clothes because I think they look great on me. Also, it's an homage to Janet Jackson. Her *Control* era, the *Rhythm Nation* era. . . .

FATIMA: She looked great.

ALESIA: She'd always been the chubby kid with the chubby face, and that's how I've looked most of my life. But she didn't wear baggy stuff, she wasn't trying to hide her body. She embraced her curves, and everything she wore, it looked like it was tailor-made for her. She may have had insecurities, but you couldn't tell it in the way she dressed. I think that's been my style inspiration for who knows how long, with little adjustments here and there.

FATIMA: For me it's sort of a three-pronged thing between nineties Morticia Addams—like in the *Addams Family* movie—and Grace Jones, because I'm very drawn to androgynous kinds of looks, and Diana Ross, because I love that really glam stuff.

ALESIA: I spend a lot of time on my eyelashes, and it's definitely because of Diana.

AURELIA: I love lashes. Solange is a little bit further left-field than I am in my day-to-day life, but I wish I could dress like her on the regular. But my life doesn't really allow for that.

RAMOU: I love Solange, but you're right. I could not wear what she wears every day and make it work for me. I used to be really into accessories, like I would overaccessorize. And since I've cut my hair, I'm pretty much all about my earrings. But when I first cut it, I was very self-conscious about still appearing feminine, so I'd wear these big, very girly earrings. . . .

ALESIA: Me, too. When my hair started transitioning to natural, I wasn't comfortable with not having straight hair anymore, and I would try to girly it up a bit by wearing huge, chunky, feathery, neon, sparkly earrings. Like, "Hey, I'm still a girl!"

RAMOU: I was definitely like that.

AURELIA: I didn't do the big chop. I got a weave, and I had a big curly weave until my hair grew out enough that I wanted to wear it out.

ALESIA: That takes a lot of patience. I was, like, ready to rock my stuff immediately.

AURELIA: I did cut all of my hair off a while after that, but that was a fashion statement for me. I knew what I was going to look like. I think it's because my mother and my aunt had really short hair, like these boy cuts, and I always thought they were so gorgeous, so I was like, "I want to be like my mom and cut all my hair off." But then I grew it all out because I thought my boobs were too big, and it made my head look really small. (*Everyone laughs.*)

ALESIA: I went natural because I thought my head was too big, and wearing my hair straight was making me look odd. Everyone was always, "You have the best hair, it's so thick, you should just wear it." And I was like, "You don't know what you're talking about. You don't know what I deal with." But then I'd notice that when I had a curly weave, I looked really great, like my head looked proportional, so I finally decided to do it. But then I had a little problem where I just didn't feel like I looked . . . presentable.

RAMOU: I think, especially for black girls, it can be very contentious—natural or not natural—and people are very sensitive about their hair. But I'm realizing that before I cut my hair, it was more about my own worries. Like, nobody cared about my hair. And now that I've cut it, I just feel more confident with it, and it feels like more of a style, because I was very self-conscious when it was straight. It was very damaged and I would straighten it all the time and I would always wear it pulled back. So it's a whole different look for me. I do get a lot of compliments on my hair now.

AURELIA: I got more compliments when I cut all my hair off, which was weird. I thought it was gonna be the opposite. When I cut all my hair off, I got a hundred percent more attention from men. But at some point I decided that's not how I want to look anymore, so I grew it out. I constantly have this idea in my head of what I want to look like, and I just go with that.

ALESIA: There's four different types of hair on my head—like, curl patterns. I'd say my hair ranges from 3c to 4c. When I let it do its own thing, no one wants to see that, apparently, because I get no compliments. Other black women are like, "Good for you!" But I know they would never do it. But when I have my hair in twisties or a braid-out, where there's a defined pattern, I get a lot of compliments and I'm just like: "Save it. I know why you're complimenting me!"

FATIMA: My confidence grew when I stopped straightening my hair and started wearing it in its natural state. One, probably just because I was less exhausted from all this damn straightening, you know? (*laughs*) I looked better because I looked fresher—I was getting more sleep! And I wasn't constantly worried in the summer, when it's humid, about my hair going back to its natural curly state, or if it rained—all that stuff you worry about when your hair's straightened. It just went out the window. I've now cut it after about five years of growing it out, and I realized I should have kept it short the entire time, because I once again feel very free. There's this idea about very long, curly hair, and it being ideal, and I think I bought into that, even though it was more work for me, because it didn't really have a shape.

RAMOU: It's funny, we all have these similar hair journeys. I think the problem is . . . I know for me, I didn't grow up with a lot of black girlfriends with natural hair, or black girlfriends period. So part of my struggle with cutting off my hair was I felt, Oh I don't know anybody else who's going through this. But it does seem like this is a very kind of common thing that black girls go through.

ALESIA: What's really sad about that is that, yeah, I didn't have a community of black girls until very late in life. I mean, I'm not sixty, but until recently. Especially when I was transitioning from relaxed hair to

natural hair, I was looking for a community to guide me through it, and I was lucky enough that I found someone who gave me this book called *Thank God I'm Natural* that's written by a black woman who has all these natural recipes and she tells you what to do straight up. Because looking at the blogs, they were so vicious, it's a miracle I didn't just say whatever and put my hair in a fake Yaki weave or something.

AURELIA: I went natural because there were enough people out in the world, at the point when I decided to do it, who were natural, so I got to see it more and say, Wait a minute, this is exactly what I'm trying to accomplish getting these relaxers every six weeks and getting straw sets. It looks exactly the same!

ALESIA: That's an advantage of living in an area that's populated by actual black people. (*laughs*) You get to see other black people living relatively normal lives, with bangin' hair. I only found natural communities because I was having scalp issues and I knew it was probably related to getting relaxers, and I was just Googling, and I was like, What else can I do? Then I found natural hair, and I kind of just waded my way through the murk.

ALESIA: I think that's why when I see someone in a really bad . . . sorry to keep talking about bad weaves, but they're ruining our community. (*laughs*) It's a real problem, you guys! When I see people who have terrible weaves, I'm just like, Look, there's a better way. Which probably comes off as weird, but. . . .

FATIMA: My hair now looks healthy and it has a style, and it's manageable, and I just feel better. I just feel more like myself.

RAMOU: I think in the last few years I've also figured out what my style is. I sometimes like looking at fashion blogs and seeing trends, and figuring out which trends work for me and which don't. But I'm also somebody that, if I like a trend, I'm not going to stop wearing it next season or whatever, right?

AURELIA: Yeah. When you find something you like, it goes into your personal fashion library.

RAMOU: Like leopard. I'm never going to stop wearing leopard. I'm just always going to wear leopard, I think.

ALESIA: I'm so with you on that.

RAMOU: I'm wearing leopard underwear right now!

ALESIA: Most of my lingerie is leopard. My favorite nightie is this leopard-print Betsey Johnson negligee. It's got hot-pink bows on it, it's so tacky, it's so Peg Bundy, I love it.

AURELIA: That sounds amazing, are you kidding me?

COLLECTION

ODETTE HENDERSON's raincoats

CONVERSATION

I'M ALWAYS ON THE FLOOR AND WORKING

FASHION DESIGNER MONA KOWALSKA OF A DÉTACHER SPEAKS TO HEIDI JULAVITS & WRITER/CHILDBIRTH EDUCATOR CERIDWEN MORRIS

CERIDWEN: When you think about clothes, do you think more about day-to-day, practical, non-event-focused dressing?

MONA: I don't really care so much about looking sexy or smart. People want to feel a certain way. That is almost more important than how things look. So I try everything on, because I want the clothing to feel a specific way. I do all my own pattern-making, I do all my own muslins. I like to feel strong in my clothes.

CERIDWEN: I just turned forty-five, and the look that's being pitched to me is about being MILF-y, sexy—but whatever you do, don't look like you're forty-five. Like the idea of being a capital-W Woman is not so great. We should all look twenty-eight.

MONA: And the result is these terrible human collages. Sometimes you see someone from the back and they're all worked out and wearing skinny jeans and then they turn around. . . .

HEIDI: Eep! And they're seventy!

MONA: I'd prefer someone dressed in a dowdy way.

CERIDWEN: I feel like the stuff you design is younger than anything else out there, in the sense that it's childhood young. I recently tried on your dress with the ruching around the bottom. You said the design was inspired by the act of tucking your dress into your underwear.

MONA: My assistant from Australia always tucked her dress into her underwear. I thought, That is so smart, so I did it, too! Now if I'm wearing something fluid in the summer I always tuck it into my underpants, because I'm always on the floor and working.

CERIDWEN: There's this youthful aspect to your clothing and at the same time it's very much about being a grown-up woman. Everyone else is seeking to be right in the middle, at twenty-eight. Which, by the way, is a wonderful age.

HEIDI: It's not a wonderful age, actually.

CERIDWEN: It's a rough age, that's true. Thirty is a bit better.

HEIDI: I feel like forty is the best age.

MONA: I was at a dinner in France recently. Most of the women at the table were in their late fifties, and at some point somebody said, "What age would you go back to?" And all of them said forty. It was amazing. They could have said anything! They could have made themselves sixteen. Everyone said forty. You're at the top of your game, you're at the top of your career, you're at the top sexually. But here in America we don't have this appreciation. I don't find America particularly youthful, for all the emphasis on youth.

HEIDI: You really appreciate the influence of older women.

MONA: That ruched-bottom dress came from the "Grandma's House" collection. I feel like one's grandmother is a big clothing influence.

HEIDI: More than one's mother?

MONA: I think so. A grandmother is your first contact with vintage. Grandmas are pile-ups of the old thing, the acrylic thing, the crazy thing. There's the thrill of sorting through Grandmother's stuff.

HEIDI: What was your grandmother like?

MONA: She was a very elegant woman. One of the things in the collection inspired by her was this big wallet. She used to wear a big wallet between her bosoms. When she needed money, she would, just like a magician with a rabbit, pull this wallet out of the top of her dress.

CERIDWEN: I store lots of things in my bra. I have my phone in there. Credit cards, money, keys. When you don't have pockets, you have to stick it somewhere.

HEIDI: Was your mother an influence?

MONA: My mother was head of an atelier. There were two companies that dressed all of Poland under Communism, and my mother worked for one of them. She had a lot of private clients, so there were always women in and out. You know, wives of party members, who could afford to have clothing made. Our apartment was the size of your pocket, so when someone arrived, that's what was happening that day. I remember her doing wedding dresses. She thought it was a particular kind of gift to make a wedding dress.

CERIDWEN: Have you ever made a wedding dress?

MONA: I made one for one of my oldest customers, a person who supported me when I first opened. But I would never do it again.

HEIDI: You had misgivings about the dress?

MONA: I didn't. I just don't have a lot of connection to the idea of the wedding dress. I planned my wedding in two days. I wore a '40s silver jacket and black pants. So I wasn't connected to the intensity of choosing a wedding dress. You know, when a person is trying on a wedding dress, we say it looks nice, and then we have to start over and say it again. It's this "You look great" loop that goes on for two hours.

CERIDWEN: I have one of your sweaters and it's a little itchy, and there's something about the itchiness that's so intentionally contrary to the Juicy Couture comfy adult sweatpants culture.

MONA: I wear those sweaters on bare skin because I'm such a maniac. I always say, It's nice to feel your clothes. If something's a little tight on your bum, I don't think that that's an issue. You'll walk differently that day. Like a little panty line, and that funny way of walking. . . .

HEIDI: I love the panty-line detail. When you moved to Baltimore, was your mother still making your clothing?

MONA: Not so much. We moved in the 1970s, when I was nine.

CERIDWEN: Baltimore has a specific aesthetic—the whole John Waters thing. Was that relevant for you at all? Or '70s American culture in general?

MONA: Just '70s American culture in general. I really have an appreciation for that era. That was when we finally took the remaining stuffing out of the clothes. After the '80s, it's more about bulking up again, but in the '70s we were almost naked. There was this feeling: a little bit naked—powerful and naked. If I think about clothing, the 1970s is one of the decades for which I have a deep appreciation. I think it's the decade that influences me the most. Although it's less about the way the clothing looked. It's more about that feeling

of a sense of freedom. No bras, a natural body, you'd always see somebody's nipple. I have a girlfriend, she has a big bosom, and if the dress permits it, she'll go without a bra. I think that looks great.

HEIDI: Do you wear bras ever?

MONA: No. I mean, I'm so tiny!

HEIDI: You work in the back of your store. Do you ever come to the front and give customers advice when they're trying on your clothes?

