Mad Men, Mad World
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In the season 1 DVD special feature “Establishing Mad Men,” the producer Scott Hornbacher says that “accuracy to the period is of paramount importance to all of us, because if it’s wrong it’s embarrassing . . . and it compromises the ability for people to suspend their disbelief.”¹ “Behind the Scenes” videos on the AMC website and ancillary media accounts also regularly detail the show’s meticulous reproduction of everyday life in the 1960s. There is the eBay bidding war for authentic TWA pilot’s wings, and issues of Time, Life, and Playboy recreated for momentary onscreen appearances (Keane and Lewis).² Highlighting costumers, prop masters, set designers, and the perfectionist auteur-creator Matthew Weiner, these explorations assure us that Mad Men is what the early 1960s really looked and felt like. The show’s proclaimed historicity is then distinguished from the vague and nostalgic “past-ness” of movies like American Graffiti (1973) and television shows like The Wonder Years (ABC, 1988–93).

While Mad Men can thus be constructed as an archive of material history, the public promotion of the show reveals a more performative aspect to the text and its twenty-first-century representation of the 1960s. Before the season 3 premiere, AMC publicized the show through the slogans “The World’s Gone Mad” and “New York’s Gone Mad.” A week of promotional events in

SWING SKIRTS AND SWINGING SINGLES
Mad Men, Fashion, and Cultural Memory
MABEL ROSENHECK
New York City culminated in a public screening of the premiere in Times Square. AMC’s website invited fans to “watch the Season 3 premiere on the big screen and come dressed in your swankiest sixties attire to enter our pre-screening costume contest” (Oei). The AMC blog “Mad Men” Fashion File and magazines such as Elle and Marie Claire also encourage the live performance of Mad Men’s historical fictions, telling readers “how to dress like a Mad woman” (Krentcil, “How to Dress”; Krentcil, “The Frills”) and where to find high-end lookalike pieces (Aminosharei and Joseph; Marie Claire). Other examples include Brooks Brothers’ collaboration with the costumer Janie Bryant to release a Mad Men suit, and Banana Republic’s Mad Men–inspired lines and window displays (fig. 8.1).3

With marketing that emphasizes historical accuracy, and promotions that encourage viewers to extend the show from screen to street, Mad Men provides an opportunity to examine television’s representation of the past in terms of what the performance scholar Diana Taylor calls the “archive” of material artifacts and the “repertoire” of performed cultural memory. Performance highlights not only the movement from archive to repertoire but also the movement between past and present, including the meaning of the past in the present day. In this chapter I examine Mad Men—and in particular the show’s 1960s fashions—as a contemporary negotiation of past and present and a representation of the performance of cultural memory. Though the discourse surrounding the show stresses historical accuracy and an authentic archival look, the embodied nature of fashion and fashion-oriented promotions highlights the status of both clothing and the series as exercises in memory through which twenty-first-century production engages the history of the 1960s.4

MEMORY, HISTORY, AND FASHION

The suggestion that fashion can be a site for the interaction of past and present rather than a static artifact of history draws on Taylor’s concept of the archive and the repertoire. It also draws on broader understandings of memory’s relationship to history. Pierre Nora makes a distinction between history, by which he means authoritative accounts of what happened and when, and memory, a manifestation of the past in lived experience. He asserts that memory “is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present,” whereas “history is a representation of the past” (8). History fixes the past; memory emphasizes the past as a dynamic, flexible, and usable part of everyday life. Yet these two concepts need not be diametrically
opposed. For Marita Sturken, “cultural memory is a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history” (1). Sturken’s alternative to Nora lies in presenting “cultural memory and history as entangled rather than oppositional” (5). The colloquial definition of memory as rooted in personal experience can be part of this entanglement, yet so are the pasts constructed by history, collective memory, and nostalgia, as well as the pasts found in textbooks, museums, public memorials, and popular media.

We can then add Taylor’s material archives and performed repertoires to the already entangled fields of history and memory. For Taylor, the division of historical sources is not “between the written and spoken word but between the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (19). Performance studies thus “allows us to expand what we understand by ‘knowledge’” (16). Though *Mad Men*’s narrative of history may be a textual archive, it is also an embodied repertoire reliant on the performances of actors. Television becomes archival when its performance is recorded, but its performative status allows it to mobilize repertorial aspects as well. Looking at *Mad Men* though Taylor’s archive and repertoire allows us to put alternative histories of gender and resistance in conversation with more vocal and dominant narratives of the past, constructing a representation of history that is also a site of memory.

Fashion is pivotal in developing this relationship because, like the show itself, it is archival as well as repertorial. As artifacts, vintage clothing can act as “congealed memories of the daily life of times past” (E. Wilson, 1). Yet vintage fashions also establish a performative “dialogue between the present-day wearers of that clothing and its original wearers” (Silverman, “Fragments,” 195). Similarly, retro clothing is not just an object to purchase but part of an everyday performance of history and gender identity. Through this dual performance, we can see Kaja Silverman’s suggestion that “retro also provides a means of salvaging the images that have traditionally sustained female subjectivity, images that have been consigned to the waste-basket not only by fashion but by ‘orthodox’ feminism” (“Fragments,” 195). Clothing operates as a palimpsest on which social, cultural, and personal histories are written and through which we evoke, embody, and perform those histories in dialogue with contemporary contexts as part of the repertoire. Further, as clothing is used to construct gender roles and female identities, retro fashion becomes a space in which women’s histories are in dialogue with feminist historiographies. Thus, looking at *Mad Men*’s use of embodied
**Figure 8.1.**  
A page from the Banana Republic “Mad about Style” style guide, 2009.

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**BANANA REPUBLIC IS**

**MAD ABOUT SKIRTS**

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Printed Tie Blouse
$69.99

G-Backie Belt
$49.95

Flatiron Zip Wallet
(Available in August)
$79.95

Tassel Bracelet
$39.95

Hourglass Pencil Skirt
$79.95

Ely Suede Bootie
$160

(On the opposite page)

Modern Duchess Lattice Ring $39.95
Retro Print Scarf $39.95
Vintage Pen Necklace (Joan’s own)
All items imported.

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The Pencil Skirt
Lightweight wool. Day-to-night ease. Sharp and to the point when paired with a delicate printed blouse. Add a chic belt, bag and heels, and you’re ready to call the shots.
Office Manager

JOAN HOLLOWAY

Joanie always lets 'em know who's boss—and her form-fitting silhouettes and bold accessories complement her in-charge attitude flawlessly.
fashion, we see an archive, but also a repertoire of femininity and feminism, shifting between the past being represented and its present performance; between traditional and alternative ways of understanding these times and places.

AMC’s active incitement of viewer performance suggests that *Mad Men* acknowledges both the archival and the dialogic and performative aspects of historical representation. However, the relation between objects and performance in everyday life does not necessarily reproduce what appears on-screen. As a historical drama, *Mad Men* uses fashion as a sign of historical authenticity, “looking through clothes,” to cite Stella Bruzzi. But the viewer is also given the opportunity to “look at clothes,” to “create an alternative discourse, and one that usually counters or complicates the ostensible strategy of the overriding narrative” (Bruzzi, 36). I suggest that *Mad Men* encourages an alternative discourse of fashion that performatively links the recreated past to the present, and links the feminisms and femininities of the 1960s to those of the twenty-first century. Watching *Mad Men*, we are encouraged to look at clothes and engage actively in a dialogue between the pre–second wave feminism of the characters, the feminism that they will live through in the 1960s and ’70s, and more contemporary ideas about feminism, femininity, and gender.

Though the characters I look at here—Betty Draper, Joan Holloway, and Peggy Olson—each negotiate this historical performance in distinct ways and through distinct fashions, their juxtaposition through the television narrative creates an even more dynamic version of women’s history, feminist identity, and the pleasures of femininity. While our looking “through” their clothes would place these women squarely in the past, looking “at” their clothes moves the characters back and forth between past and present. The effect highlights not only change over time but also continuities: the progressive aspects of the past as well as the regressive aspects of the present. *Mad Men*’s fashions thus become a site of memory and a field of cultural and historical negotiation rather than a fixed representation of the past.

**Betty Draper’s Dresses**

I begin with Betty Draper because she is explicitly connected both to the traditional gender roles of the postwar housewife and to the feminism born out of that era’s oppressions. The origins of Betty’s New Look fashion and her concomitant role in the family lie in a familiar postwar narrative. During the Second World War, women went to work alongside men and, at least
in heavy industry, adopted male fashions: pants, overalls, and caps (Steele, 80–82). After 1945, with soldiers returning from overseas, women were supposed to return to the home, give their jobs back to men, resume their unpaid duties as wives and mothers, and refashion themselves in New Look femininity.

Introduced by Christian Dior on Paris runways in 1947, the New Look highlighted the female form with a structured bodice, fitted waistline, and voluminous skirt that were a break with wartime menswear-inspired, fabric-rationed garments. As Karal Ann Marling argues, the New Look used dress to construct “an artificial, manufactured woman whose anatomical differences were exaggerated to conform to the sexual dimorphism of the 40s and 50s” (12). The 1950s housewife in her New Look dress, high heels, and pearls symbolized a return to normative gender roles and separate spheres. Although Dior claimed that “the collection affirms the natural graces of Woman . . . Woman the stem, Woman the flower” (qtd. in Cawthorne, 119), that “natural,” floral shape required “a padded bra . . . along with a boned corset to give the nipped waist, and hip pads” (Cawthorne, 111). Despite its pretenses, the New Look was artificial and impractical, but this, in turn, was strategic and symbolic. The impracticality performed a class function by showing off postwar prosperity, demonstrating that a man’s wife need not, “does not and cannot habitually engage in useful work” (Thorstein Veblen qtd. in E. Wilson, 50). The immobility of the New Look and its attendant undergarments thus made the woman into an object, at best “a form of living sculpture,” at worst “irrelevant to the dress” and its conspicuous display of consumption, male earning power, and economic status (Marling, 11).

Betty seems to fit this description perfectly. She is constructed as subservient, an archetypal postwar housewife on display. Since she has a maid to help rear her children and clean her house, Betty’s functional value is not linked to her labor so much as it is linked to her appearance. We see this, for instance, in “The Benefactor” (2.3) when Don invites Betty to dinner in the city. Upon discovering that this is a business dinner, Betty asks casually, “Is this one where I talk or don’t talk?” While agreeing to be “shiny and bright” and to be his “better half,” she also tells Don, “I have nothing to wear.” This narrative development is further contextualized in the season 2 DVD special feature “An Era of Style.” There, fashion historian Valerie Steele explains Betty and her dresses by introducing the designer and author Anne Fogarty’s concept of “wife dressing” as the primary principle of 1950s fashion and the New Look. Steele says, “The first principle of wife dressing was complete femininity. A woman should be dressing to please her husband and to help
him at his career.” She explains how this fashion “was part of the conservative sexual politics of the 1950s and early 1960s . . . the era of the feminine mystique and going back to strict gender roles so women were supposed to dress like women and men were supposed to be like men.” Though Steele clearly describes Mad Men’s historical context, the show does not only look through Betty’s clothes to fix her temporally. It also looks at Betty and her dresses to examine her feminist future as well as our feminist past.

The first time we properly meet Betty is in the second episode of season 1, “Ladies Room”; she is out at dinner with Don, Roger Sterling, and his wife Mona. Betty wears a quintessential New Look dress: white with a blue and pink floral pattern, an excessively full skirt, a curved boat neckline, and a fitted waist with a wide blue satin sash tied in a bow at the back. Betty’s sartorially constructed femininity once again serves Don’s career at a business dinner. Yet in this episode we also see Betty’s anxiety as a recurring hand numbness becomes the physical symptom of a psychological disorder implicitly linked to what Betty Friedan would call “the problem that has no name.” As Friedan explained it in 1963, “There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique” (7). Or, as Betty puts it on her psychiatrist’s couch, her mother “wanted [her] to be beautiful so [she] could find a man. There’s nothing wrong with that. But then what? Just sit and smoke and let it go till you’re in a box?” (“Shoot,” 1.9). Betty’s complete femininity is only a fashionable façade, and one that is cracking as it increasingly fails to mask the emptiness and oppression of this limited identity.

Betty’s façade is further dismantled by Mad Men’s ongoing revelation of gender, fashion, the New Look, and wife dressing as careful constructions. When we see the undergarments, bullet bras, girdles, and corselettes that shape Betty’s figure and construct her complete femininity, the natural womanliness of the New Look and dimorphic gender roles is undermined. Further, in the revelation that the female ideal is an artificial manipulation there is an acknowledgment that gender, fashion, and the body are performative and so can be manipulated not only by patriarchal forces but by women themselves. This rewrites the corseted and dressed woman as a subject as well as an object. By acknowledging subjectivity, Mad Men opens a space for women to find pleasure in the performance of the ideal image, a space in which they are not just victims of that image.

