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Deploying material culture to write the history of gender and sexuality: the example of clothing and textiles

Culture matérielle, histoire du genre et des sexualités. L'exemple du vêtement et des textiles

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Deploying material culture to write the history of gender and sexuality: the example of clothing and textiles

Leora AUSLANDER

A material culture approach to textiles and clothing

Many forms of material culture – furniture, jewelry, shoes, clothing, tableware, toys, kitchen equipment, bicycles and radios – have drawn the eye of historians of gender and sexuality. Any effort to discuss this expansive literature in one brief review essay would frustrate both the author and the reader; I focus here, therefore, on the particularly extensive gendered history of textiles.¹ It is no accident that historians of gender and sexuality have been drawn to spinning, weaving, embroidery, knitting, quilting, and tailoring. All of these are not only generally highly feminized forms of labor, but the products themselves have been systematically used to construct gender. The advent of the suit for example, in the nineteenth century, both marked and helped to create a change in the definition of masculinity, and women's struggle for the right to wear trousers was a key element in the early feminist movement. The mass marketing of clothing from the late nineteenth century onwards arguably facilitated the construction of homosexual and heterosexual identities; those self-defining as homosexual or lesbian could mark that identification with clothing that enabled mutual recognition and encounters. Furthermore, fabric and clothing are, because of their intimate relation to the body, psychologically loaded; clothing is a classic fetish item and the nineteenth-century disease of kleptomania was defined by women's uncontrollable desire for

¹ For a succinct argument for the importance of textiles see: Burns 2004a.

textiles.² The gendered use of clothing is most obvious, but other textile practices have been equally important in the making of gendered identity.³ In many parts of the world, girls have learned to be women through spinning, weaving and embroidery and actively participated in the making (or assembly) of their trousseau, which would mark their entry into married life.⁴ By contrast, a man's choice to embroider or knit could, in certain contexts, be a sign of resistance to normative masculinity, suggesting how textiles and clothing are intimately linked with sexuality as well as gender identity.

The ubiquity of textiles in most of the major edited collections and journals focusing on gender and material culture or consumption,⁵ the centrality of gender in the journals, monographs, and collective works on textiles,⁶ and the hundreds of books and articles in general history journals on the topic, testify to their linkage. There are, furthermore, well over a dozen Anglophone journals devoted to textiles, a sampling includes: *Journal of Indian Textile History* (1955-); *Costume* (1967-); *Textile History* (1968-); *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body, and Culture* (1997-); *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* (2003-); *Khil'a: Journal for Dress and Textiles of the Islamic World* (2005-); and, *Clothing Cultures* (2013-). All of these have published many articles on gender and sexuality. There is a marked linguistic imbalance in the publications in the field reflecting the dominance of Anglophone scholars, with just a few exceptions like *Textilkunst und Kleidung: kulturhistorische Beiträge* (1990-); *TM: teorila mody: Odezhda, tel, kul'tura* (2006-).⁷

² The best text on textiles and fetishism is Tisseron-Papetti & Tisseron 1987. On shoplifting: Whitlock 2005.

³ Steedman 1998.

⁴ Pellegrin 1999.

⁵ Batchelor & Kaplan 2007; Chabaud-Rychter & Gardey 2002; Donald & Hurcombe 2000; de Grazia 1996; Goggin & Tobin 2009b and 2009c; Martínez & Ames 1997; McClanan & Encarnación 2002; Sandgruber 2006; Styles & Vickery 2006.

⁶ Akou, 2011; Burns 2004b; Burman 1999; Burman & Turbin 2003; Goggin & Tobin 2009a; Haye & Wilson 1999; Hendrickson 1996; Lemire 2010; Llewellyn-Jones 2002; Richardson 2004.

⁷ Databases searched: Cairn, Gallica, Historical Abstracts, IBZ, JStor, Muse, and WorldCat. Notable exceptions to this in the French historiography are Daniel Roche's work and that of Philippe Perrot (1981) as well as the two issues of *Clío*

The goal here is to offer *Clio's* readership a sense of the particular contribution of a material culture approach to the very substantial gendered history of textiles, not to provide a complete overview of the field. Historians have worked for decades on women's role in the design, production, distribution, acquisition and use of cloth and clothing. The distinctiveness of a material culture approach is that it starts with a set of open questions about the thing itself and assumes the salience of the entire life-cycle of that object. Emblematically, Mary Beaudry's book, *Findings: the material culture of needlework and sewing*, devotes a chapter each to pins, needles, thimbles, shears, notions, and artifacts, centering the history of needlework on the tools used and pieces produced.⁸ Judith Coffin's classic *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris garment trades, 1750-1915* provides a clear contrast. The very titles of the two books indicate the difference. Each of Beaudry's chapters traces the origins, uses, and meanings of a particular thing, demonstrating its capacity to shape the production process, social relations and other objects. Coffin's work is organized around labor regulation, processes and discourses; clandestine production in the 18th century; machinery, political economy, and women's work; married women's work; unions; and, the minimum wage bill.⁹ Coffin's book is about the garment trades because they constitute a good example for her argument about gender, labor and the state in this period, not because she thought that either tools or the objects produced had something to teach us. In sum, historians following a material culture approach sometimes use it to tackle a classic historiographic question differently and sometimes to ask different questions. A landmark edited collection in the field, *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750-1950*, provides examples of the new questions this approach enables. What did possession of a sewing machine and the knowledge to use it enable? How was it different to "write" with a needle or a pen? How does "craft" turn into "art" and what happens to

HFS 10: *Femmes travesties: un 'mauvais' genre* and 36, *Costume*. There is, by contrast, a larger francophone and germanophone ethnographic literature on the topic.

⁸ Beaudry 2006.

⁹ Coffin 1996.

its gender when it does? How did women use domestic production to make claims to political power?¹⁰

From gendered labor to gendered making

Historians approaching the gendered making of textiles from a material culture standpoint have built on decades of scholarship on women's role in the production of textiles and clothing for their own and their families' use as well as for sale. As a result of this work in labor and social history, we know a great deal about the gendered organization of production in rural, urban, convent, guild, out-work, sweatshop and factory contexts, from the ancient world to the present day. Scholars have studied how girls were taught to spin, weave, embroider, make lace, knit and crochet, sew and sometimes to cut and press. They have shown us that it is impossible to draw a sharp line dividing the world of domestic and industrial labor, work for the family and work for the market, or even stitching for pleasure and for profit. Labor historians have also demonstrated how women have capitalized on the skill and knowledge they learned at home, in school and on the job, to organize for improved labor conditions or gain autonomy from their parents or spouse. The gendering of work with textiles has also been thoroughly investigated revealing that although most societies have gendered these skills as feminine, that has not always been the case, and that practices and trades sometimes change gender. Men often take on "women's work" when living in homosocial circumstances, and women do "men's work" during wartime.¹¹

Scholars working from a material culture standpoint have shifted the focus from the social interactions around the labor process to the objects themselves and interaction between the makers and the cloth or clothes.¹² Historians have used not only extant objects, but the regulations governing the production and the sale of these goods, iconography, documents generated by labor organization and

¹⁰ Goggin & Tobin 2009a.

¹¹ For an overview of this literature see: Frader 1996; Vigna & Zancarani-Fournel 2013.

¹² Barber 1994; Beaudry 2006; Jackson 1994.

protests, company records, instruction manuals and the records of trade schools to reconstruct the gendering of production. Archaeologists use the remnants of tools and cloth to tell both the very distant and more recent history of this aspect of women's engagement in material culture. Most work with material culture rests not only on extensive research with cloth and clothing, their visual representations and primary textual sources, but also on theoretical work in psychology, philosophy and semiology. Influenced by the 1984 feminist classic, *The Subversive Stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine*, in which Rozsika Parker showed both how the discipline of embroidery constructed feminine norms and how women appropriated those skills, scholars have looked differently at needlework itself.¹³ Maureen Goggin, one of the most creative scholars in the field, has demonstrated, for example, that in colonial America some girls learned how to form the letters of the alphabet not by writing them as their brothers did, but rather by stitching them over and over on samplers. She suggests that this gendering of apprenticeship in literacy shaped its very nature, giving it a different materiality and temporality. Stitched letters looked and felt different than those written on paper in ink with a pen's nib and took much longer to produce.¹⁴ Those girls who had the opportunity to use both needle and pen or chalk, gained a special kind of bi-scriptoralism. Not only did girls come to think about letters and words differently through needlework, but they and their descendants, who were schooled with boys but still learned to sew, also came to use their skills with the needle and thread to create expressive and communicative textiles. Women made quilts, embroidered tableaux, handkerchiefs and dishtowels, and crafted needlepoints and crewel tapestries to commemorate important family events, to record and display a beloved poem, or simply for the pleasure of it.¹⁵ Finally, this work demonstrates that even such banal objects as pockets can be rich in signification. Barbara Burman has shown that pockets were the subject of much debate among seamstresses (and the women for