MONA: Generally I try not to give advice. I don't really want to worm my way into people's lives and closets in that way. If I say something to a customer, it's usually along the lines of "That dress looks really beautiful with your hair color," because I think sometimes people don't see those things. Someone with dark hair will try on a navy dress, and all of a sudden their hair has this blue cast and it looks really beautiful. But rarely do I give advice like "You should wear this with this," because I don't know. I don't know what people should wear. You don't know about people's lives.

HEIDI: Do you ever learn things from watching people try on the clothes?

MONA: Women love pockets. Sometimes when we do sales, a buyer will try something on and I'll see her do this (*hands-searching-for-pockets gesture*), and then I will add pockets.

HEIDI: Are there other people who've inspired you?

MONA: I worked for Sonia Rykiel in Paris, and she was really into the accidental discovery. She was the first person who did the inside-out seams. I think she just put her sweater on inside out one day. As a designer, you pay attention to these accidents.

CERIDWEN: What are some of your best accidental discoveries?

MONA: One day I walked out of the shop and saw an older woman with her raincoat on. She'd put her dickey on over her raincoat, and I thought, Ah!

HEIDI: What's a dickey?

MONA: It's just a little partial shirt, it usually has a turtleneck, and you wear it under things. But she wore it over her coat, and I thought, "She couldn't find her scarf and so she just threw that on." She was a little Hispanic old lady, she wasn't doing a "look." I pay attention to older women. I find they just do these things.

CERIDWEN: What was the first thing you owned that you were excited about?

MONA: I remember some jumpsuits I had when I was in high school. I had one that was made in India.

CERIDWEN: Did you listen to the Abba record *Arrival*? The Abba ladies really worked the jumpsuit.

MONA: I had immigrant parents, so we had no music at the house. When I said I wanted a backpack, they were like, Oh my god, no, you're going to look like a runaway. So I couldn't carry a backpack or wear jeans.

HEIDI: Do you always wear heels?

MONA: I prefer heels. Last week I wore Birkenstocks and at the end of the day I just felt so bad about myself. Like, Okay, my feet don't hurt, but my morale is really low. I think I'd rather have feet that hurt a

little bit but a higher morale.

HEIDI: Do you think about how the body gets canted differently depending on the heel height? That posture becomes part of the whole look.

MONA: I have one pair of try-on shoes, they're a pair of old Miu Miu shoes that have a high heel and a very simple banded front. They are in horrible condition, they are so beat, but if I try on a muslin and those shoes are not there, I am almost in tears. I turn over the whole back room, like, "We gotta find the try-on shoes!" There's something about the way these shoes sort out my body—all of a sudden it's the proportion I want to see. It's that extra three inches on the leg. It's not about the shoe so much. It's the proportion that shoe creates.

CERIDWEN: Since I've got bigger boobs, I like to wear bigger shoes. Because if I come down to a point, I'm feel like I'm teetering.

MONA: If you made your hair big, then it would be nice to teeter.

HEIDI: Do you ever make super-delicate shoes?

MONA: I prefer a strong, sexy shoe. I like things that aren't just one thing. When you accomplish that in a design, it allows everyone to find themselves in it. I like these dualities. They're open-ended somehow. People will come in and they'll say of a dress, "It reminds me of something my mother used to wear." That sense of finding yourself in something is important. That's where the resonance comes from.

CERIDWEN: Sometimes you need fishnets to balance the wool sweater.

MONA: I think about the very beautiful woman who dresses down. She could dress up and be a total babe. But people like a more complicated presentation of themselves, I find.

HEIDI: How do you balance wanting your aesthetic to be embraced by many women with that proprietary feeling of, "Hey, fuck, that's my look."

MONA: I only have one thing about which I feel proprietary. When I wear men's shirts, I turn the collar in. I have a friend who does it and it makes me crazy. It brings out the teenager in me. You know why I resent it so much? Because I share everything. For example, I make a little dish rack for my house, and then I make it for the store because it works so great. I share everything! So that collar thing makes me so crazy. I want to say, "Let me just have this one thing." Oh, it just makes me so cross, you have no idea.

COMPLIMENT

"WATCH"

Shibuya, Tokyo. Saturday night in a department store. Two young Japanese saleswomen stand together. One is wearing a black miniskirt, tights, and a loose gray sweater. She is also wearing a watch with a brown leather band and, in its face, golden exposed gears and parts.

KATE: I like your watch!

WOMAN: Oh, thank you!

(The woman and her coworker giggle.)

