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Fear and Clothing at the Iowa State Fair

New York author Cintra Wilson heads to the Corn Belt for a cultural comparison in style

BY [CINTRA WILSON](#) | AUGUST 17, 2011

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As early as the stopover in Detroit, it was clear that the Midwest and New York City were going to be two entirely different balls of wax, stylewise. The codes were already becoming inscrutable. I knew I was dealing with new gravitational style-orbit when I saw women with extremely high-maintenance salon hairdos, stretch pants, and lunar-white tennis shoes—hairstyles that would consistently outspend the body, including the feet (unlike New York, where shoes are usually the most expensive object on a body, because they double as transportation). Body types were different. An older lady on a people mover, with upper arms the size of pumpkins, made me wonder if her body wasn't in some way reflecting a rural abundance of lateral space. Have New Yorkers, through some unconscious process of internal mimicry, become comparatively scrawny people by physically emulating the narrow, shoulder-to-shoulder, multistory brownstones that the Dutch built to get around their real-estate lot laws?

I've been going around the United States researching a new book, doing fashion reports on the "belt" regions (corn, gun, Bible, rust, etc.)—trying to see ways in which the regional economy and culture

—politics, religion, industry, landscapes, etc.—have influenced the local closets. Fashion is a language; regions have style dialects just like they have weird food specialties.

Iowa is in the corn belt, so to see as many tractors, towheads, farm animals, and 4H Club agricultural things as possible, I went to the **Iowa** State Fair, which has been happening annually for more than 100 years, replete with a cow carved out of butter and a veritable apocalypse of deep-fried things on sticks—including sticks of butter.

There's a pervasive kindness and wholesomeness to Iowans that makes it difficult to take a picture of a couple or a family and have it not look like a corporate stock photo. Literally every senior couple I spoke to had been married more than 40 years. On the unphotogenic side, there are way too many people driving Rascals and surly women around 30 who had been savaged by love and taken to expressing their rage through softball and tattoos. But even these chicks seemed to get nice after singing a few pro-redneck karaoke anthems.

Clothingwise, Iowans seem to be a largely modest, fancy-averse people, not unlike Canadians. Clothing is often representative of a subservience to land and beasts of the field and punctuated by cowboy accouterments. There are, however, many group activities and contests that involve wildly spangled garments and tiaras. The point seems to be that if you want to draw attention to yourself, you don't want to be caught doing it *alone*.

I saw zero punk-rockers in **Iowa**, but punks and rednecks are so unlike that they're almost exactly the same: broken teeth, broken boots, crude tattoos, profane belt buckles, interchangeable T-shirts. They'd beat the crap out of each other in any parking lot on earth, but it's sort of the fashion equivalent of when Pat Buchanan argues with Rachel Maddow—they agree on every point for an entire argument, then right when you think the snake is going to swallow its own tail, they draw completely opposite conclusions.

Sarah Palin made a cameo appearance, ostensibly to upstage the Republican Straw Poll that was in progress. True to her Common Touch with common Joes and

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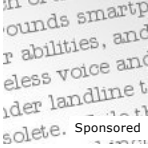
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EYE-POPPING HAIR

plumbers, she was wearing a white T-shirt with her usual high-maintenance, vertical brunette zigurat hairstyle. I got the feeling that the crowd thronging around her was primarily interested in Palin the Celebrity Spectacle—several people in the scrum were wearing Ron Paul T-shirts.

In trying to boil down Iowa fashion to micro-encapsulations, it struck me that many of the older people seemed to favor bright, crispy-clean, polyester-blend garments, with sharp permanent creases. This struck me as being reflective of the astringently clean-cut crop fields. Iowans seem to like their natural fibers seasoned with a bit more pesticide than we do on the coasts—but then, they're the ones actually growing these things.

I was driving back to my hotel in Perry from a hot-rod show in Jefferson, the moon was rising, and the land was stretched out flat and green in every direction. The sky looked dizzyingly limitless; the cicadas were buzzing in synchronous throbs, and the sun was slanting in backlit oranges and blues over the screaming green corn fields.

[2] The landscape suddenly rolled up the steel garage door on my soul and threw a beauty bomb into me that destroyed me. It was like an inward-moving tsunami that smashed noiselessly through my skin and owned me in such a way that I could feel the color inside my chest. Iowa was cheerfully absorbing my neurotic urban toxins and giving me a

spontaneous color transfusion—so generously it made me cry.

Eden has been through a rough patch, and she's looking pretty spent these days...but she's still under there. The pork has not been kind to her. She has suffered abuse and neglect and has been the victim of many bad perms and unfortunate tattoos. But if we demonstrated a little more appreciation, maybe she'd soften back up again. If we could get her to stop overplucking her eyebrows, wipe off that trashy makeup, and shuck off that drip-dry petroleum hooker dress, she'd still be the mother of all beauties.

I started thinking of the bottom-line Iowa fashion statement as *Already Redeemed/Yet to Be Redeemed*. It's kind of all the same, ultimately. Whatever you're putting on to cover your nudity, you've either already arrived at a perma-press virtue or you're just taking your time getting around to it. However many pork chops on sticks it takes you to get there, the landscape will make you lighten up eventually.

Cintra Wilson is an author and culture critic living in New York City. Her fourth book, *Fear and Clothing: Unbuckling America's Fashion Destiny*, will be released by W.W. Norton in 2012.

PHOTO: CINTRA WILSON



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