¹³ Parker 1984; Ring 1993; Stickrodt 2010; Miller 2009.

¹⁴ Goggin 2002; Goggin 2009.

¹⁵ Ulrich 2001.

whom they worked), because they were understood to disrupt the line of the body but also to enable women both to carry things and have their hands free.¹⁶ Clothing with pockets emphasized autonomy over appearance. Other needlework was explicitly political in nature; by studying the embroideries made by slaves, the recently freed and their abolitionist allies, scholars analyze the use of color, composition, stitches, symbols and depictions of the enslaved body to provide new interpretations of the gendering of slavery and of the abolition movement.¹⁷ The use of textiles in the suffrage movement provides another view into how suffragettes negotiated their relation to femininity and equality than that revealed in their tracts and other actions. Stitched portraits of local or national heroes reveal whose visages women chose to labor over and hang on their walls, allowing historians to assess thereby how women viewed these public figures. The abstract quilt patterns women devised to commemorate battles let historians know which conflicts were thought worth remembering and how they were symbolized.¹⁸

In sum, this work broadens and deepens the labor historians' inquiry about skill to ask not only how skill was defined by others, but how women themselves defined it, found pleasure in it, transmitted it, and often used it to their own ends. It also engages the object of the labor of labor history more seriously than previous approaches allow, showing how objects talk back.

A material culture approach to gendered clothing and textile consumption

I would like to suggest that just as a material culture approach helps us to extend the interpretive and analytic reach of gendered labor history, it provides an alternative to the history of consumption which has been dominated by the debate sparked by the publication of the influential texts, *Le Peuple de Paris : essai sur la culture populaire au*

¹⁶ Burman 2002.

¹⁷ Miller 2009.

¹⁸ Auslander 2009; Miller 2006.

XVIII^e siècle, in 1981 and *The Birth of Consumer Society*, in 1982.¹⁹ That debate over the timing of the onset of consumer society, with consumer society defined as one in which people have relatively unrestricted access to a wide range of affordable goods, where desire for those goods has been generated, or stoked, by marketing strategies, and where people's identities depend to a substantial degree on the use and display of the goods they own, is virtually impossible to resolve. The difficulty comes from the multiplicity of factors and their fluidity. Which factor – access, marketing, identity-construction through consumer goods – matters most? What percentage of the population has to have access to what quantity of what kind of clothing at what price for a society to be considered a consumer society? What qualifies as advertising capable of shaping consumer desire? It is not surprising therefore that some historians have been able to find examples of consumer societies as early as the thirteenth century, while others insist that it is only truly a phenomenon of the twentieth century. Material culture scholars can displace this ideologically charged and often unproductive debate. Working out from a specific object, they are able to determine the conditions of its acquisition and use (often in relation to its production) and, crucially, the meanings attributed to it in a given time and place. Approaching from this angle, historians are able to write highly nuanced accounts of the relation of the consumer to the good itself, how that relation is gendered, and how people use clothes and cloth to define and express sexual desire and identity. The power of this approach may be seen in recent work on the gendering of revolutions, which although inspired by the original consumer society debates, has taken a different turn.