In “Red in the Face” (1.7), Betty tells Francine that her psychiatrist tried to look down her dress, noting, “As far as I’m concerned, as long as men still
look at me that way, I’m earning my keep.” This, like the later comments to her psychiatrist in “Shoot,” indicates that Betty’s social role is dependent on the class and gender cues her appearance provides. Yet it also indicates that Betty, as well as the audience, is aware of the sartorial performance. Not only does she understand that her function is valuable, but she and the series also acknowledge that there is pleasure to be taken in the performance of that function, pleasure that lies outside of her function as an economic asset and as a dressed wife. Indeed, she continues, “Every once in a while I think, no, this is something else. I don’t want my husband to see this.” To this, Francine replies, “I love to be looked at that way.” The male gaze upon these women constructs them as sexual objects, but their self-awareness and self-pleasure complicates that construction and reconstructs them as sexual subjects who manipulate the meaning of their performances of fashion and gender as much as their performances are determined by the desires of the men around them.

In moments like this, Mad Men uses Betty to suggest a distinct feminist trajectory that is linked to second wave feminism’s rejection of subservience but that also reinterprets the seemingly subservient performances of pre–second wave fashion and femininity. On the one hand this is a process of rereading the past through the lens of the present and through contemporary feminist theory that sees performativity as potentially destabilizing gender essentialism. At the same time, it works historiographically to reject a traditional reading of the past and of the housewife as ignorant, suggesting that the artificiality of the façade was always apparent to the women who constructed it daily. Further, this rewriting of history through Betty suggests that with the knowledge of artifice can come a pleasure in performativity, a pleasure—particularly in feminine excess—that potentially destabilizes traditional gender ideology.

In “A Night to Remember” (2.8), the self-conscious sartorial performance works not only to reclaim the figure of the postwar housewife but also to re-interpret her fashions and reevaluate the symbolism of the New Look in a time beyond the 1950s. In this episode we once again see Betty at a dinner for Don, this time with his bosses and their wives at the Draper home. Betty wears a spaghetti-strap New Look gown in white silk with blue, green, and yellow polka dots. Yet the innocent femininity of the dress and its cheerful color is belied by the fury with which Betty approaches Don after the party, accusing him of embarrassing her and revealing that she knows about his extramarital affair. The next day the dress (which she has slept in) wrinkles and the straps fall off her shoulders as she too comes apart while search-
ing frantically for proof of Don’s infidelity. The dress no longer conveys the façade of idealized femininity but now reflects the anxiety it sought to contain (fig. 8.2). Betty does not have the language to articulate her dissatisfaction, so we see it instead through an appearance that challenges the conventions of her dress’s intended construction of gender and a passive female self.

We can see, then, how *Mad Men* encourages the reconstruction of fashion not just as an artifact of history but as a dynamic site of memory. Dress and narrative simultaneously suggest the series’ move forward from the 1960s and the contextual move back from the 2000s to explore the past. Beyond the movement between text and context, however, the movement back coincides with contemporary women’s explorations of vintage femininity through retro fashion trends. We find this suggestion especially in the promotional encouragement of retro style everywhere from Janie Bryant’s *Fashion File* book and the corresponding *AMC* blog to Banana Republic, from Times Square dress-up parties to vintage boutiques that long predate *Mad Men*. Performativity works to comment not only on the constructedness of gender but also on the negotiation of the past in the present. This allows a renegotiation of the pre–second wave housewife, as well as of second wave feminism. The possibility that dresses and heels and petticoats can suggest feminist values is a rewriting of the popular misconception that fashion and feminism are incompatible. Indeed, in Silverman’s words, vintage and retro fashion is a way of “acknowledging that its wearer’s identity has been shaped by decades of representational activity” (“Fragments,” 195). Though I would
argue that these ideas are embedded in every vintage dress worn fifty years later, *Mad Men’s* ability to narrativize this makes these dynamics uniquely explicit. *Mad Men* transforms personal memories and personal histories of individual wearers into cultural memory and public history.

