

CULTURE

How Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Plain Black Jacket Became a Controversy

The backlash against the incoming congresswoman's "very nice" outfit is both tedious and predictable.

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Incoming Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez waits for a House of Representatives member-elect welcome briefing on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., November 15, 2018. (YURI GRIPAS / REUTERS)

Earlier this week, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez posted a tweet: At congressional events, she shared (the representative-elect of New York's 14th Congressional District is currently in Washington for a series of orientations on the workings of the House), she keeps being mistaken for an intern. Or sometimes for the spouse of the person who must be the true new member of Congress. Ocasio-Cortez, a young woman who is also a woman of color who is also a democratic socialist—a politician who won her election, earlier this month, with 78 percent of her district's vote—keeps getting told that she doesn't quite belong in Congress. Her tweet sharing that experience was punctuated by a face-palm emoji. It went viral.

The next day, Eddie Scarry, formerly a blogger for the gossip site *FishbowlDC* and currently a writer for the conservative *Washington Examiner*, posted a picture of

Ocasio-Cortez, taken from behind, seemingly without her knowledge, as she walked through a hallway wearing a tailored black jacket and carrying a coat. He accompanied it with a note that doubled as a caption: “Hill staffer sent me this pic of Ocasio-Cortez they took just now. I’ll tell you something: that jacket and coat don’t look like a girl who struggles.” This tweet went viral, too—not because of the insight it offered, but because of the opposite. People mocked it and memed it and objected to it, some indignant at the creep shot Scarry shared, many others referencing the obvious fact that it is possible to advocate for the working class and wear clothing at the same time.

Scarry’s tweet, on its own, isn’t worth much more discussion; it was a bad thought, posted in bad faith. What’s notable, though, is the way his tweet tangled with Ocasio-Cortez’s observation about the way she has been treated during her congressional orientation. Both tweets were asking questions about power and representation and belonging. Ocasio-Cortez was making a wry observation about how she has been seen, as a newcomer to the halls of Congress; Scarry was proving her point. He was suggesting that Ocasio-Cortez, the public servant who chose to don a well-cut jacket rather than a dirt-streaked potato sack to do her serving, must somehow be deceiving the public. He was insinuating that, the system being what it is, the success she has found within it must be its own evidence of manipulation. *Don’t look like a girl who struggles*: The comment was about the clothes, but at the same time it wasn’t about the clothes. It is never, really, about the clothes. It is about belonging. It is about power. It is about who is assumed to look like a congressperson, and who is not.

[*Read: Why the pantsuit?*]

Ocasio-Cortez is well aware of the absurdities of that tautology. In the short time that has found her as a fixture on the national stage, she has been a target for precisely such questions—membership, difference, disruption—joining the ranks of Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi and Maxine Waters as a bogey(wo)man for the right. Many have challenged her own challenge to the status quo by questioning her legitimacy as an advocate for change. She is not what she seems, many pundits have suggested. She is a fraud, they have insisted. That has been the best way—the most convenient way, the least disruptive way—to make sense of her political success. Power that knows what it looks like; power that knows what an outsider looks like, too.

Shortly after Ocasio-Cortez's victory in the NY-14 primary, the conservative TV-show host John Cardillo shared an image, taken from Google Maps, of the home Ocasio-Cortez grew up in outside New York City, dubbing it a “far cry from the Bronx hood upbringing she’s selling.” Her general upbringing, her family, her college education, and more have been called into question since then, all of it offered up as evidence that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the political identity if not the person herself, is on some level a lie. (A suit-and-stilettos outfit she wore for a photo shoot with *Interview* magazine in early September—a \$3,500 combination that was, as such outfits generally will be, merely borrowed for the occasion—inspired similar accusations.) In a recent *New York Times* interview, Ocasio-Cortez mentioned how hard it is to find affordable housing in Washington; conservative pundits alternated between laughing at this and dismissing it as spin. Judy Miller, on Fox: “I think what she’s talking about is all of the money in Washington, all of the wealth in Washington, all of the power—and a little, simple person like her from New York can’t find a place to live. It is a brilliant political line.”

A little, simple person like her. This is the strain of rhetoric Scarry was both capitulating to and amplifying when he sent his tweet on Thursday. “I know what it’s like to be a poor intern in D.C.,” he told *Talking Points Memo* in an interview, “and I can tell you—and I’m a male, obviously—but you tend to not look like that. She looks very well put together, looks very nice.” As its own form of spin, it’s a crafty rhetorical move: The niceness itself assumed to be the liability. The fact that Ocasio-Cortez’s outfit fits in—the plain suit, the black heels—treated as its own evidence of her difference. Dressing the part presented as proof of her ultimate unfitness for the part.

The move is, in its own way, a conventional outfit. Hypocrisy is a common thing to weaponize—particularly in politics, which makes so many competing demands of its practitioners. One must be authentic, but widely appealing. One must be careful, but relatable. Smart, but not off-puttingly so. Charming, but not trying too hard. And for women politicians, of course, the demands amplify: Attractive, but not too attractive. Put-together, but not excessively. Well dressed, but. Made up, but. Confident, but. The competing demands can transcend one’s party; very occasionally, they can transcend one’s gender. In 2008, Sarah Palin was widely criticized for having spent \$150,000 on designer duds to wear on the campaign trail as John McCain’s running mate. (“Sarah Palin, small-town hockey mom and everywoman? More like Sarah Palin, pampered princess,” the *Los Angeles Times*

scoffed of the move.) John Edwards, in the 2008 primary, faced similar accusations after reporting emerged about his expensive haircuts and clothing. (The AP on the matter: “Looking pretty is costing John Edwards’ presidential campaign a lot of pennies.”) And then there is the human catch-22 that is Hillary Clinton, living out the demands of being Hillary Clinton: For decades, pundits have used her sartorial choices as evidence of her unfitness—for the office of the first lady, for a seat in the Senate, for the leadership of the State Department, for the desk in the Oval Office.

It’s not about the clothes. It’s never, really, about the clothes. For those who seek power in places that have not previously been welcoming, the clothes can become cudgels. They can serve as an easy shorthand for who belongs, and who does not. They can be ratifications of progress and of backlash, used by people who think they know what power should be, and act like, and look like, and dress like—people attempting to enforce, on and for everyone else, the narrowness of their own perspectives.

This is a time that is challenging that myopia. Ocasio-Cortez, before and since she was elected into office, has been making a point of doing precisely what her campaign promised she would: doing things differently. Not fitting in. The representative-elect has been, along with several other of her fellow freshmen, Instagramming her experiences of the congressional orientation. She has participated in a protest about climate change in the office of Nancy Pelosi. She has drafted legislation on the same subject, as part of her campaign-platformed “Green New Deal.” She has been reveling in disruption, in change, in difference, all the while suggesting that *a girl who struggles*—and indeed that several such girls, newly elected to the halls of power—will struggle above all to change the appearance of power itself. Which is also to say that Ocasio-Cortez is being treated as a threat, in some quarters, because that is precisely what she is. “Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Will Push Washington,” the headline of her postelection interview with the *Times* read. “Will Washington Push Back?”

This week, in the most tedious of ways, the paper got its answer.

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