Material approaches to gendering revolutionary politics

For decades now, gender historians on both sides of the Atlantic have been debating the gendering of the American, French, Russian,

¹⁹ Roche 1981; McKendrick, Brewer & Plumb 1982; Spufford 1984 were among the earliest texts to argue for a consumer revolution in the eighteenth (or even seventeenth) century. Roche 1989; Roche 1997; Brewer & Porter 1993; Lemire 1997; Styles 2003 further develop and nuance these arguments.

and Chinese revolutions, as well as the decolonization movements of the twentieth century and of the new forms of political regime they each enabled. In the case of the Atlantic Revolutions, scholars have analyzed political pamphlets and treatises, legislation, songs, feminist writings, and memoirs, in their efforts to determine both what kinds of claims women made to political participation and the logic of their inclusion and exclusion from the political process. While it was not central to the first wave of feminist scholarship, some historians did note the place of clothing in imagining a new form of governance. Scholars of the Russian and Chinese revolutions have focused more on the dissonance between claims of gender equality – including in dress – and the reality of continued disparities.

Material culture historians have pressed these analyses further. T.H. Breen has, for example, gone so far as to entitle his book, *The Marketplace of Revolution: how consumer politics shaped American independence*. In that book he argued that it was the spread of consumer goods throughout the American colonies that allowed for women's intense involvement in the revolutionary process; beyond their production and consumption of homespun, women were the key players in the boycott movement that pushed the revolution forward.²⁰ Other historians have analyzed the specifically masculine uses of homespun by men. Linda Baumgarten documented the wearing of homespun by the elite men graduating from Harvard College, the same men who dressed their slaves in British calicoes because homespun, even if rougher than imported cloth, was to be reserved for the free.²¹ And, Linzy Brekke has demonstrated that George Washington's wearing of broadcloth at his inauguration was a key piece of political theater, emblemizing the new austere masculinity of the new nation.²²

Clothing created an image – whether worn or pictured – that played a role in the diffusion of revolutionary ideology in the French Revolution.²³ As I have argued elsewhere, however, the gendering of clothing and fabric was very different in the American and French

²⁰ Breen 2004.

²¹ Baumgarten 2002 and Haulman 2011.

²² Brekke 2006.

²³ Heuer 2002; Kleinert 1989; *Modes et Révolutions* 1989; Ribeiro 1989; Wrigley 2002.

revolutions, reflective of the different spaces and roles allocated to women and men in the two revolutionary moments and in the politics created in their wake. The American boycott of imported fabrics and the production and wearing of homespun were both movements in which women played a leading role. The iconic clothing of the French Revolution – as worn by the *sans-culottes* (without breeches) – was, by contrast, uniquely masculine. This difference suggests that the politicization of women in the American and French revolutions took quite different paths and not that the French women were more radical, as is often assumed. The line between the domestic and the political was far more blurred in the American context, arguably giving the role of republican mother more weight than in the French. Admittedly, however, women found themselves excluded from formal political power in both post-revolutionary regimes, an exclusion that the French revolutionary clothing foretold.

The material culture literature would suggest that the loose-fitting full-length trousers of the “sans-culottes” in fact became emblematic of modern democratic male dress. Michael Zakim and Joanne Entwistle have argued that “the great masculine renunciation” – the shift to somber colors, minimal decoration, fabrics without sheen, and body-obscuring form in men’s fashion – was part and parcel of the democratization of politics and the legitimization of the principle of universal manhood suffrage.²⁴ If all men, and no women, were to govern, it was important that differences among men be diminished and those between men and women marked. Breeches that revealed status (because well-toned calves were produced by horseback riding – an activity open to only a few) were to be replaced by trousers that hung from the waist. Women, by contrast, were to continue to wear corsets and bustles, dress forms that artificially exaggerated gender difference.²⁵ Women’s clothes were, furthermore, designed explicitly to make transparent their cost and attract attention while men’s were to do the opposite. Finally, these differences marked men as dressed

²⁴ Entwistle 2000; Zakim 2003 and Hollander.

²⁵ Fontanel 1992; Jones and Stallybrass 2001; Steele 2001; Summers 2001.

for the public world of politics and business, and women for the private world of domesticity and sexuality.

These efforts to instantiate political change through clothing were emulated by virtually all modern revolutionary movements, whether on the Right or the Left. The Russian and Chinese revolutions' efforts to create socialist gender relations through clothing is well known, as is that of the German and Italian fascist movements to reinforce nationalism and traditional gender roles by the same means. Recent scholarship has both provided more detail, but also demonstrated how consumers used clothing to play with those roles.²⁶ The styles the various regimes attempted to impose varied from a reinforcement of regional forms to a civilian uniform, but in all cases, material culture scholars have been able to demonstrate the limits faced even by authoritarian regimes. Mark Edele, for example, shows how young men under Stalin found ways to imitate Western dress, and Dominique Veillon's study of fashion under the Vichy regime provides multiple examples of women finding ways of working around both ideology and rationing to maintain a defiantly "French" look.²⁷

Finally, historians have noted the efforts of imperial regimes to impose their vision of an appropriate gender order on the societies they conquered, efforts to which post-colonial regimes and peoples responded sharply but in highly varied ways. Here, too, historians attentive to the work done by textiles have shown that virtually all colonial and post-colonial regimes turned to clothing to shape the gendered subjectivities they understood to be compatible with their ambitions. Dianne Lawrence has addressed how *European* women affirmed their gentility through dress in an imperial context.²⁸ Understood as an essential part of the "civilizing mission," versions of European dress were imposed upon a small fraction of the indigenous population (those being groomed as mediators) throughout South Asia, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean

²⁶ For East Germany, Stitzel 2005; for the Soviet Union, Kiaer 2005; for China, Finnane 2008; Eyferth 2012; for Italy, Paulicelli 2004; for Germany, Guenther 2004.

²⁷ Edele 2002; Veillon 2001.

²⁸ Lawrence 2012. See book review in the French edition of this number of *Clio*.

and Latin America.²⁹ In parts of the colonial world in which plantation slavery was common, male and female slaves were given distinctive dress, each deemed appropriate to both their gendered as well as their racial status.³⁰ In all of these instances, clothing was to be a constant reminder to both the colonizer and the colonized of who they were in the social and political order.³¹ This strategy of rule was resisted under colonial regimes and, in part at least, overturned with independence. Post-independence governments too, however, created gendered sartorial systems. In these new nations, women were most often urged to “return” to a form of pre-colonial dress in order to help recuperate something resembling an authentic national culture, a national culture that had, in most cases, been so thoroughly overlaid by the colonial regime that such a recuperation was impossible. Andrew Ivaska provides an example from Tanzania in the 1960s when men tried to impose a norm of “modest” dress on women, in order to restore national dignity, but parallel examples may be found throughout the decolonizing/early national world.³² Two volumes of collected essays, one on Africa the other on Asia and the Americas, provide numerous additional examples of both efforts to make women comply with a nationalizing project through their clothing and their refusal to do so.³³

The “wildness” of the material

Things, as Judy Attfield noted in her seminal monograph, *Wild Things*, are not easily controlled.³⁴ Regimes governed by universal manhood suffrage (and the exclusion of all women from governance) did not, in fact, as Christopher Breward has documented, see the erasure of class differences in men’s clothing.³⁵ And, in the twentieth century when, along with the vote, women gained access to far less restrictive clothing than in most earlier periods, the modern practice of

²⁹ Akou 2011; Presta 2010; Waghorne 1994.

³⁰ Fair 1998; White 2003; Miller 2009.

³¹ Martin 1994.

³² Ivaska 2002.

³³ Allman 2004; Roces & Edwards 2007.

³⁴ Attfield 2000.

³⁵ Breward 1999, ch. 3.

obscuring masculine sexual attributes while revealing the feminine continued. Both conceptions of gender and sexuality and the world of material culture exceed politics. This may be seen in the fundamental paradox in the *longue-durée* history of gendered clothing, from the medieval period to the present. In a period with no pretense of political, legal, or social gender equality, clothing styles equally highlighted male legs, buttocks and genitalia, and female breasts.³⁶ From the mid-twentieth century onwards, despite the rising claim for gender equality, clothing has continued to be designed to obscure masculine sexual attributes and highlight the feminine, as it did in the nineteenth century. If clothing and politics mapped perfectly, this would not be the case. These examples suggest that a study of gender relations limited to formal equality before the law may miss essential aspects of the system's workings.

Part of why clothing neither simply mirrors, nor simply opposes, political ideology is because it is subject to many forces beyond the political. In a context of affordability and availability, elaborate networks of distribution and sophisticated advertising, the whole relatively free from regulation, cloth and clothing took on new possibilities for the reproduction and contestation of gender and sexual norms. Displays, magazines, newspapers and later film and television produced and disseminated ideals not just for appropriate masculine and feminine dress, but differently gendered dress for different contexts, classes, ages, and races.³⁷ Some of this was done through explicit advertising intended to sell particular goods, but much was more subtle than that. The representation of clothing and fabric in texts and visual culture to convey sexual attractiveness or availability also shaped people's imaginaries and practices. These norms concerned both styles and types of goods. A certain fabric, color or cut could be defined as masculine or feminine. In parallel to the shifts in the gendering of the division of labor discussed above, however, these classifications could also change. A form of clothing may be defined as exclusively masculine at one historical moment and then be adopted by women, changing meaning as it changes users.

³⁶ Fisher 2006.

³⁷ Advertising, retailing, and advice manuals have their own, massive, historiography.

Blue jeans in Argentina provide a vivid example. Valeria Manzona has shown how jeans went from a good worn only by men, to their adoption by women, at which point they were defined as sexually alluring. In a third moment, they lost that signification and took on that of androgynous political radicalism.³⁸ Or, as the aprons analyzed by Elke Gaugele demonstrate, objects may exist in sharply gender-differentiated forms (the male shoemaker's vs. the female maid's), but be more complex in practice.³⁹ The gendering of clothing across the lifecourse is also historically highly contingent. Jo Paoletti notes that one can date changes in both mobility and child rearing practices by the shift to gendered baby and toddler clothing. Before 1890, such clothing was unisex in the United States not because the gender of the very young was not thought to matter, but because infants were only seen by those who knew their sex. It was only when babies started to be taken outside at an early age in a social context in which they would encounter strangers that their clothing became blue or pink. Christine Arnold makes a similar argument for the highly decorative, but gender-neutral Fair Isle sweaters she analyzes, saying that they were a product of a society in which gender was very rigidly marked, therefore not in need of sartorial reinforcement.⁴⁰ Finally, early modern corsets appear to be garments that served only to exaggerate gender difference and incite heterosexual desire, but the "busk," a central stay in the early modern corset that ran from breasts to groin, has generated a fascinating historiographic debate, with some scholars arguing that it could actually serve to disrupt the gender order, while others claiming the opposite.⁴¹

Both women and men, therefore, have made choices, with very varying degrees of freedom, concerning their appearance against the backdrop of the norms of the times in which they lived. Sometimes those choices indicated compliance with gender norms, sometimes a refusal, sometimes some of each. The uses of clothing by sexual

³⁸ Manzano 2009.

³⁹ Gaugele 2002.

⁴⁰ Paoletti 1997; Arnold 2010.

⁴¹ Jones & Stallybrass 2011 and Feinstein 1994 argue for disruption and Bendall 2014 for reinforcement.

subcultures and cross-dressing provide vivid examples well-studied by material culture scholars. George Chauncey has suggested, for example, that the vast array of forms of men's clothes available in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were crucial to the development of a gay subculture in New York City.⁴²

Scholars have investigated practices of cross-dressing, that is dressing in the clothes of "the other" gender, showing how it is for some a mark of a sense of "having been born in the wrong body", allowing them to appear in the world as the gender they feel themselves to be. For others, by contrast, it is a refusal of the gender attributed to one's biological sex; one feels oneself perfectly at home in a male body, but refuses the characteristics, instantiated by clothing, of what it means to be a man. Christine Bard, Gayle Fischer and some of the contributors to Guyonne Leduc's collective volume trace the history of women's choosing to wear trousers, when they were defined as men's dress.⁴³ Their work here echoes that of Laura Levine and Sylvie Steinberg on transvestism in the early modern period.⁴⁴ Luther Hillman, by contrast, focuses on the politics of gay men's transvestism in the 1960s and 1970s, which he argues was essential to the making of cultures focused on contesting sexuality, rather than gender.⁴⁵

The 1980s movement known as the SAPE (*Société des Ambianceurs et Personnes Élégantes*) provides a quite different example of how clothes make the man that has attracted considerable interest from historians and other material culture scholars.⁴⁶ The *sapeurs* were impoverished Zairean and Congolese men who acquired very high-end European men's fashion and, for the time the clothing was on their back, considered themselves to *be* part of the elite for whom that clothing was made. The lifestyle needed to support this sartorial style was difficult to reconcile with family life; the clothing was extremely expensive and often illegally acquired and the ideal was to

⁴² Chauncey 1994.

⁴³ Bard 2010; Fischer 2001; Leduc 2006.

⁴⁴ Levine 1994; Steinberg 2001.

⁴⁵ Luther Hillman 2011.

⁴⁶ Gandoulou 1989; Bazenguissa & MacGaffey 1995; Auslander 2008.

live in permanent motion between Africa and Europe. The *sapeurs* lived for their style, and the style was one judged by and lived among men. Having grown up with *évolués* fathers and grandfathers, who wore the Western suit demanded by the colonial regime, and having lived themselves through Mobutu's imposition of the anti-suit, the Abacost (*à bas le costume*), they continued to take clothing very seriously, but turned it in a very different direction. Striking in this phenomenon is the *sapeurs'* rejection of the nationalism and productivism of the post-independence period, along with a refusal of normative masculinity. Parallel stories may, of course, be found of women's refusal in the post-colonial period to adopt the forms of dress deemed appropriate by the regime, but this is a particularly striking example of clothing being simultaneously embedded within a political narrative and exceeding it. I would argue that it is precisely that quality of material culture in general, and cloth and clothing in particular, that makes it an invaluable source for historians of gender and sexuality.

The scholarship discussed here suggests the importance of material culture for historians of gender and sexuality and may help us to find better answers to some of the questions that remain open after a half century of intensive work. Research on clothing, for example, offers some explanations for why formal legal and political equality alone will not generate gender likeness. Most of those involved in the French Revolution gave no thought to the gendering of the *sans-culotte* anymore than most Americans thought about the gendered politics of homespun. And yet the sartorial practices speak volumes about each revolution's gender politics to the historian attuned to such practices. Parallel transnational work is needed on clothing in colonial and post-colonial regimes; there is a tendency to think that all such practices were more or less alike, that Mobutu's Abacost and Gandhi's Swadeshi were both similar nationalist expressions. Closer study would, I suspect, reveal that they were no closer than homespun and the *sans-culotte*. But it is also crucial to go beyond the normative, whether in revolutionary or the established regimes. More research needs to be done on how and why sexual difference has been created and expressed through clothing in different times and places, with thought given to the consequences of these sartorial effects. Work is

needed both on the most mainstream of clothing – the business suit, blue jeans, athletic wear – but also on the extremes – drag, Zoot suits, goth – to grasp better how politics and societies have sought to create and reproduce normative gender and sexual behavior and their inevitable failure to do so completely. The extremes, referenced here in the example of the S.A.P.E., reveal the ways in which gender and sexuality are not containable within political ideology or political practice. Gender involves sexuality and sexuality, whether heterosexual, homosexual, or queer, entails a play of likeness and difference as well as an engagement with power. The interpretive difficulties posed by material culture, moreover, force a reflection about method that text-based research may allow one to elide. Those reflections may be usefully carried over to historical research with more conventional sources. Really engaging material culture requires a deep materialism, taking very seriously the constraints and possibilities of raw materials, the labor and distribution processes, cost and availability. It also, however, requires an equally serious engagement with culture, because makers and consumers are motivated by many things beyond the material. They seek to communicate, express themselves, and generate desire. Consequently, much of human interaction with things, both individual and collective, is not explicable with the traditional methods and sources of political, social, or economic history; it most often requires semiotic and psychoanalytic theorizing as well. In sum, historians' attention to textiles and clothing provides us with new ways of thinking about such classic questions in the history of gender and sexuality, including that of the gendered division of labor, consumerism, the gendering of monarchical, democratic and imperial regimes, and sexual identification and desire.

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