HER COWORKER *(in Japanese):* Her watch is handmade.

(The woman holds it up for the others to see more closely.)

WOMAN: Handmade by an artist in Japan.

KATE: It's beautiful.

WOMAN: Thank you!

PROJECT

WEAR AREAS | GINTARE PARULYTE

1 I am obsessed with cleaning my ears. When I was small, my mum used to roll a small bubble of cotton onto a matchstick and clean my ears with it. My brother developed the same obsession, probably for the same reasons. A few years ago, during my shopping routine in an organic supermarket, I stumbled upon a tiny tool: a small Indian hairpin-looking device to clean (or rather internally massage or tickle) the ears. I couldn't believe my discovery. This small nothing represented to me the materialization of my siblinghood, a secret obsession we share and always will.

2 I was born with a stainlike birthmark on my left butt cheek. Since I grew up in the Soviet Union and Gorbachev had a similar one on his head, I was convinced that every citizen of the USSR had one on some part of the body as an anatomical manifestation of being united as a community. My interpretation was backed by the fact that my brother had a stainlike birthmark on the exact same spot, on the exact same butt cheek.

3 I can move my small toes sideways. I see it as a playful, secret gift. It empowers me and makes me feel special.

COLLECTION

KATE RYAN's tote bags

SURVEY

BREASTS

"I rebel against the idea of pleasing men, but I think lingerie is beautiful, especially on women over fifty."
—ELLEN RODGER

KRISTINA ANNE GYLING I'm pretty happy and comfortable with my body. I wish my breasts were bigger so that I could wear dresses that had bust cups or a bustline that accentuates the breasts. When I see women wearing those types of dresses, it embodies a certain part of womanhood that I don't think I'll ever experience. I think I'll feel like I'm trapped in a little girl's body forever.

MEGHAN BEAN FLAHERTY I care a great deal about lingerie. Where I fail in clothing, I ace all tests of underlace. I have a pathological desire to match the bra and panties, the silk stockings to the garter belt. Each new piece becomes a character in me—a heroine, an ingénue, a bawd. I keep them in a perfumed box.

TALITA S. My mum is sort of anti-bra. She wears Lycra tops and says anything else gives breast cancer. I used to wear Lycra tops when I was younger, but I felt embarrassed about it. My lack of decent bras made me feel like less of a woman. So when I moved to London, the first thing I bought was a bra. I went to the shop that makes bras “by appointment to Her Majesty the Queen” and had a fitting, then spent 180 pounds on a bra at Agent Provocateur. It is still the only piece of actual lingerie I own—that bra and the matching panties—and it always gives me a buzz to wear it. If I have to wear old or dirty underwear, I spend the whole day missing a big chunk of my self-confidence.

ZARA GARDNER Lately I'm very interested when women deliberately present themselves as small-chested by wearing an unpadded bra. I see this as an act of liberation, rejecting how men and society might wish them to look. I'm small-breasted myself and gradually moving toward bras that are about support over cleavage. I feel it's a sign of growing confidence and strength somehow.

TAMARA SCHIFF I think smaller breasts would be more conducive to the types of tops I like to wear. I wish I could go braless with certain tops without feeling inappropriate. It's not my style to dress in a sexy manner, but sometimes I think my boobs, which honestly aren't even that big, make things a little more va-va-voom than I would like them to be.

KRISTY HELLER I travel the country with the Renaissance Festival. My circuit takes me from North Carolina to Arizona to Minnesota to Louisiana, and everywhere in between. Every weekend I dress up in “garb” and everything I put on for the shows accentuates the female form; waists are taken in, hips are lush and womanly, breasts are everywhere. When women put on an outfit like this, they can feel this incredible surge of power.

JUDE STEWART Getting a real bra fitting is no joke when you're expecting. Those boobs really do swell on you, for a surprisingly long time, and going braless occasionally becomes a thing of the past. I used to wear a 36B and am now a 36C at least. I hate the smoothly robotic-neutral color of most maternity bras, but it's too much effort to fight that tendency entirely.

ASHLEY C. FORD My breasts are always bigger than I think. I look fertile. I'm not.

SZILVIA MOLNAR I have an almost bodily memory of a new sweater I got one Christmas. I was fourteen, and my mother had knitted me a cream-colored sweater that came out a lot tighter than planned. I liked it, but it was the first time I let my quite newly budded breasts get so much recognition. I felt they were exposed to the world for the first time, since the sweater held on to them so tightly. I ended up only wearing that sweater at home during the holidays.

EMILY BROTMAN In high school, girls with names like Molly and Cate wore sports bras that curved fantastically around their shoulder blades—I could see through their gym shirts when it rained. It made their chests look taut and perky.

REN JENDER In a cruisey, sexual way, I like women with generous bodies, perhaps because even at my

heaviest I've never had big hips or breasts.

BETH FOLLETT If I find a brassiere that suits me, I buy two or three, as it seems almost a Murphy's Law that bras I really like will become obsolete in two years. I am not a standard bra size and I've had trouble finding bras that truly fit. I don't want to wear my breasts like bullets.

MIMI CABELL My ex-boyfriend really liked it when I wore a garter belt and stockings, and he would get really turned on, but as he got turned on, I would sort of shrink away into myself. I knew that he was into me in the lingerie, but it was hard. I guess I feel at odds with the way that sexy is portrayed, because the closer I get to how I think I should be presenting myself, the less like myself I feel. I feel like an alien, or not alive, or nothing at all.

RACHEL WEEKS When I worked at this nonprofit to help garment workers, there was a faction of women there who could not believe we were considering partnering with a manufacturer that was making bras for Victoria's Secret. I mean, these women were just *livid*. And I sat there and I thought to myself: Every woman in this room is wearing a bra. And do they have any idea where that bra was made? Like, are all their bras ethically sourced? I doubt it. It's one of the most complicated garments in the world to make—it has over thirty-five components, and it's a very complicated piece of apparel with a global sourcing story.

CARISSA HALSTON I have a very small back and a very large front. How I wish I could buy a \$10 or \$15 bra from H&M. I can't even buy a \$40 bra from Lane Bryant. Because I'm a 32F, my back is too small to shop in plus-size stores and my cup size is too large to get a bra anywhere else. And if I wear the wrong-size bra, my posture is awful and my clothes fit me like a tarp.

MARIE MYUNG-OK LEE I don't enjoy wearing bras. I also think they are bad for your health, so I keep my eye out for clothes that suit this. I'm Asian, so I have small breasts and can get away with this more than women with larger cargo.

KATHRYN BOREL I never let a button-up shirt bulge around my boobs. You know when that little opening is created between two buttons? Fuck that. To myself I will say, "Suck it up, get a larger size."

ROXANE GAY I would get a breast reduction and lift. I want the girls to fly high.

KATE ZAMBRENO I have a rather large bust but a small frame—the last measurement at a bra fitting was a 32DDD. I have to buy new bras every six months, otherwise I am already on the last hook and everything's stretched. My bras are like military equipment. It's a really costly thing I have to do. I know that when my clothes don't fit then I need to buy new bras.

JASON BARKER Trying to pass as male with 38DD breasts was quite a challenge, so I wore a tight elasticated binder to keep my boobs strapped to my chest and then a beige fleece vest on top, like a psychological binder on the outside. There's a photo of me standing outside the pork pie shop in Skipton and the outline of flattened breasts is quite clear, like I'm trying to smuggle two very large pita breads under my clothes. Then, last autumn, I bought myself a padded sleeveless jacket from a shop that sells outdoor gear and I loved the whole shop. The clothes are all presented according to purpose. There are no tricky patterns or designs, nothing to call attention to the wearer in a "Look at me in my new clothes—I think I look great!" sort of way. The huge photos they have of bearded men and laughing women enjoying the outdoors were very appealing—to be free from fashion and free from the pressure to "express myself" through clothing. Truth is, I just want to look like everybody else.

COLLECTION

DOROTHY PLATT's wrap skirts

ON DRESSING

STAYING HOME

ROSE WALDMAN

From my closet I pull out a straight black skirt, my go-to on most days. I choose a cream-colored T-shirt to go with it, then the lace blouse I always wear over the T-shirt to hide the fatty bulges on my back. A perfectly good outfit—in Williamsburg, among my fellow Hasidim, that is. But for tonight's event, I'm feeling doubtful. The outfit seems too overdone. Too formal. The blouse goes back. So does the shirt.

I try a dark purple T-shirt instead. Now I look somber. Off it goes. I want something summery, light. I'll be conspicuous enough wearing long sleeves in ninety-degree weather among the halter tops I imagine everyone else will be wearing. I try the cropped white shell with the turquoise cotton sweater. I like it. Maybe this will work.

Tonight's event is a reading at a gallery by one of my fiction workshop classmates. When I got the invite, I e-mailed her, *I'll be there. Can't wait!* But in the end, I don't go. All the shilly-shallying over clothes has been for nothing. As usual, at the last minute I chicken out.

Some clarifications before I continue:

When I use the word "T-shirt," I am talking about the "Hasidic T-shirt," which is the same thing as a regular T-shirt but the sleeves are longer.

Cropped shells are also a Hasidic invention. They are long-sleeved T-shirts that end in an elastic below the bust. They're quite brilliant, actually. We can now buy pretty much any sleeveless top, wear it with a cropped shell, and voilà—instant sleeves!

After supper, I lie down on the couch with my sudoku and feel a bit guilty. I should be out there supporting my fellow writers, especially this woman, who is one of the loveliest people I know. Here's how I justify staying home:

I'm generally not a night person. After six p.m., my body and brain stop cooperating with me. So it's not really my fault, but my body's.

I squeeze a lot into my days. I deserve to relax with a book or a crossword puzzle or sudoku in the evenings.

It's really hot and humid out there, and I'm allergic to humidity. It always puts me in a foul mood.

I have so many obligations in my real life—my Hasidic life—weddings, bar mitzvahs, engagement parties, charity events, and so on, that I cannot get out of attending, that it's not my fault if I have no energy for these extracurricular experiences.

These reasons aren't bad. And they're also true. But they're not the real reasons. Or at least, not the only reasons.

The fact is, I'm self-conscious at these events. In my panty hose, long skirt, long-sleeved top, and wig, I feel like "that girl." My rational mind tells me that in New York City, where people dye their hair green and wear knee-high boots in the dead heat of summer, my Hasidic wear barely merits a second glance. But like most people, I operate by emotion, not rationality. And my emotional self feels conspicuous and self-conscious.

These days, when people compete for ever more imaginative ways to make themselves stand out, when all of life is one big exhibition and if it's not on Facebook and Twitter it's like it never happened, I suppose many people would enjoy standing out. But that's because they don't have to stand out. Standing out is their luxury, not their necessity.

It bothers me that I didn't go to the reading. Clothes should not have such power.

POEM | TEXTILE NAMES I

Bird

Doris

Gossips

Rooster

Princess

Tulip tree

Les violons

Spring rain

Deer season

White trellis

Field flowers

Flower heads

Scattered pins

Vegetable patch

Orange blossom

Triangles and lines

Pennies from heaven

CONVERSATION

YOUR JEWELRY IS YOUR STOMACH

NOVELIST KIRAN DESAI SPEAKS TO HEIDI JULAVITS

HEIDI: You recently mentioned that you're at a fashion crossroads.

KIRAN: Yes, but also a life crossroads. I realized that I've been doing everything wrong. (*laughs*)

HEIDI: Let's start with clothes and then we can explore the other aspects of your wrongness.

KIRAN: I grew up in India, so you have to learn a whole new way of doing clothes when you move to the West. Fashions don't carry over, so if you fly between places you will inevitably look wrong in the country you're going to. Definitely going to India you look bad if you go in your Western clothes. Everyone comments on how awful you look right away. The sky is different, the street is different, the dust is different—only Indian clothes work.

HEIDI: So do you have both of those wardrobes?

KIRAN: No, I don't. I always look wrong when I go back to India. But then, I feel extremely unhappy in New York, too.

HEIDI: New York is where I've always felt the most wrong. Even when I manage to feel right on occasion, if I see a picture of myself when I felt right, I look horrible to myself.

KIRAN: I feel ashamed of myself when I feel right in New York, because there's something wrong with this place. I'm always stunned when I walk into a party and I find all these women are really wearing little high heels, and girls are dressed in tiny clothes that look really horrible in fact, and they're so miserable in the cold of winter, wearing tiny little high heels in the snow. These women have no pride.

HEIDI: Many people see saris as being more uniform, if they don't have an eye for where the differences lie, where personal flair comes in.

