

Dressing the Body

Introduction

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Author Katherine Mansfield, when writing to her personal assistant in 1921, took pains to stipulate what kind of clothes she wished to have arranged by her dressmaker. As we learn about her preferences for colours—‘ROYAL blue instead of cornflower’—and shapes—‘cut them on the big side so that I can wear my woollen jumpers underneath if necessary’—we also read her emphatic assertion of self: ‘I am a very MODERN woman.’¹ Threaded together in this letter are clothes and self: how Mansfield wishes to appear in the world, the garments that will materialise that appearance, and the labour necessary to unite the two. Intimated in Mansfield’s writing, too, are the subtle affects and dynamics that flicker through our relationship to clothing: anxiety, desire, imagining the future, exercise of taste, and a sense of self becoming. We all live life in our clothes and, as such, it is the act of wearing that

ISSN 1837-8692

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Citation: Cultural Studies Review (CSR) 2016, 22, 4907, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v22i1.4907>

makes clothes come alive, rather than an industry, a fashion magazine, or a commercial outlet. This consideration lies at the heart of this special section of *Cultural Studies Review*.

The everyday conventions of getting dressed have received increasing academic attention since 2000, when Joanne Entwistle argued that dressing is a 'situated bodily practice'.² Responses to the intersection between body and fashion have been published from a wide range of disciplines, including art history, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies (for an overview of this literature, see Entwistle's 'Preface to the Second Edition' of *The Fashioned Body*), as well as literary explorations for a general readership, focusing on personal narratives of dress and wearing.³ Much attention has been afforded to the communicative qualities of clothing, and the ways in which dress renders the body appropriate to social situations or according to cultural convention. This collection intersects with this rich area of study by focusing particularly on the interplay between embodied self and dress, examining the affective, cultural, social, political and phenomenological aspects of dressing in, buying and repairing clothing. This approach thus differs markedly from the earlier textual analysis of fashion signs and codes.⁴

As such, this special section takes up the disciplinary concerns of cultural studies by examining a habitual human practice, mapping its particularities while seeking to explain its significance as a cultural phenomenon. However, despite this shared concern, the collected articles are interdisciplinary in nature, ranging in methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives to examine materiality, repair, embodiment and memory. This work foregrounds personal narrative, lived experience and the everyday rather than the commercial and artistic aspects of the fashion industry; indeed, these articles are concerned with clothing, not fashion, even as they indirectly address the creative, economic and aesthetic values of the fashion industry.

The collection is loosely divided into two categories: the first three articles speak to labour practices of sustainability, care, repair and the making of clothing, whereas the next three articles examine the process of dressing as well as its personal, social and cultural significance. That said, there are thematic crossovers that permeate these works: inherent in the consideration of care and repair are affective and interpersonal narratives that speak to the power of material objects to

connect us with the immaterial. Similarly, there is labour in the process of dressing and making: the attention to detail, the consideration of appearance in the world, the imaginative labour of envisaging a 'future you' inhabiting the garments under consideration, and the constant shifting between past and present. These considerations overlap, recur and, ultimately, unite these diverse works into a rich examination of the weave between clothing and the everyday practice of wearing.

In 'The Economy of Persistence: Mario the Tailor', Prudence Black takes as her point of departure an interview with Mario Conte, a tailor in Sydney's inner-city suburb of Newtown. This piece examines the persistence of a skilled worker whose practices and techniques have remained the same in a rapidly changing world. Drawing on Scott Herring's *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture*, Black discusses the small confines of Conte's workshop and what it means to stockpile objects from the past. Such an exploration is particularly pertinent in relation to the fashion industry, where rapid turnover of stock and the pursuit of the new are more commonly valued than maintenance and care of the worn.

Alison Gill, Abby Mellick Lopes and Holly Kaye-Smith take a refreshing perspective on sustainability in 'Practicing Sustainability: Illuminating "Use" in Wearing Clothes'. In attending to the quotidian rhythms of laundering, Gill, Mellick Lopes and Kaye-Smith redirect us from the big-S Sustainability movement that would concentrate efforts for environmental change on industry. Rather, they propose a revaluation of the everyday practices of maintenance and care that re-centre clothing as entities with a shifting, enduring lifecycle, rather than a disposable, consumable good. Drawing on the primary research of doctoral student Kaye-Smith, the authors discuss how simple strategies of assessing a garment's need for washing as well as experimenting with a 'sniff test', can encourage small-scale cleaning interventions using what is at hand to embed sustainable practices in laundering. This approach integrates the practices of laundering and care with a consideration of the materiality of objects, ultimately arguing that time itself 'holds the key to practicing sustainability'.

