to Melissa Marra-Alvarez

Designed by BTDNSC

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FRONT COVER
Pink Powder, Lily Donaldson wearing John Galliano,
by Nick Knight, 2008.

BACK COVER
The Pink Project—Jeeyoo and Her Pink Things,

FOLLOWING LEFT PAGE
The Museum at FIT.
IN THE PINK OF THINGS:
GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RACE

Dominique Grisard

THE COLOR PINK STANDS FOR ALL THINGS FEMININE, so much so that it is hard to imagine a time when girls and women weren’t decked out in pink things, although historical research has shown that pink has only recently become a girls’ color.¹ Until the early twentieth century, pink was considered a light version of red, and it was not uncommon for little boys to be dressed in pink. By the 1940s and 1950s, however, pink had become a signifier for white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity.² In the 1990s pink was marketed as girl power. Not everyone is buying into pink’s emancipatory power, though. Peggy Orenstein, for example, grapples with the increasing “pinkification”³ of girls’ culture and the way it commodifies and sexualizes young girls.⁴ In this essay I will explore several milestones in the color’s trajectory, to look at how pink things articulate gender, sexuality, and race in historically specific ways.

PINK PRINCESS FEMININITY

One of pink’s most dedicated proponents in the 1950s was Mamie Eisenhower. She had a pink gown embroidered with over two thousand pink gemstones for her husband’s inaugural ball.⁵ She also decorated her private rooms in the White House in assorted shades of pink.⁶ Indeed, the White House press corps soon dubbed the White House the Pink Palace.⁷ Her favorite shade of soft pink was called Mamie pink or First Lady pink. Frequently combined with white, this pink exuded a gentle feminine charm.⁸ Mamie Eisenhower presented herself as a housewife and once proudly proclaimed that “Ike runs the country, I turn the pork chops.”⁹

97. Anonymous, Young Boy with Whip, 1840.
Image © Honolulu Museum of Art.
Oil on canvas. © 2018 White House Historical Association.
The popularity of the color pink in the 1950s promoted both the infantilization of adult women and the (hetero) sexualization of girl children. Pink was also associated with white feminine beauty via the historic discourse surrounding blushing. As a little girl named Claudia in Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel, *The Bluest Eye*, puts it: “All the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured.” Coloring white skin pink is Morrison’s way of making the racial privileges attached to whiteness visible. The pink in a girl’s cheeks also signifies feeling “in the pink of things” and the white middle-class girl’s growing consumer power in the marketplace.

**PINK LEISURE MASCULINITY**

Even in the 1950s, pink was not always the domain of women and girls. Brooks Brothers’ pink button-down shirts were a staple in upper-middle-class men’s wardrobes. But Ivy-style pink was in stark contrast to the confrontational black-and-pink color combination popular with 1950s youth subcultures that refashioned African-American and working-class fashion styles. Elvis Presley popularized the look, donning custom-made pink shirts with high black collars and with matching socks and belt. Onstage he sometimes wore hot pink suits, and in the 1960s and 1970s his infamous pink jumpsuits. At the beginning of his career, Elvis bought many of his clothes at a Memphis clothing shop owned by the Lansky brothers. “He always wanted to be the belle of the ball,” shop owner Bernard Lansky would later say. In 1955, Presley also acquired a Cadillac painted in a customized pink color called Elvis Rose, which he referenced in his hit single *Baby Let’s Play House*, promising his “baby” that she could have a pink Cadillac if only she would play house with him. Presley’s music, like his personal style, borrowed heavily from Black culture, which many whites regarded as sexually excessive.

Elvis Presley was not the first public figure to sport a pink Cadillac. The rock and roll star was undoubtedly aware of Sugar Ray Robinson’s 1950 flamingo-pink Cadillac. The story goes that when the famous Harlem boxer visited Miami, he “fell in love with the color pink” and had his car painted the same color. “That car was the Hope Diamond of Harlem,” its owner mused. “Everybody had to see it or touch it or both to make sure it was real. And to most of them it literally was the Hope Diamond because if skinny little Walker Smith could come off the streets to own a car like that, maybe they could too.” To them the pink Cadillac was proof that a black man could live the American dream on his own
99. Singer Elvis Presley wearing his pink shirt with black collar stripes in 1956, in Memphis, Tennessee.