**JOAN HOLLOWAY’S HIPS**

While Betty is part of a contemporary reevaluation and reclamation of the 1950s housewife, Joan Holloway’s relationship to feminist history works by finding continuity between the present and the past in a model of feminism the second wave has generally not accommodated. Like Betty, Joan embraces her femininity through fashion and style in a manner that can become resistant as it foregrounds the constructedness of gender and as she finds pleasure in being a single woman. That this kind of femininity can be feminist has not been easily accepted in the dominant discourses surrounding conventional feminist history. As Jennifer Scanlon argues, “The grand effect of such feminist attempts to deemphasize women’s looks was that the movement as a whole most often either avoided the issue of fashion or considered it an element of women’s punishment rather than their pleasure, their oppression rather than liberation” (130). Yet because of *Mad Men’s* investment in the history of fashion and feminism, it can pose a question more like Elizabeth Wilson’s: “Is fashionable dress part of the oppression of women, or is it a form of adult play? Is it part of the empty consumerism, or is it a site of struggle symbolized in dress codes?” (231). *Mad Men* negotiates these questions by moving between the moments in which each idea dominates. For Betty, the connotations of the New Look collide with the feminine mystique and the contemporary reevaluation of postwar womanhood. In Joan, the potential liberation of the sexy single girl collides with the career limitations of the early 1960s, forcing questions about the politics of appearance, femininity, and sexuality and how they have or have not changed since then.

As Tamar Jeffers argues, and as is made plain through Betty and Joan on *Mad Men*, in the 1950s and early 1960s there were “two predominant outlines for the female costume: the New Look-inspired swing-skirted silhouette, with tight waist and multiple, full stiff petticoats supporting circular skirts, versus more tailored, figure-hugging sheaths” (51). Though both silhouettes highlight the female form with a fitted bodice and cinched waist, the New Look extends the movement from waist to hip while the sheath shows off the legs and rear by following the line of the hip into the knee rather than standing away from it. Jeffers suggests that in contrast to the New Look, “the
sheath shape both clung to the body, revealing its curves to the viewer, and simultaneously permitted approach thanks to its more parsimonious occupation of space” (52). She argues that the sheath’s connection to the body was a sign of sexual experience, yet at the same time it could emphasize that women like Joan were “in the office to attract men rather than taking their careers seriously” (51). Thus Joan’s fashion and body suggest both a traditional expectation for women to find husbands, not careers, and a feminist or proto-feminist embrace of female sexuality on a woman’s own terms. Indeed, the show initially emphasizes Joan’s highly sexualized position in the workplace but increasingly uses that same style to highlight her personal complexity and professional competence.

While the New Look silhouette constructed one kind of woman in the 1950s, Lee Wright makes a parallel argument about the stiletto heel in the 1960s (fig. 8.3). The physical effect of the heel is to highlight the hourglass silhouette constructed by the sheath dress or the pencil skirt and its attendant undergarments. Socially and politically, however, Wright argues, the stiletto was used by some women to represent dissatisfaction with the conventional female image and to replace it with that of a “modern” woman who was more active and economically independent than her predecessors. The paradox is that, in retrospect, it has been labeled a “shackling” instrument which renders women immobile and passive. . . . I consider it a more important factor that the stiletto did not symbolise the housewife. From 1957 the stiletto was associated with glamour, with rebellion: it represented someone . . . “modern” and “up to date,” and, above all, someone who inhabited a world outside the home. (203)

In other words, fashion and the stiletto heel operate not just as a form of unidirectional containment but also as a site of struggle—and it is clear that many contemporary viewers experience a great deal of pleasure in Joan for precisely the ways in which she seems to struggle against her social roles, her space, even her own clothing. Wright’s analysis offers a historical framework for Joan’s fashion, femininity, and sexuality as a break with the gender roles and gendered expectations of the New Look and the 1950s housewife. Joan’s fashions and the way her sartorial choices publicly highlight her body and her sexuality align her not just with the 1950s sex kitten stereotype but with the sexual revolution, the birth control pill, and a brand of feminism which embraced the possibilities that women might have it all: work and sex, independence and relationships, femininity and feminism. Key to this relationship as embodied in Joan is the possibility that a feminist reading of
Figure 8.3. Joan’s stiletto heels on disc 1 of the season 2 DVD box set (Lionsgate, 2009).
the clothed body “no longer rests with the image (whether such a stereotyped femininity can be perceived as feminist) but with the possession of the image” (Bruzzi, 127). Joan “controls the effect of the image” (Bruzzi, 127) by embracing a 1950s stereotype not because of what it is to men, but because of what it is to women: the opposite of the oppressed and contained housewife.

