Cristina Giorcelli and Paula Rabinowitz, eds., *Extravagances: Habits of Being 4*

Katerina Delikonstantinidou

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3. Katerina Delikonstantinidou
4. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

The fourth and final volume of *Habits of Being* continues and brings to successful completion the series’ mission to provide English-speaking audiences with explorations of the interface between text and textile, originally published in Italy by *Abito e Identita: Ricerche di storia letteraria e cultural*. As in each of the previous three volumes, artists and scholars from a wide range of backgrounds and expertise cross disciplinary, methodological, cultural, and geographical boundaries are gathered to address the multiple and complex interactions between clothing and (psychic and ontological) aspects of identity; social, political, and economic processes; as well as a variety of cultural arenas, including, but not limited to, art and literature.
Aptly titled *Extravagances*, this volume encompasses fifteen essays, apart from the Introduction by editor Paula Rabinowitz and Coda by co-editor Cristina Giorcelli, that examine instances where the extraordinary (ornamentation) bursts into the ordinary (quotidian dress) in the realm of clothing, personal appearance, and (bodily) habits—with identity itself conceived, according to the Preface, as “little more than a matter of habit.” Indeed, “[a] habit of being” (xvii). The idea for the creation of the volume may have drawn conceptually on Paul Ricoeur’s use of the term “extravagance,” albeit in the very different context of the study of the parabolic mode to characterize its constitutive trait of hyperbole and outlandishness borne by the conjunction of the normal with the abnormal. Similarly to Ricoeur, the contributors to *Extravagances* seem to construe the titular word in terms of a fractured realism associated with the elements of surprise, shock, exaggeration, and paradox, straining and transgressing the sense of everyday-ness of the wearers of objects and of “those who observe them, describe them, desire them, and perhaps also shop for them” (xv). Beginning with the introductory “Worn Out of Bounds,” coming immediately after the Preface and the “Arcade”—a constellation of quotations relevant to clothes, dress, and fashion—all of the book’s essays reflect, one way or another, on ways in which the interpenetration between the ordinary and the extraordinary with regard to items of apparel affects and is in turn affected by issues of subjectivity and identity.

Rabinowitz’s “Worn Out of Bounds” offers a useful first glimpse at the often extravagant (and more than structural and linguistic) relationship between text and textile by means of her succinct discussion of Daj Sijie’s novel, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. More specifically, Rabinowitz treats the novel as a story, or rather, as a parable about liberating stories written in books and on clothes, in which “the mundane everyday act of wearing clothes,” involving issues and processes of power, desire, and the sense of self, “strays beyond the bounds of the body” (3-4), thus opening up new vistas of possibilities for the wearers.

Conforming to the format of previous volumes, *Extravagances*’ string of essays “officially” opens with a reflective essay by a woman psychoanalyst on the meaning of clothes in relation to the identity of the wearer(s). In this volume, Mariapia Bobbioni closes up and expounds on a
number of points raised in the Introduction, bringing insights from the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic schools of thought to bear both on her introductory reflections on the interrelationship between women’s sense of self, dress and body (image), as well as personal and sociocultural history, and on her brief but revealing sketches of the implications of traumatic events in women’s lives related to the said dress and body (image). The triptych identity-dress/body-history is next taken up by the volume’s second meditation on habits of being, which brings it closer to our more immediate experience of clothes and fashion. Here, maître Guillermo Mariotto—fashion designer and creative director of the Maison Gattinoni—converses with Cristina Giorcelli about his avant-garde retrievals of the histories of great women of the past (from Saint Teresa to Queen Elisabeth and Anita Garibaldi), which are also the histories of (their) garments, in reimagining “their” accessories as signifying “gestures” (22).

The next three essays, dense and nuanced, explore the convoluted trajectories of more “gestures,” to use Marrioto’s brilliant notion: wearing the crown, earrings, and buttons. Paula Colaiacomo’s essay traces different forms and meanings attached to the gesture of wearing the crown over time and across European dynasties—both real and imagined (as in Shakespeare’s history plays), including those forms and meanings pertaining to woman’s objectification. Motivated by the idea of details of clothing as subtle signals pointing to much more than themselves, Giorcelli and Margherita di Fazio undertake a similar task with regard to earrings (Giorcelli) and buttons (di Fazio) in American and European literature respectively. The scholars establish subtle connections between the said “gestures” and their literary and sociocultural contexts, thus shedding precious light on their ubiquitous evocative powers.