Photo: Michael Ochs Archives / Getty Images.
100. Boxer Sugar Ray Robinson leaning on his 1950 pink Cadillac convertible in Harlem.
Photo by George Karger / Pix Inc. / The LIFE Images Collection / Getty Images.

terms. Sugar Ray Robinson performed an extravagant leisure masculinity, which in turn was fetishized as flamboyant and exciting by Elvis and others. Indeed, white leisure masculinity subsequently incorporated these supposedly excessive flamingo-pink aspects of Black culture, yet tamed and sanitized them. When Kay Thompson urged women to “Drive in pink, come alive in pink,” she certainly didn’t imagine Robinson wearing a pink jacket and leaning against the hood of his pink Cadillac.20
PINK PRISON MASCULINITY

Given his hyper-masculine boxing credentials, Sugar Ray Robinson never needed to worry about being disparaged as effeminate. Since the late 1970s, however, pink has been used punitively to “feminize” male inmates of jails and prisons in the United States. Psychologist Alexander Schauss conducted experiments with male prison inmates to measure the color’s effect on human behavior. He concluded that pink reduced muscular strength and “violent,” “hostile,” “aggressive,” and “erratic” behaviors.21 As a result, the color made its way into correctional facilities in Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Texas, Tennessee, South Carolina, Montana, Georgia, and Ohio. According to a 1984 article in the Boston Globe, Paul Boccumini, clinical psychologist for the San Bernardino (CA) County

101. Inmates at Maricopa County, Arizona, jail wearing regulation pink boxer shorts.
Photo by Scott Houston.
Probation Department, estimates that about three hundred jails and hospitals use pink rooms.\textsuperscript{22} Pink walls were just the beginning, though.

In true chattel logic, “America’s Toughest Sheriff” Joe Arpaio had an entire prison population parade in pink underwear—for the general public to see. Arpaio served as sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona’s most populous county, for twenty-four years from 1993 to 2016.\textsuperscript{23} Step-by-step, he introduced socks, linen, towels, and handcuffs of the same color, which he soon also sold in his online shop.\textsuperscript{24} His motivation for demeaning the inmates was just that: he believed in shaming inmates to such an extent that they wouldn’t offend again. Arpaio’s stated goal was to keep prisons from becoming overcrowded.\textsuperscript{25} During his tenure, both citizens and the federal Justice Department sued the sheriff. According to the 2012 case \textit{Wagner v. County of Maricopa}, the stigmatizing and shaming effect of pink boxer shorts even led to the death of an inmate.\textsuperscript{26} Why the color pink is so shameful is not necessary to specify.

One way to understand the trend of using pink in men’s correctional facilities is to look into the history of how pink became associated with effeminacy and (homo)sexuality. In the Third Reich, many German men suspected of homosexuality were imprisoned in concentration camps, where they were forced to wear a pink triangle on their clothing. About seven thousand of the pink-triangle prisoners died. It remains unclear why the Nazis chose pink to stigmatize men suspected of homosexuality, especially since the color most often used in the German gay subcultures of the 1920s and 1930s was not pink but lavender.\textsuperscript{27} Burkhard Jellonnek’s speculation that Himmler’s SS followed a dominant practice of associating the color pink with gay men in Weimar Germany cannot be confirmed.\textsuperscript{28} It seems more likely that the fact that male sex workers were referred to as “Rosarote” (“Pinks”) influenced the Nazis’ color choice for homosexual inmates.\textsuperscript{29}

In March 1972, the members of the Frankfurt group Rote Zelle Schwul (RotZSchwul) decided to mobilize and politicize gays and lesbians in West Germany by wearing and handing out pink triangle pins at a public demonstration.\textsuperscript{30} Soon after, in the US, the pink triangle began to be used to foster gay identity, visibility, and political engagement.\textsuperscript{31} The celebration of “Pretty gay in pink” in \textit{Funny Face} (1957) did not anticipate pink being used as a shorthand for homosexuality. The utilization of pink paint, underwear, and overalls in US prisons took pink’s feminizing and emasculating powers seriously. Pink was used to publicly ridicule and shame inmates’ (hyper-) masculinity, which underscores the sexism and homophobia of the prison system and society more generally.
PINK RIBBON BREAST CANCER ADVOCACY

