

MATERIALS

Redressing: A Script

Angela J. Latham

I gravitate immediately to the black, crepe, Victorian-era dress I see hanging, dusty, in the corner of the small antique shop I frequent when passing through this tiny Midwestern US town *en route* to visit family in an equally tiny Midwestern US town. The dress has exquisite beading on the bodice and sleeves. I tap the beadwork with my fingernails to verify my suspicions—it is glass. Delicious. Indeed, if I were not in such close proximity to the proprietor of the shop, I would use my sure-fire method of verification: putting the tiny beads to my teeth, vampire-like, consuming the unmistakable clink of the glass. But even the fingernail test confirms these are beads that if one were so brazen and cruel, one could smash into shards. The dark inklings of an axe murderer.

Actually, I am a historian and, in equal measure, a performer. I cannot conceive of history without embodiment and all the trappings of bodies enacting their lives and their rituals, their performed selves. My historical leanings and research proclivities have led me often to these remote outlets of history, quaint shops in small towns, in my insatiable desire to find, to estimate, to touch the fabrics and fashions of the women whose lives I have studied in equally fusty archives filled with similarly touchable pages of print. Yellowed, with crumbly edges and stale smells, pages almost as delicious to me as the dress I now examine, with its wrinkled sleeves that so poignantly reveal the form and long-ago movements of its wearer. I must possess this . . . artifact . . . no, this art. It requires my reverence, my protection, even my advocacy. I will examine its seams, smell it, fondle it, taste it. I will open and read it, like a book, like a lover. Put plainly, I must undress and know this woman.

I politely take the dress to the surprised shopkeeper who so rarely sells items to the occasional visitors, most of whom troll the merchandise, scavengers with a greedy eye for the discounted roadshow treasure.

When I get her home—the dress is no longer an “it”—I lay her gently on the bed and begin. I see and sniff the stains from her armpits. I am reminded how I take for granted the luxuries of temperature-controlled environments. Antiperspirant. She was resourceful. I see her efforts to spare her garment damage from her own body’s sweat by padding the underarms with extra fabric. She was proud. For in this way she also concealed her body’s involuntary reaction to the heat and stressors of her life.

There are patches neatly sewn on by hand to reinforce the places worn by repeated wearings and washings over many years. Though frayed, this gown is fancy, for dressy occasions. In it she attended many a church service, wedding, funeral. Did she go willingly? Eagerly? Resignedly? Was she pleased to wear this dress? Did she feel admired by others in it? I mourn the span of time that mars my sense of these, her distant memories.

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In my continuing lust I examine her workmanship. I am a maker of apparel too. I puzzle over the techniques and materials used to craft this vesture: the lining; the fabric choice; the order of construction; the painstaking handwork. In my historical forays I have also become an observer of the machines that women of this era used to construct their clothing. I imagine the creator of this dress sitting at the dark oak table that supports her treadle machine, leaning over the strips of cloth she sews. Little does she know that this enactment of her culturally and historically defined femininity will one day be commemorated in at least some small way by the likes of me. Her work will mutely testify to her beauty, her social status, her modesty, her vanity, her stature, her skill, her stress and strain, even her physical movements. The very bending of her arm and the circumference of her torturously cinched waist will be revealed across time through the medium of this “mere” fashion.

I am sated for now at least. This remembering in my way a historical era and a world in which women acquiesced to, fabricated, resisted, repaired, and recycled their sartorial and social structures is dimensional. This beaded remnant of a completed life—perhaps that of even my great-grandmother given the propinquity of my find—now joins the remnants of my own life. It is of a piece with my memories, my identities, my life rituals—touching, sorting, imagining, constructing, displaying, deconstructing, historicizing, professing, redressing. It will be among my own artifacts that another finds when I too am long gone, and that will lead her to wonder and imagine and, if I am so fortunate, make her wish to know me.

My intimacy with this woman in these moments of undress makes her memory for a brief and satisfying instant as real as my own. We share a space on the continuum of time and touch each other across the great divide of historical circumstance. I know her in a more sensate way than if I had simply met her, though indeed I have met and admired her frocked likeness many times in my beloved, staid, paged archives.

I clink her painstakingly applied beading to my teeth and feel her breath, the prick of her sewing needle, and hear her sigh in sorrow or perhaps in joy. Or maybe both. Impossible to tell, alas, from this my distant memory.

A Note on the Text

The text and performance of *Redressing* are corollaries to my previous scholarship, which posited and applied the methodology of historical performance ethnography to the often contested self-presentations by women of the post-Victorian era. It is also a natural counterpart to the scholarship of Borggreen and Gade (2013), Denzin (2003), Schneider (2011), and others, who articulate so well the complexities of performance “remains,” including artifacts that directly and indirectly illuminate performances of the past. The intellectual, emotional, and sensual impact of tangible remnants of embodied performance as encountered in the archive by the performer/ethnographer/historian can be and often is profound. *Redressing* substantiates and punctuates this phenomenon that is for many such artists and scholars an often unarticulated yet vivid juncture, rife with its own performative potentialities. Further, by means of an aesthetically crafted and theoretically informed personal narrative, the presentation blurs the temporal and physical boundaries of live(d) performance. In short, I have attempted herein to offer an artistically rendered and corporeally transposed glimpse of the extraordinary yet commonplace coalescence of the remembered, the imagined, the longed for, and the real.

References

- Borggreen, Gunhild, and Rune Gade, eds. 2013. *Performing Archives/ Archives of Performance*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Denzin, Norman K. 2003. *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schneider, Rebecca. 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. New York: Routledge.