Joan and her narrative arc also demonstrate the limitations of feminine power rooted in appearance, however. We admire the confidence with which her sexualized body moves around the office, but we also see her feet aching in high heels and the marks her bra straps leave on her shoulder. In “A Night to Remember” Joan fills in as a script reader for the television department at Sterling Cooper. She is uniquely useful in this new position since she offers the perspective of the soap opera’s female target audience. Joan also enjoys her new role and responsibility. However, even when her insight is acknowledged, it is linked to her appearance. One executive tells Harry Crane, “This is why I didn’t want to do this on the phone. I love what she says and I love the way she says it.” And once she proves the value of the position, the newly created full-time job is given without discussion to a new male hire. The story line ends with a disappointed Joan, undressing at home, rubbing her shoulder where deep red marks show the physical and emotional cost of her femininity. Despite the power her body exudes and the pleasure it gives her (and the viewer) to wield her curves in the office, despite the insight she brings to the advertisers, her prospects are limited by the very femininity from which she gets those pleasures. She has no ability to leverage her power and insight into anything except an engagement ring. Joan, like Betty, is left looking pretty but questioning the payoff, a move that alerts us to the real need for a coming feminism that will insist on the place of women in the workplace and the possibilities for her outside of the home.

Joan’s paradox is not only that the high heel that “has been labeled a ‘shackling’ instrument” is also a sign of her liberation, but that as much as her emphasis on femininity as power is familiar to and embraced by twenty-first-century feminism, her power nonetheless reads as dated, even tragic, in retrospect. In “The Summer Man” (4.8) Joan chides Peggy for having fired a disrespectful employee who draws an obscene image of Joan: “I’d already handled it. And if I wanted to go further, one dinner with Mr. Cortzer from Sugarberry Ham and Joey would’ve been off it and out of my hair. . . . No matter how powerful we get around here, they can still just draw a cartoon. So all you’ve done is prove to them that I’m a meaningless secretary and you’re another humorless bitch.” Though she does demonstrate the power of femininity and is certainly a powerful woman, in moments like these it is
hard not to see as well how the power of Joan’s appearance is undermined by that appearance’s roots in male ideals designed to keep women in a subordinate position.

Because of her embrace of femininity and sexuality, Joan resonates with women who have grown up after the advances of second wave feminism, women who want to embrace femininity as powerful, not reject it as a sign of patriarchy. However, Joan’s limitations may also be a part of this resonance. Joan is a reminder of the difference in context between then and now—women have opportunities today they did not in the early 1960s—but also the similarity, in that women still struggle to be taken seriously in worlds run by men and wrestle with the question of whether power and respect come from appearing more or less feminine or more or less sexual. Fashion continues to be a powerful form of self-expression and an everyday negotiation of femininity and feminism, but it is also still a conditional expression whose meaning can shift depending on who is looking.

Perhaps what Mad Men suggests is that just as Joan and Betty are in need of a coming feminism, we too are still in need of that feminism. In our everyday lives, we must continue to find ways to put fashion in conversation with feminism so that they can be productively resistant. One strategy lies in using fashion to evoke women’s histories, to evoke previous decades of representational activity. If “cultural memory is produced through objects, images and representations” (Sturken, 9), Mad Men produces cultural memory by reinfusing sartorial artifacts and their contemporary counterparts with often ignored social histories, by reinvesting pencil skirts with both sexism and the sexual revolution, by reconnecting swing skirts to both the housewife and the feminine mystique. While Betty and Joan powerfully reposition articles of clothing, the dialogue between feminism and fashion reaches toward its apotheosis in the development of Peggy, her feminism, and her emerging sense of style.

PEGGY OLSON’S PONYTAIL

In Mad Men’s pilot episode, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” Peggy Olson’s first day as a secretary at Sterling Cooper is one of the central story lines. Joan shows her around the office and gives Peggy various pieces of advice, including the need to improve her appearance. While Joan’s dress highlights her hourglass silhouette, Peggy’s plain figure is made curveless and adolescent by a midlength swing skirt and loose sweater, and she wears her hair in a carefully curled ponytail. Joan tells Peggy, “Go home, take a paper bag and
cut some eye holes out of it. Put it over your head, get undressed, and look at yourself in the mirror. Really evaluate where your strengths and weaknesses are. And be honest.” Especially in the early seasons, Joan is Peggy’s primary model of modern womanhood, and the relationship between Joan and Peggy is shaped by how Peggy often fails to live up to this model.