The pink ribbon of breast cancer advocacy draws on codes of gender and consumption that have been passed down through nursery rhymes such as “sugar and spice, and all things nice” since the early nineteenth century. Indeed, the verse “ribbons and laces, and sweet pretty faces” underscores how ribbons have tied women to sweetness, prettiness, and consumption since at least the mid-nineteenth century. Pink breast cancer advocacy is informed by the long history of ribbons as an adornment of bourgeois women and children. Up until the late eighteenth century both men and women adorned their hats, clothes, and hair with yards of ribbon trims. It was class and status and not gender that defined the wearer of the brightly colored ribbon. It was only with the establishment of bourgeois hegemony in the nineteenth century after the French Revolution that ribbons and colors became gender markers, distinguishing the colorful and lavish garments of women and children from the sober styles of men. Ribbons were often moved from one gown to the next when the wearer desired a new look. Pink ribbons were never just a fashion trend, however; they were always also a commercial endeavor. For example, manufacturers in Basel, Switzerland, produced 10 percent of the global ribbon market around 1900. The city was also one of the main players in the production of synthetic dyes, including the popular pink dye luchsine. A century later, the aniline dye factories had turned into chemical and pharmaceutical companies, which profit from the success of pink ribbon advocacy.

It was at the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation’s annual Race for the Cure in Washington, DC, that pink awareness ribbons were first handed out in 1991. One year later Self magazine, together with the Estée Lauder cosmetic company, launched a nationwide pink ribbon breast cancer awareness campaign, which went hand in hand with a rosy narrative about the disease. Barbara Delinsky’s book Uplift: Secrets from the Sisterhood of Breast Cancer Survivors epitomizes this cheery image. “Attitude is the mind’s paintbrush. It can color any situation,” she quotes “survivor” Sallie Burdine, underscoring pink ribbon advocacy’s investment in coloring feelings “pink.” The quote suggests that a rosy pink “attitude” is what turns victims into survivors. Other “survivors” in Delinsky’s bestseller describe the cancer as a “blessing in disguise” and as a disease that “has made my life richer.” One woman even shared how thanks to breast cancer “the man of my dreams found me.”

Think Before You Pink activist Sandy Fernandez problematizes the obligatory cheerfulness surrounding breast cancer. She argues that the pain of women

102. Participants in the Race for the Cure at the Washington Monument and next to a giant pink breast cancer awareness ribbon in 2000 in Washington, DC.

Photo: Neshan H. Naltschayan / AFP / Getty Images.
with breast cancer is squashed by a color believed to be “the quintessential female color. The profile on pink is playful, life-affirming. We have studies as to its calming effect, its quieting effect, its lessening of stress. [Pastel pink] is a shade known to be health-giving; that’s why we have expressions like ‘in the pink.’ You can’t say a bad thing about it.”42 Pink ribbon culture thus leaves no place for “victims” who succumb to the disease.43 The frequent shout-outs to the fearless warriors, survivors, and heroes out there in the fight against breast cancer bear traces of the ribbon’s military legacy.44 Indeed, ribbons didn’t just adorn women’s hats; they also decorated uniforms, denoting rank, status, and hierarchy in the military.45

Survivors frequently frame the disease as a gift: “I believe that we are given this ‘gift’ of illness to see how special and fragile life is. The gift may not be wanted, but it can teach a most valuable lesson: to love and live fully in our day-to-day lives,” highlights Cathy Hanlon, a New York school researcher who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2000 at age forty-two.46 It is with statements like these that pink ribbon culture manages the feelings about breast cancer. The use of feminine stereotypes offers comfort to many women. After all, clichés draw heavily on the comfort of the familiar and the familial as comfort, which effectively deflect from the terror of being diagnosed with cancer. The metaphor of the gift creates a “feeling bond,” while the gift’s ribbon ties feminine virtues to consumption and feminine consumption to the positive rosy thoughts of the survivor.

