

Introduction to the Academic Roundtable

“Homeless Chic:” The Cultural Contradictions of Representations of the Homeless and of Homelessness

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The contradictory term “homeless chic” was initially employed in the spring of 2000, when designer John Galliano introduced his “boho-meets-hobo chic” spring-summer haute couture collection for the House of Dior in Paris. Dior models wore newspapers, straightjackets, tin cups, and whiskey bottles. The denigration of homelessness implied by these images caused quite a stir, especially from homeless advocates. By placing abject images of extreme poverty within the context of the privileged world of couture, Galliano’s “art” essentially reinforced an already present separation between rich and poor, othering “them” and comically rendering those experiencing homelessness as almost sub-human and limited in a fixed identity. Although he revealed his source of inspiration to be *les clochards* (homeless people) he passed during his daily runs, and maintained that his intentions were to “expose the pure decadence of the couture by ‘turning it inside out,’” his designs shocked the public.¹ Met with much negativity from critics who claimed how preposterous it was for him to be exploiting the misfortunes of others in an effort of aesthetics, Galliano publicly apologized, quietly retreated, and has since worked to repair the damage done to his reputation by rebounding with many admired collections since.²

Nevertheless, Galliano’s controversial “homeless chic” could not be quickly or easily forgotten when in 2001, Hollywood presented the hit comedy *Zoolander*, starring Ben Stiller as an aspiring male model, as a direct parody of Galliano’s disastrous spring line. The film calls its version *Derelecte* – explained in the movie as “a fashion, a way of life inspired by the very homeless, the vagrants, the crack whores that make this wonderful city [NYC] so unique.”³ The film’s satirical attempt to gussy up the word “derelict” and its connotations into a form of upscale chic seemed to represent the commonly held view by the public that Galliano’s vision did not coincide with the sense of cultural sympathy and human identification with the homeless present in the 1980s nor in the beginnings of the new millennium.

Yet despite a general reaction of shock and repulsion toward the oddity and absurdity of even the mere term “homeless chic,” there still lingered in the media a kind of fascination with such a contradictory and slippery concept. The fashion style first presented by Galliano continued to make headlines when tabloids and celebrity magazines like *People* began dropping the “bohemian” tag and began identifying the fashion choices of Hollywood celebrities as “homeless chic.” Between 2004 and 2009, “homeless chic” lost its mostly negative connotations and began garnering more positive attention, for a style that rejects the overt display of wealth.

In popular culture over the past several years, “homeless chic” has surfaced widely – from television shows and magazine spreads, to even the toy industry. For example, in the February 27, 2008, episode of Tyra Banks’ *America’s Next Top Model* girls experiencing homelessness were invited to the set and given the opportunity to try on couture clothing while the show’s models, apparently choosing not to interact with their guests, attempted to channel what it might be like to live on the streets as they posed as homeless. In September 2009, the American high fashion magazine *W* displayed a “Paper Bag Princess” line designed by Alex White, modeled by Sasha Pirorarova, and shot by Craig McDean, in which a “dark, urban portfolio of street style me[t] high fashion.”⁴ The photographs depict Pirorarova wearing different ensembles of pieces of paper shopping bags from Prada and Dior, mainly lying down in various urban street settings, and the series was met with rave reviews about the creation of such “great art.” That same year, Mattel produced a new limited edition addition to their American Girl Doll Collection, “the wildly successful, extremely expensive brand of faux children that are sold out of a four-story town house in the heart of Fifth Avenue.”⁵ Doll Gwen Thompson’s back-story included a narrative about her father walking out on the family and Gwen living in her car with her mother, all in the name of awareness. Yet the doll sold for ninety-five dollars with none of the proceeds directly earmarked for homeless aid. After a much-contested and negative reaction to the product, American Girl released a response to the criticisms that cited its fundraising and “ongoing partnership” in the last several years with national non-profit homeless housing group HomeAid in “its mission to support the temporarily homeless.”⁶ It also removed from its website any mention of homelessness in conjunction with Gwen, who is currently sold out.⁷

This glaringly contradictory term “homeless chic” offers occasion for critical thinking about the intersections of class, identity, representation, citizenship, and power, and the contributors to this Academic Roundtable approach the topic from a variety of perspectives. Paula Mathieu, in “Public Rhetorics and Homeless Chic,” offers ways to think about “homeless chic” through the purview of public rhetoric. She asks, and offers tentative, speculative answers, to some particularly productive questions like: “What kinds of publics are being hailed into being under the banner of “homeless chic”? Who benefits and who gets hurt from these depictions? And, Does our academic attention to this matter enlighten or merely fuel this spectacle?” Amanda Grzyb examines programs that encourage participants to pretend to be poor as a way of purportedly gaining knowledge of the experience itself. She argues in her contribution, “‘Homeless Chic’ as Domestic Poverty Tourism: Street Retreats, Urban Plunges, and North American Class Boundaries,” that although perhaps well-intentioned, efforts of advocacy and awareness like alternative spring break experiences of living as homeless and street yoga retreats actually reinforce already-existing class boundaries. In “Fashion/ing Statements: Reading Homeless Bodies in Contemporary Fiction,” Dorothea Löbbermann critiques representations of homeless bodies in literature – how they are described, how they are dressed, and what the relationship between the bodies and their clothes signify. The next contribution is a visual answer to the paradoxes of “homeless chic” that was eventually published in *Stütze*, one of Berlin’s homeless street newspapers, in 2003. Three students of Berlin University of the Arts –

Victoria Kirjuchina, Caroline Scotto and Dominik Schumacher – reenacted two *Vogue* fashion editorials with actors of a homeless theater group, *Die Ratten 07*. Finally, my own contribution, “Homeless Chic in the Classroom” examines what happens when these issues of representation, cultural paradox, and rhetorical publics in relation to homelessness become classroom discourse. In the piece, I share some reflections on teaching a course based on the concept of “homeless chic”, and the conclusions drawn by university students about the contradictory and conflicted representations of homelessness present in cultural artifacts such as contemporary literature and film. It is our hope that this Academic Roundtable on “homeless chic” gives a current and varied perspective on the cultural contradictions of the representations of homelessness present in our world today.

Notes

1. Polyvore, “John Galliano,” Feb. 15, 2010, http://www.polyvore.com/john_galliano/set?id=5950663.
2. Elle.com, “From the Sublime to the Absurd: John Galliano,” January 2001, <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/STYLE/ELLE/05/02/>.
3. *Zoolander*. Dir. Ben Stiller. Paramount, 2002.
4. “Sasha: Paper Bag Princess,” IMG Models Blog, August 20, 2009, <http://imgmodelsblog.wordpress.com/2009/08/20/sasha-paper-bag-princess/>.
5. Andrea Peyser, “‘Homeless’ Doll Costs \$95 (Hairstyling Extra),” *New York Post* Sept. 24, 2009, http://www.nypost.com/f/print/news/national/item_4Ic0hC7Lacpfo8HQbczsQM.
6. “‘Homeless’ American Girl Doll Costs \$95,” *The Consumerist* Sept. 29, 2009, <http://consumerist.com/2009/09/homeless-american-girl-doll-costs-95.html>.
7. American Girl, “Gwen Doll and Paperback Book,” 2010, <http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/html/ProductPage.jsf/itemId/142095/itemType/TOY/webTemplateId/3/uniqueId/609/saleGroupId/1123>.