KIRAN: That's right. It's in the way you tie them. But also, every tiny community and all the weaving families, they have a code of symbols, and the patterns can be handed down six, seven generations. They're so complex. The wedding sari will have its own special symbols—it's this huge code. They're beautiful. The plants and shells and creatures and birds . . . I miss that, because in America, you don't have animals all over your clothes. Well, you do sometimes, but I'm not a fan of leopard print.

HEIDI: Just actual leopards.

KIRAN: I lament having to give up Indian clothing now that I'm here. It's one of the most fun things about being an Indian woman. But it's really time-consuming. All these people manage to have clothes like that because they have servants. With the saris, you wash these great lengths of fabric, then you hang them on huge lines or down your balcony, then you starch them and then someone stands on one end and you stand on the other end and you pull it to make it tight and starchy, and then it's ironed. So it's a lot of work.

HEIDI: I never think of saris as being starched. I think of them as being more flowing.

KIRAN: Well, the cotton ones are starched. Traditionally they're dipped in rice water and then starched, so you walk around so stiffly. Then gradually the humidity and sun get to them and they become really crumpled.

HEIDI: They wilt.

KIRAN: Starched clothes also sound so different. I once interviewed weavers in different parts of India, and they were telling me how important the sound of silk is. If two women are going through a door together, and they rub saris, they should make a *kssshh*. They complained that cheap Chinese silks are flooding the market. They don't have the right sound. It should be rustling.

HEIDI: Instead of that nylon-y, slick sound. Do you have recollections of learning what to wear once you moved to England, then America?

KIRAN: I remember starting to wear the most basic T-shirts and jeans and being unhappy in them. If you haven't grown up wearing a lot of jeans, they're very uncomfortable.

HEIDI: They have grommets on them. That dig into your body!

KIRAN: Why did they become so popular? Remember after September 11, when everyone was terrified that anyone who looked strange in New York would summarily shoot something? Well, my aunt has only worn saris her whole life, and her son told her, "You've got to try to wear jeans." So they put her into jeans and she couldn't sit down. (*laughs*) I kept saying, "Sit down," and she'd say, "I can't!" (*laughs*)

HEIDI: So what made your misery come to a head?

KIRAN: I don't know. It was building and building and I realized I'm not . . . *anything*. I'm not living the life I want. I'm not living according to my ideals of life. I'm just sort of embarrassing myself. One option for me now is to come up with a kind of uniform.

HEIDI: And you feel that figuring out a uniform is a starting point?

KIRAN: Well, you have to have some sort of self-respect in the end that doesn't alter depending on where you go, which place you travel to. Ideally, the uniform would be something I'm happy in, that's not dull, but also that I could wear all the time.

HEIDI: Gustav Klimt used to work in a blue caftan. It was a painter's smock, and it was linen, and almost looked like a monk's robe.

KIRAN: With exciting fabric, you could wear that with your long johns in the winter! I feel like when I find the right thing, I'm really going to go for it and stick with it, because it's taken me until age forty-two to be in this miserable place.

KIRAN: I'm writing a story right now about these women going to visit the family jewelry in the bank—these precious stones mixed with beads and glass. That was your inheritance, and it mattered a lot, as any Indian woman knows. And the grandmother keeps giving it away to the granddaughters, then reclaiming it because she can't bear to let it go because . . . it's like her stomach is missing. I've seen it so strongly, the jealousy, greed—having to pass on your jewelry, feeling your jewelry is your stomach, in a way. It's that much the center of your life—your saris, your jewels. There are women in my family—their eyes, their entire expression changes as soon as they're in front of a sari or old jewels they've handed down. Something really old comes up. I remember my grandmother had these jewels, and whenever she had to give one away, she felt like an organ was missing.

HEIDI: And she had to give it away because. . . .

KIRAN: Because you inherited it. You have to give it to a daughter when she gets married.

HEIDI: So in the story you're writing, they're going to visit the jewelry in the bank?

KIRAN: Yes.

HEIDI: That's fascinating—the survival worry that, as a woman, you're only worth what you show up with. Like you have this clothing, and this dowry with these linens, and these jewels.

KIRAN: Yes. I have some jewelry that was divided among all us grandchildren, and I have my grandmother's nose ring. It's huge—it covers your whole mouth. Why don't I wear that?

PROJECT

MOTHERS AS OTHERS | PART 1

Send a photograph of your mother from the time before she had children and tell us what you see.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Dwight Case:

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