This plays out clearly in “Maidenform” (2.6). In this episode, the male copywriters come up with an ad campaign idea while out at a bar, without Peggy. Responding to Peggy’s frustration, Joan tells her, “You want to be taken seriously? Stop dressing like a little girl.” This echoes the advice that Bobbie Barrett gives to Peggy in an earlier episode: “You can’t be a man. Don’t even try. Be a woman. It’s powerful business, when done correctly” (“The New Girl,” 2.5). Those around Peggy are telling her she has to be more feminine to be successful, regardless of whether that success is in finding a husband or in her career. At least momentarily, she responds to these pressures and does so sartorially, when at the end of the episode she shows up to the strip club where her male coworkers are celebrating with clients. Peggy is wearing a blue, deep V-neck satin dress, diamond-like jewelry, and bright red lipstick, and her hair is down, no longer in her trademark girlish ponytail (fig. 8.4). Peggy wants to be seen as sexual and attractive here, but her performance of femininity is uncomfortable and uncertain, like the fake diamonds she is wearing. Even in her sexy dress, she fails to be either a Jackie or a Marilyn, a Bobbie Barrett or a Joan Holloway, and her sexuality has little real power. Unlike Joan or Marilyn, Peggy does not possess the image of herself. Peggy dresses simply for the men around her. Yet this is not only reflective of Peggy’s inadequacies, it is also reflective of the inadequacies of the ideal. Peggy is not Jackie or Marilyn, but this is not just because she fails at trying. Rather she simply is something else entirely, belying the binary femininity of her era.11

While Joan and Bobbie tell Peggy to be a woman, in “Indian Summer” (1.11) Don tells Peggy: “You presented like a man. Now act like one.” Similarly, in “The Mountain King” (2.12) after Peggy asks for the office vacated by Freddy Rumsen, Roger Sterling tells her: “You young women are very aggressive. . . . It’s cute, there are thirty men out there who didn’t have the balls to ask me.” Despite the fact that she succeeds at Sterling Cooper because she is a woman and offers a female perspective on products like lipstick and weight-loss belts, as she moves away from her girliness, there is equal pressure on her to be—and by extension, to appear and to dress—both more feminine and more masculine. After her meager attempt at femininity in “Maidenform,” it would seem that her fashion choices, like her
career choices, would continue to follow “the second wave’s workplace advice, which for decades argued that women had to downplay their femininity in order to fit in to the male worlds they increasingly inhabited” (Scanlon, 133). Yet in seasons 3 and 4, Peggy instead begins to find a middle ground. As Faran Krentcil observes in the AMC Fashion File blog posting “The Blues Never Felt So Good,” Peggy is consistently clothed in collared shirts and dresses with pussy bows at the neck. Despite her haircut and her evolving silhouette, “she still can’t relinquish her necktie.” Krentcil goes on to say that in season 3, “it was an attempt at being fashionable,” and indeed Joan too sometimes wears a more subtle version of the bow. Yet in season 4, Krentcil sug-
gests “it’s gone deeper: Peggy needs to wear a tie because Don, Pete, Roger, and Harry all do. And she’ll be damned if she can’t be part of that boys’ club because of her clothes.” Yet I would argue that she combines the feminine bow with the masculine tie not only to move closer to the boys’ club but also to define a third path between femininity and feminism.

Though Peggy’s moments of imitation in the first three seasons suggest that there are a limited number of identities a woman can take on, as the show moves into its fourth season we see additional possibilities for her. While Betty’s and Joan’s characters suggest specific and somewhat predictable trajectories, aligned with specific feminist or feminine models, Peggy is increasingly less easily pigeonholed as she both tries on Joan’s Manhattan lifestyle and moves toward the counterculture. When she tries the single-girl life in season 3, however, being “out in the city, ready for fun” with her perky new roommate (“The Arrangements,” 3.4), she never quite dresses the part and never quite gets the performance right. She more successfully flirts with a wholesale alternative when in “My Old Kentucky Home” (3.3) she proclaims, “I’m Peggy Olson and I wanna smoke some marijuana,” and she assertively tells her secretary at the end of the episode, “I’m in a very good place right now. . . . I have a job and an office with my name on the door, and a secretary. . . . Don’t worry about me. I am going to get to do everything you want for me.” By embracing not only her professional status but also a bohemian version of herself, she begins to invent a middle path between Joan’s single-girl sexuality, second wave feminism, and the counterculture. Though this version of Peggy largely disappears from the rest of season 3, it reemerges decisively when season 4 begins in November 1964.

