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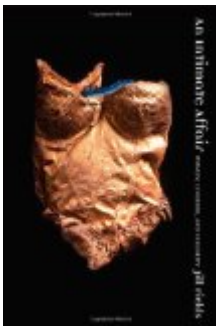

Jill Fields. *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007. 392 pp. $21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-25261-5.

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Published on H-Histsex (July, 2010)

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Jill Fields's recollections of navigating "wooden drawers filled with undergarments" (p. xiv) in the archives of America's premier costume collections, including the Smithsonian and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, had me hooked instantly. What tactile and visual pleasure her research must have inspired. Fields's descriptions of the structure, fabrics, and design of twentieth-century undergarments prove central to her account of lingerie, gender, and sexuality in modern America. Equally intriguing was Fields's tribute to her grandmothers Tillie and Helen, who "wore with aplomb the garments detailed here" (p. xvi). I happily anticipated their, and other American women's, "voices" featuring throughout *An Intimate Affair*.

Fields begins with an examination of the shift in popularity from open to closed crotch drawers at the turn of the new century. She argues that once women's rights activists "publicly asserted their own claims to sexual pleasure, political power, and economic independence" (p. 42), the Victorian ideology of female "passionlessness" was overturned. Accordingly, previous concepts of the propriety and modesty of open crotch drawers, which, after all, provided convenient sexual access, were rapidly invalidated. Closed crotch knickers were now mandatory.

Crotchless drawers were thenceforth consigned to pornographic pin-ups, but not so another Victorian undergarment. As Fields illustrates, the corset remained a compulsory feature of American women's wardrobes. Threatened by the dress reform movement, manufacturers successfully harnessed emerging discourses of racial purity, youthful beauty, and even national security in a relentless campaign against the "corsetless evil" (p. 48). New technologies of the 1910s and 20s may have allowed the replacement of whalebone with elastic inserts, and the ideal silhouette evolved from hourglass to straight (involving painful breast binding underwear) and later to uplifted, but the necessity of containing the "inherently flawed" (p. 48) female figure was, as evidenced by booming corset sales, widely accepted. Indeed, even throughout the Great Depression,

companies like Maidenform (or Maiden Form, as it was then known) did record-breaking business.

The tone of ***An Intimate Affair*** alters in chapter 4, where Fields addresses the meaning of black lingerie. The theories of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Georges Bataille concerning the dance of sex and death; anxieties about the sexual availability of black-clad widows; and the branding of black-skinned women as sexually voracious all "contributed to black lingerie's emerging erotic meanings" (p. 141). Drawing on psychoanalysis, film costume, play scripts, memoirs, and novels, this chapter is a theoretically satisfying explanation of the rise of sexy black undergarments. Fields's assertion, however, that new technologies for dying fabrics produced a greater range of colors--black amongst them--and that "increasing mechanization of dress production extended possibilities for creating fashionable dresses in black" (p. 144)--ultimately offers an obvious, if somewhat more prosaic, explanation for this development in women's fashion. New technology meant there was new product to sell, which in turn required the employment of alluring advertising imagery.

Chapter 5, "The Invisible Woman," examines recurring motifs in these advertisements. The function of intimate apparel ads, Fields argues, was that they "provided pleasure for female viewers" (p. 202) without alienating them with an outwardly homoerotic display. Thus, models are usually depicted alone or, when in groups, strictly avoiding any physical or eye contact. Employing Laura Mulvey's theory of the cinematic male gaze, [1] Fields contends "women readers were meant to see the models, and themselves in reflection, through the lens of the male spectator" (p. 210). She draws on a seemingly endless catalogue of examples, which, while demonstrating the extraordinary amount of research undertaken, are a little wearying for the reader--especially when only a fraction of the ads discussed are reproduced.

The final chapters are highly engaging, with Fields delving into the nexus between production and glamour. She illuminates the ongoing battle between manufacturers seeking to sever the "material construction of garments from [their] aesthetic design and retail promotion" (p. 225), and the workers who refused to become invisible. From the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) archives Fields builds a fascinating story of a predominantly female workforce--many from African American and immigrant backgrounds--demanding fair pay and better working conditions, often via innovative tactics. In 1941, for example, striking American Lady Corset workers marched on Detroit's streets "clad only in their combination corsets and stockings" (p. 241), thereby highlighting to consumers the realities of undergarment production: real women labored hard and long to construct these symbols of luxury, fantasy, and desire. Despite the determination and many achievements of the ILGWU, it faced a losing battle against undergarments manufacturers who kept relocating to poorer areas (usually in the South) where non-union workers would accept lower wages. Ultimately production moved offshore.

The last gasp for the corset was the phenomenal post-WWII popularity of the New Look. Exported to the United States from France, this fashion reintroduced cinched waists and long voluminous skirts to an American market craving glamour after the straight boxy shapes and plain fabrics of wartime apparel. Keen to promote both sales and jobs, manufacturers and unions alike pushed the New Look. Throughout the fifties, fashions requiring girdles and highly engineered bras also kept the industry buoyant. These garments came under sustained attack in the late sixties. Famously at the 1968 Miss America pageant in Atlanta, members of New York Radical Women consigned bras and other "woman-garbage" to the "Freedom Trash Can." The epilogue of ***An Intimate Affair*** explores the work of feminist artists who, since the sixties, have addressed the politi-

cal, cultural, and historical meanings of women's underwear.

An Intimate Affair is a seminal American feminist history text, along the lines of Lois W. Banner's *American Beauty* (1983) and Kathy Peiss's *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (1999). The breadth of research and level of theoretical sophistication make it a key reference for any student of women's fashion. However, Fields's focus on desire means there is limited discussion of some of the more functional aspects of women's underwear. For instance, given the high birth rates throughout periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, American women would have regularly adorned undergarments appropriate for pregnancy and breast-feeding. Yet I could find no mention of the evolution of maternity underwear. Likewise, Fields doesn't sufficiently address what women wore while menstruating, and whether designers, manufacturers, and marketers considered women's monthly ovulation cycles at all. These aspects may have been more closely addressed if, as I had hoped, the voices of individual American women were included in *An Intimate Affair*. How I longed to read about their negotiations with these key markers of Western femininity. As Fields notes in the final chapter, in the first half of the twentieth century, "mass-produced, commercially advertised, nationally distributed, and widely available undergarments and foundations were worn by almost every women in the US" (p. 271). Perhaps a future study by Fields--or another scholar inspired by her work--will detail via oral history, diaries, and memoirs, women's intimate experiences with intimate apparel.

Note

[1]. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 6-18.

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Citation: Madeleine Hamilton. Review of Fields, Jill. *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality.* H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. July, 2010.

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