**PINK PUSSYHAT FEMINISM**

In January 2017, hundreds of thousands of protesters marched in Washington, DC, New York City, Sydney, Geneva, London, Amsterdam, and many other cities, wearing hot pink hats with kitten ears. The handcrafted hats alluded to a recording of US president Donald Trump from 2005, where he boasted about grabbing women “by the pussy.” In response, Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman, the Los Angeles-based founders of the Pussyhat Project, one a screenwriter, the other an architect, embraced the “power of the pink pussy” and started organizing. “We love the clever wordplay of ‘pussyhat’ and ‘pussycat,’” Suh and Zweiman stress, “but yes, ‘pussy’ is also a derogatory term for female genitalia. We chose this loaded word for our project because we want to reclaim the term as a means of empowerment. In this day and age, if we have pussies we are assigned the gender of ‘woman.’” Their emphasis on female genitalia is meant to underscore that “a woman’s body is her own.”47
Suh and Zweiman chose the color pink, they said, because it was “a very female color representing caring, compassion, and love—all qualities that have been derided as weak but are actually STRONG. Wearing pink together is a powerful statement that we are unapologetically feminine and we unapologetically stand for women’s rights.” The color was also chosen for its visual effect, which is reflected in the Pussyhat Project slogan: “The more we are seen, the more we are heard. Let’s come together to support women’s rights in a creative and impactful way.” The visual force of the hot pink hats contributed to getting
the political messages out and to creating a virtual and physical community. Importantly, the hot pink color, in combination with the double entendre of the word “pussy,” allowed wearers to re-brand feminism as fashionable, accessible, and “now,” and that is reflected in the overwhelming coverage by the media.\textsuperscript{50}

The pink hat’s popularity gives pause, however, especially since women who cover their heads for religious reasons are represented in starkly different ways. Even though Suh and Zweiman express awareness that all women, whether transgender or cisgender, are mistreated in society, they frequently use female-ness and femininity interchangeably, glossing over the fact that there are many women—with and without vaginas—who were ready to protest but felt excluded by the Founders’ emphasis on female genitalia.\textsuperscript{51} The way pussyhat feminism conceived of pink as a shorthand for white female genitalia, as a marker of femininity (e.g., care, compassion, love), and as a hyper-visible fashion accessory, thereby equating white cis womanhood with femininity and consumption, was heavily criticized.

While some feminists rejected the pink pussyhat for its misogynist, transphobic, racist, and classist connotations, others chose to embrace it as a political, not a biological symbol, and the “knitting and the infantile Barbie color as a play with clichés of a specific kind of femininity.”\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, the plastic femininity of Barbie lends itself well to the play with gender stereotypes. What make Barbie unmistakably feminine are so-called secondary sex characteristics—big breasts, long hair, and an ever-growing wardrobe in her signature color pink. Throughout her history, Barbie has slipped into vastly different personae. In 1998, for example, Beyond Pink Barbie inspired girls with her song “Think Pink” to “be anything” they want, “seek every possibility, take every opportunity.” That the song didn’t just encourage cis girls but also trans teen Jazz Jennings to “explore the world” and “become a star” speaks to the malleability of the doll’s body and persona. Jazz loves the color pink and enjoys swimming with her hot-pink mermaid’s tail.\textsuperscript{53} Pussyhat feminism bears noticeable traces of the consumerist and individualistic girl power offered by Barbie’s “Think Pink.” Indeed, the pink pussyhat may not be easily divorced from its marketability and a consumerist type of “empowerment” that is ultimately unthreatening to existing power structures.

Pink ribbons, pussyhats, prisons, clothes, and Cadillacs share similar ideas about how to analyze gendered desire and action. Pink increases visibility in an “attention economy” where information is increasingly abundant and immediately available.\textsuperscript{54} Pink catches the interest of potential consumers.\textsuperscript{55} However,

Courtesy Mattel Inc.
Image courtesy of Jazz's Family LLC.
the color’s association with 1950s fashionably domestic femininity and 1990s
girl (consumer) power takes the sting out of feminism and breast cancer, repro-
ducing an essentialist understanding of femininity. Pink’s “sugar and spice, and
all things nice” type of femininity has made it an effective emasculating tool in
prisons. Could it be that the pinkification of girl culture, feminism, and prisons
is neither coincidental nor random, but a productive way of reassuring white
middle-class boys and men of their superiority?