“The Rejected” (4.4) is particularly interesting in this process of sartorial reinvention. Of two particularly notable outfits of Peggy’s, the more memorable is the skirt and boots combination she wears with a yellow-and-black-striped mock turtleneck to a party in the Village with her new friend Joyce. More significant, however, is the outfit Peggy wears to the office at the episode’s close. Peggy’s dress is a bright blue color reminiscent of Joan’s bold hues, but it is accented with a geometric, more mod-style collar and has a fuller, pleated skirt that is simultaneously evocative of the evolving New Look and of the plaid pleats of Peggy’s earlier schoolgirl dresses. While the first outfit is unexpectedly mod, the blue dress is not wholly one style or another, and neither is Peggy. This Peggy is learning to negotiate Madison Avenue and the Village, femininity and feminism. It turns out Peggy is the one who can have it all, not Joan. Far from the mousy secretary of season 1, Peggy is now a reminder that models of female identity go far beyond the easy
silhouettes of Marilyn, Jackie, and June Cleaver, or Betty Friedan, Helen Gurley Brown, and Gloria Steinem.

Perhaps because it is less distinct and less archetypal, lacking the clear silhouette of Betty’s New Look or Joan’s hourglass, Peggy’s style has not translated as well commercially. Betty and Joan’s fashions have appeared as inspirations in contemporary fashion lines such as Michael Kors’s and been referenced by companies such as Pinup Couture and Stop Staring! that specialize in vintage reproductions. Peggy’s looks, in contrast, are more likely to be found in actual vintage shops and among actual vintage devotees. This may in part result from Peggy’s color palette being duller than Betty’s and Joan’s and thus better matching fifty- and sixty-year-old dresses. Nevertheless, the idea that wearing vintage “involved a change of status and a revaluing of clothing beyond the original time or setting” (DeLong et al., 23) has a particular resonance with the ways in which Peggy constantly revalues her era with her refusal to confine herself to a one-dimensional identity. While Betty’s dresses and Joan’s skirts are reinvented by twenty-first-century contexts, Peggy more actively works to reinvent her clothes, exactly what twenty-first-century women do when they wear vintage. Once again, the performativity of fashion is pivotal to a character’s ability to represent both history and now, reconstructing the dress as a site and technology of memory.

I hope that this chapter, and the general success of Mad Men, can serve as a call for the importance of examining not only the representation of history on television but also television’s historical fictions as sites of memory—an aspect that may be easily overlooked amid tenacious discourses of accuracy and authenticity. As Gary Edgerton suggests, in many ways “television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today” (“Television as Historian,” 1). Yet this does not simply mean television operates as an audiovisual textbook; objects, images, and representations are, as Sturken notes, “technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced and given meaning” (9). As a technology of memory, television emerges as a key forum in which personal memories, dominant histories, and alternative narratives interact, facilitating the cultural memory function of a show like Mad Men. Likewise fashion, with its inherent performativity, enables new ways of knowing the past and thus new knowledge about the past. Television, fashion, and television’s representation of fashion have unique, if underexamined, places in the construction, representation, and entanglement of history and memory. Mad Men encourages this examination, but the project need not and should not stop there.
NOTES

2. For the eBay bidding war, see the video “Inside Mad Men: Props of the Season Three Premiere” on AMCtv.com (accessed 24 January 2010).
3. Banana Republic’s “Mad about Style” promotions have run annually since 2009. Bryant also has a lifestyle website and a book, The Fashion File, which, as it says on the cover, “lets you peek into the dressing rooms of Mad Men . . . showing you how to find your own leading-lady style.” Additionally, Bryant has released a Mad Men–inspired clothing line through the home-shopping company QVC, and several cast members have taken part in fashion tie-ins.
4. Though the insistent discourse of accuracy and authenticity has died down somewhat since the first season, it is still pivotal to the popular understanding of the show.
5. I distinguish between vintage clothing (garments actually made in the past) and retro clothing (contemporary reproductions of those styles), both of which are used on Mad Men. Ultimately, however, I think vintage and retro work in much the same way (and are often visually indistinguishable) both on Mad Men and in everyday life.
6. On gender as performative, see Judith Butler. On fashion as a “technology of self-formation,” see Craik, 204.
7. I use the term postwar because the early 1960s housewife is still archetypically and semantically associated with the 1950s. The character June Cleaver, for instance, is an archetypal 1950s housewife but appeared on Leave It to Beaver from 1957 to 1963.
8. Of course, this historical narrative is predominantly that of white women and white, middle-class families. There is a great deal to be said about fashion among women of color in the 1950s and retro or vintage style among women of color today, though this is beyond the scope of this chapter’s focus on Mad Men.
10. Again, see Judith Butler, but also work on femininity and the masquerade such as Doane, “Film and Masquerade.”
11. See also Lilya Kaganovsky’s chapter in this volume.