Karen de Perthuis takes up the notion of care of the worn to a different end in her article, 'Darning Mark's Jumper: Wearing Love and Sorrow'. Here, de Perthuis draws symbolic parallels between prolonging the life of her partner's worn jumper and his terminal illness, calling into focus the intimacy of our relationship with

clothing. In living life in our clothes, we also perceive those clothes as memory-keepers, bearing vestiges of the experiences and emotions felt while they were being worn, and so our relationship of wearing and caring for those material objects can powerfully recall prior moments, or overlay us with memory and affect in a collapse of time.

De Perthuis examines this talismanic quality of clothing by alluding to their ‘quasi-magical properties and meanings’, a concern taken up also by Rosie Findlay in “‘Such Stuff as Dreams are Made On’: Encountering Clothes, Imagining Selves”.⁵ Findlay’s article examines the complex interplay between self-imagined and embodied self in the experience of being dressed. Here, the material garment acts as a symbol of a future-self and at the same time is imagined to be the bridge to that self, an embodied process of articulation, engaging ‘joint processes of expression and connection ... that are nonlinear and visual’.⁶ Findlay argues that this inhabitation of the imagined self is not necessarily experienced or realised aesthetically, but rather it is affective and embodied, as the wearer experiences themselves differently by virtue of having dressed into an alternative mode of being in the world. This is a phenomenological consideration of dress, reorienting the discussion of dressed identity away from a sociological perspective of dressed identity by privileging embodied modes of knowing.

Stella North’s ‘Reflexive Dressing: Materiality, Temporality and Rethinking Retro’ furthers this phenomenologically-inflected examination of dressed self by arguing that the relationship between clothing and self is circular, in that ‘the body is not only the object’ of the act of dressing but is also its subject. Here, too, imagination finds material articulation and association, as the body is simultaneously turned inwards and outwards in the moment of dressing. This action is mirrored in North’s case study of retro dressing, where present and past temporally and materially collapse as the dressing subject reimagines past fashions for the contemporary moment. Such a consideration moves beyond fashion’s fascination with reinventing the past for commercial and aesthetic aims, positioning this ‘eternal return’ within the realm of the personal, the embodied.⁷

The complex interplay between social and personal is taken up by Clair Hughes in the final article of this collection, ‘Hats On and Off’. A revised excerpt from her forthcoming book *Hats: Elements of Dress*, this article closely examines the changing

social significance of the hat, drawing on examples from English literature and history to demonstrate the ways that this article of clothing has functioned as a marker of class and cultural capital, of respectability and social failure. Hughes's work calls us to attend to the knowledges implicitly layered in the wearing of garments, demonstrating that the way in which a piece of clothing is worn communicates as much as the actual article itself. These codes are often-unspoken, embodied, and enforced through social approval or censure: as H.G. Wells's Helen scathingly remarks to Kipp in *Ann Veronica*, 'a real gentleman looks right without looking as though he had tried to be right'.⁸

In examining the relationship between self and clothing, between wearing and imagining, this collection offers insight into the significance of the material, not as a status object or aesthetic device, but as an extension of self in the world. Moreover, by situating this consideration of dressed self in relation to temporal and relational practices of repair, care and communication, clothing is shown to be closely imbricated with cultural values, self-perception and human relationships.

We would like to thank the reviewers for their incisive and thoughtful comments about the articles, and the wonderful editorial team at *Cultural Studies Review* for their support in bringing this special section to life.

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¹ Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield, 1920–1921*, vol. 4, Vincent O'Sullivan and Margaret Scott (eds), Clarendon Press, Oxford, [1996] 2004, p. 272.

² Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. 325.

³ Ibid. See also Marilyn J. Horn, *The Second Skin: An Interdisciplinary Study of Clothing*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1975 and Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits and Leanne Shapton, *Women in Clothes*, Blue Rider Press, New York, 2014.

⁴ For example, see Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, Random House, New York, 1981 and Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard, Hill and Wang, New York, 1983 [1968].

⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2004 [1987], p. 378.

⁶ Susan Kaiser, 'Minding Appearances: Style, Truth, and Subjectivity', in Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson (eds), *Body Dressing*, Berg, Oxford, 2001, p. 82.

⁷ Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt (ed), *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn, Pimlico, London, 1999.

⁸ H.G. Wells, *Ann Veronica*, Everyman, London, 1999 [1909], p. 157.

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