In a graceful, compelling essay, Charlotte Nekola looks at the gesture of wearing flowers, mainly in the form of corsages, in a number of American film noirs from the 1940s and 1950s, for what it revealed about the characters (and destinies) of the famous femme fatales they featured. Shoring up her analysis with evidence drawn from pulp fiction and fashion magazines, Nekola argues that during wartime—the time that also gave rise to the “can-do,” suited, working woman, a foil to the femme fatale (120-21)
—the wearing of flowers was construed as an extreme, even unpatriotic, gesture of extravagance; this idea was reflected in the film noirs of that period in which the corsage functioned almost invariably as a signifier of deception and death. Interestingly, as we learn in the following essay by Victoria Pass, only a few years earlier, European art (especially surrealism) and fashion (especially fashion influenced by surrealism) relished and celebrated the kind of excess wartime America sought to trample on. The artworks of Meret Oppenheim and the designs of Elsa Schiaparelli, particularly those involving gloves, present cases in point. In fact, they exuded a kind of uncanny, even horrible, “convulsive beauty” (127)—borne by the conflation of irreconcilables, which subverted the circulating images of the femme fatale and the femme enfant (primitive woman), even while employing/exploiting both At the same time they pushed out of established bounds their constituent assumptions about femininity, art, and fashion. Much like Oppenheim’s and Schiaparelli’s works, Derek Walcott’s Caribbean Island Helen, “[i]n her ambiguous complexity,” made manifest by her “excessive” sporting of borrowed/stolen dress and bracelet, frustrates any effort to include (and thus contain her) either “among those who wield power” or among “those who are subject to it” (161). Rather, as Maria Anita Stefanelli, author of “Frock and Bracelet in Omeros,” suggests, Helen’s self-presentation locates her indefinitely between extremes; it is a “representation...by a subject that is simultaneously agent, actor, and instrument” (Spivak qtd. in Stefanelli 157)—one highly suggestive of the history of British colonial rule.

The essays of Rabinowitz and M. Giulia Fabi address more aspects of self-presentation, attending to the quandaries and challenges that attempt at self-fashioning the present, particularly for women. Whereas self-fashioning was successful for modernist women artists Frida Kahlo and Georgia O’Keeffe, who, by means of their signature aesthetics, secured a niche for themselves in the male-dominated modern art world, it proved unable to safeguard the New African American Woman protagonist of Nella Larsen’s Quicksand against the grim legacy of physical and psychic violence in Jim Crow America.

If in Rabinowitz’s and Fabi’s intertextual (in more than one sense) essays we moved constantly between South and North, Tarrah Krajnak’s touching photo essay of the nuns populating the convent-orphanage in Lima, where she lived
as a child before being adopted, marks a decided southward movement. A rosary, a television, “a hand or the folds in polyester fabric,” signs of the nuns’ collective identities, bring about a welcome “metaphorical reflection on the meaning of motherhood, death, family, and home” (195). Camilla Cattarulla’s engaging essay keeps us in Lima but signals a shift in tone as the white habits of centenarian nuns transform into black veils, essential in the “game of seduction” (208) orchestrated by the tapadas, the “veiled ladies” of Peru’s colonial era. Clad in their apparently modest saya y manto (long dress and black veil)—whose origins are lost in time, the tapadas defied gender (as well as race and class)-related stereotypes and straddled masculine and feminine worlds” (203). They did so by employing their costume as “an instrument of women’s freedom, allowing...[them] to go where they pleased and behave as they wished without fear of discovery” (202-03). Yet, even as the black veil served, quite paradoxically, to empower the women of Peru, the color sky blue functioned during the rule of the Argentine dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas (1829-1852) as an ideological sign that could easily deprive the person who bore it of their freedom, or even their life. As we learn in Amanda Salvioni’s insightful “Clad in the Bloody Livery,” Rosas practices of state terror, involving and revolving around his favored “Federal” poppy red and, more specifically, the divisa punzó (the Red Badge) —symbol of loyalty or submission to his regime—rendered Argentineans more than “vehicles for a [political] message” (221); it made them into “federation property,” victims and perpetrators of terror.

From the terror-inducing distinctions authorized by Rosas dictatorial regime, we move to the subtle and spectacular distinctions—primarily related to family/clan affiliations and economic standing—signified by the often extravagant designs of Kalabari clothes. On a less somber note, then, Joanne Eicher’s well-documented essay takes us across the Atlantic to West Africa and the Lower Niger Delta, among the Kalabari Ijo, whose history as traders partaking in a global network is also the history of their garments and accessories—both inextricable from the everyday life and ceremonial events of their community. Reaching the fifteenth contribution to the volume, one gets the sense that the extracted threads of the madras cloth, so important in Kalabari culture, have been picked up and transfigured to form the ingenious intertextual/intertextile poem “Shmata” that, much like the threadbare rag (or

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shmata in Yiddish) which the poem lovingly mimics and memorializes, is at once simple and extravagant; complex, like the diasporic Jewish (women’s) identities to which it alludes, and familiar, like one’s closet of rags and—sometimes ragged—memories. Bravo to the poem’s composers, Maria Damon and Adeena Karasick, for this rare gift!

It is with a tinge of regret that we return to the mundane reality of corporate power, fashion brands, and the global financial crisis by means of the volume’s Coda coming immediately after “Shmata.” Giorcelli’s piece offers a brief recapitulation of the current predicament of the fashion industry and reviews developments in the interfaces between fashion and architecture, and fashion and ecology. It serves to underscore the importance of the issues of communication and sustainability within the world of capitalist consumption—a world obsessed with fashion and new trends, extravagant, not least because it holds the power to embrace the extraordinary within the ordinary, but leaves us (and history) to decide whether the recent turn towards sustainable product manufacturing, as in ecofashion, “represent[s] a true cultural shift” or whether it is “merely a new trend” (301).

Informative and thought-provoking, particularly when it comes to the possibilities for research and meditation it unfolds with regard to the connections, criss-crossings, and overlappings of text(s) and textile(s), the fourth volume Habits of Being is a worthy addition to and conclusion of the series. The book will certainly appeal to scholars of cultural studies and fashion, literature and film, gender and ethnicity.

NOTES

AUTHOR

KATERINA DELIKONSTANTINIDOU

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki