

‘Wearing my mother’s laces’: Experiential History Through Dress

Lauren Spallone

What does an altered eighteenth century dress tell us about making and remaking a dress as historiography? In recent decades, scholars have discussed an ‘affective turn’ in the research of history, describing a movement to include experiential, implicit, or tactile elements in historical research. This article will focus specifically on the practice of making, altering, and wearing historical clothing as a means of discovering the past. As a case study, a late eighteenth century muslin dress will be examined, along with an entry from the diary of Virginia Woolf. The reconstruction and wearing of historical garments have long been employed as methods of exploring an ‘embodied’ past, and have the potential to provide valuable insight that would be unattainable through textual or visual sources alone.

What does it mean to ‘do’ history? How should history be defined, taught, or known? In a Cartesian effort to align the field with objective ‘scientific’ methods, history has often been simplified into a written exposition on primary texts. Anything else, many would argue, would veer into conjecture and sentimentalism. However, this text-to-text version of history has been challenged in the last generation of historians. Notably, there has been a wave of interest in what has been called ‘affective’ or ‘embodied’ history - that is, history through an entirely different epistemological lens, one that does not reject the emotions or the body.¹ While the methodology of embodied history in a scholarly context is still being discussed and debated, the act of seeking historical knowledge in a more experiential manner is not new. A fascination with the past has long led individuals to ‘recreate’ or ‘re-enact’ previous events, most often through clothing. From the masquerades of early modern England to Queen Victoria’s fancy dress ball, people have emulated and interpreted ancestors and historical figures. Whether in the

context of a historical pageant or a fancy dress party, wearing historical clothing has the potential to generate valuable embodied knowledge that cannot be gained from a text alone.

In this essay I seek to explore the phenomenon of experiencing the past through embodied practices. While reenactors may seek to replicate many things such as environments, events, speech or practices, I am narrowing my focus to the wearing of historical clothing and the purposes that it may serve. I’m also placing a slight emphasis on women’s clothing, although the arguments presented can apply to all forms of clothing. I am defining the ‘historical’ aspect of the clothing as any time frame far enough removed from the wearer that it would introduce unfamiliar ways of moving in and experiencing the world.

To begin, a philosophical justification of experiential history will be established, followed by an examination of the role of clothing in experiencing history. Two artefacts will be compared, one being an entry from the diary of

¹ For an overview of this movement, see Hilary Davidson, ‘The Embodied Turn: Making and Remaking Dress as an Academic Practice.’ *Fashion Theory* 23, no. 3 (2019), 329-62.

Virginia Woolf expressing the emotive power of wearing her mother's clothing, and the other a dress made in the late eighteenth century later altered for wear in the late nineteenth century. Lastly, the problematic aspects of historical re-creation will be discussed, as well as the potential.

Shared amongst hobbyists and researchers alike, reenactment is concerned with everyday life, personal experience, and social relations, all developed from 'conjectural' or 'provisional' interpretations of the past.² While historical recreation has long been mocked as mere play or frivolity, a number of researchers have begun to explore the practice as a means of bodily, performative history.³ There is knowledge being generated in these events, but because it is not considered 'purely objective' in the way that text is, it has often been disregarded. While post-structuralist theories have challenged the idea of objective knowledge in many fields, western historians seem to have clung to the traditional subjects and sources. Ethnographic approaches have been accepted in the study of indigenous communities which often include performative aspects of culture and vital bodily practices, but these methods and perspectives are rarely adopted in the exploration of western history. Katherine Johnson argues, 'Adherence to written history, to the exclusion of somatic, performative traditions, restricts the means to record (and create) history to an elite – a predominantly white, male elite.'⁴

Considering the problem of what information was deemed important enough to record in a text, Diana Taylor questioned 'whose memories, whose trauma, "disappear" if only archival knowledge is valorized and granted permanence?'⁵ Of course, performative or bodily knowledge only really becomes appropriate for academic study when it can become useful to other researchers. While recreational reenactors may not always be equipped to generate knowledge that proves directly useful to scholars, reenacting, specifically the wearing of historical garments, is a method of engagement just as valid and perhaps even richer than merely reading about history. Re-enactors and historical costumers, in their striving for historical accuracy, are often compelled to perform text-based factual research first, which naturally leads into the performative aspects. Despite the careful research into historical context and accuracy involved, many historians have reacted viscerally against performative history, likely due to an adherence to the traditional dichotomies between science/humanities, mind/bodies, or art/craft that have developed in a Western, post-cartesian world.⁶ While there are plenty of problematic issues and pitfalls to re-enactment, performative methods of history are gaining ground with historians such as Ian McCalman and Paul Pickering who have stated

² For an overview of relevant literature, see Vanessa Agnew, 'History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present.' *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (2007), 299-312, (p.300).

³ Katherine M. Johnson, 'Rethinking (re)doing: Historical Re-enactment And/as Historiography' *Rethinking History* 19, no. 2 (2015), 193-206, (p.194).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham, NC: John Hope Franklin Center Book, 2003), p. 193.

⁶ See Denning, Greg. *Mr Bligh's Bad Language: Passion, Power and Theatre on the Bounty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

that 'taking reenactment seriously as a methodology is worth the risk'.⁷

Within the world of reenactment, clothing plays a unique role due to the significance of clothing in relation to the body. Dress necessitates interaction with the form and shape of the body, and is a part of shaping how the body moves through and interacts with the world. It plays a part in nearly every daily task. It both reflects and establishes the wearer's place in a social and cultural sphere. Wearing period clothing alters the way the body moves through the world. It forces modern wearers to move in the manner of people in the past, and develops an 'experiential relation' to bodies of the past, heightened by the feeling of strangeness in the altered shape of the body and the altered patterns of movement.⁸

If our relationship with the world is primarily mediated by our senses as some phenomenologists assert,⁹ shared sensory experiences form a 'common understanding of being, formulated through anatomical similarity between subjects, realized within a shared world'.¹⁰ It is this 'common understanding of being' that is the heart of seeking the past through historical garb. Dance historian Diane Foster suggests that historical research can interact with the past not just through text and objects, but also has the potential to 'reanimate' past bodies through connection with contemporary bodies. This kind of research develops 'an affiliation, based on a kind of

kinesthetic empathy between living and dead but imagined bodies'.¹¹ This is an embodied experience, formed through an awareness of movement in relation to the bodies of the past. While Foster's expertise is specifically in dance, the same arguments can be made for a 'kinesthetic empathy' in historical practices via clothing.

The significance of the practice is amplified when wearing an actual historical garment rather than a reproduction. Building upon the increased awareness of the body, interaction with historical objects can create a sensation some have termed 'flattened temporality', the feeling that the gap between past and present has thinned. Emily Robinson explores this phenomenon in the context of archival research, and highlights the experience of touching the same objects once handled by people in the past. Digital copies and facsimiles do not seem to produce the same effects, despite the fact that both contain the same textual information. What is missing is the tactile elements, feeling the same sensations as the original authors of the documents. Researchers touch the artifacts and the artifacts 'touch' in return via the sensory input they provide. There is intellectual interest in the historical information, but the physical sensations can create a metaphorical bridge across time with the knowledge that a body in the past was experiencing the same sensations.¹² This same concept applies to historical garments, amplified by the fact that dress is not only experienced via

⁷ Iain McCalman and Paul A. Pickering. *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*. *Reenactment History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁸ Johnson, 'Rethinking (re)doing: Historical Re-enactment', p.200.

⁹ See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Colin Smith. *Phenomenology of Perception*. (London: Routledge Classics, 2002).

¹⁰ Amanda Card, 'Feeling for Dancing Hidden in the Archives of the Dead', in *Scrapbooks, Snapshots, and Memorabilia: Hidden Archives of Performance*, ed. By Glen McGillivray (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011) 129-148 (p.139).

¹¹ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing History*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) p.7.

¹² Emily Robinson, 'Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible' *Rethinking History* 14, no. 4 (2010) 503-20.

the hands, but with the whole body. Clothing is reciprocal. It lays flat until worn and only takes shape when it is put on the body, yet also shapes the body and its movement. In this manner, objects of the past can ‘touch’ us in return.

In January of 1923, Virginia Woolf attended a fancy dress party. The event, hosted by Maynard Keynes, was referred to as the Twelfth Night Ball, referencing both the Shakespeare play and the end of the twelve days of Christmas. Rather than dress as a character from one of Shakespeare’s plays, Woolf chose to don her mother’s Victorian clothing. Although we do not know what the ensemble looked like, we do know she wore her mother’s ‘laces’ (the corset) and can infer that the unfamiliar structural garment altered her movement and the way she interacted with the world around her. In her diary entry of January 7, 1923, Woolf describes her experience of stepping into the party:

[It was] full, miscellaneous, & oriental for the most part. Suppose one’s normal pulse to be 70; in five minutes it was 120: & the blood, not the sticky whitish fluid of daytime, but brilliant & prickling like champagne. This was my state, & most peoples. We collided, when we met; went pop, used Christian names, flattered, praised, & thought (or I did) of Shakespeare. . . . Sh[akespeare] I thought would have liked us all tonight. . . . We were all easy & gifted & friendly & like good children rewarded by having the capacity for enjoying ourselves thus. Could our fathers? I, wearing my mothers laces, looked at Mary’s soft Jerboa face in the old looking glass—& wondered.¹³

The entry describes an affective experience that is joyful, perhaps even euphoric. It seems most of the others were dressed in ‘oriental’ costume, and the fact that Woolf was wearing her mother’s clothing prompted her to reflect on the previous generation. The frivolity of the party seems to contrast with her perspective of her parents and their Victorian culture, which led her to wonder if their ‘fathers’ could have enjoyed the same light hearted identity play. Additionally, she makes a connection further back in time to Shakespeare himself and contemplates the playwright’s potential perspective on the gathering. The wearing of the historical dress raises questions about the past and how it relates to the present, and does so through a kind of conceptual empathy occurring both on the tactile and the mental level.

While Woolf gives a unique articulation of the experience of historical clothing generating empathy and inquiries into the past, I would argue that the experience itself was not unique. The wearing of historical clothing was highly sought after in the ‘long’ nineteenth century, especially after events such as Queen Victoria’s birthday celebration in 1850, during which the Queen and Prince Albert dressed in an eighteenth century style. This reflection of the past relied mostly on the emulation of important figures such as kings and queens, adhering to the theory of history that focuses on the series of individuals in power ‘who shaped the world’. Historically based costumes were typically either specific figures – most often royalty – or heavily romanticized nameless peasants.

Manuals such as Arden Holt’s 1875 *Fancy Dresses Described: or, What to Wear at Fancy Balls* describe

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 2*, ed. Anne Oliver Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p.223.

as well as prescribe the costumes worn at these gatherings. It begins with an acknowledgement that most historical costumes were not entirely accurate, but later strongly advises to adhere to historical realities as much as possible. This raises the question of why attendees should concern themselves with historical accuracy for an event that would include others dressed as literary or fictional characters? One theory is that knowledge of the past functions as social capital, reflecting a cultured and educated background. Moreover, historical dress could potentially serve as a bridge between an individual, their ancestors, and personal family history. The fancy dress, so different from day to day wear, could function as a development of identity through a reflection on one's personal past.

Woolf was able to wear her mother's clothing without much difficulty, but what if she had chosen to wear the clothing of an ancestor almost a century removed from her present? One dress housed in the Victoria and Albert museum shows signs of just such an occurrence (Figure 1). The dress may have been passed down through the family or perhaps purchased in some kind of second hand shop. The former seems likely, as the dress itself is very plain in appearance. It lacks bright color, intricate details or sumptuous trim. It's a plain cotton garment with no decoration aside from the printed flowers, and its appeal for use in fancy dress would only be in its historicity.

The dress itself is estimated to have been made around 1780, yet contains alterations made by machine stitching estimated to have been made around 1875. Even if the nineteenth century individual happened to be the same size as the



Figure 1. Brown & Co. 'Gown' 1770 - 1790 (block printing), 1780s (sewing), 1870 - 1910 (altered) Accession number T.113-1925.

original wearer, the silhouette and shape of the body had changed. Undergarments and bodices in the late eighteenth century formed the torso into a conical shape, and by the late nineteenth century, corsets allowed for curves at the bust, waist, and back. The alterations on the dress were designed to allow the garment to be worn over a contemporary corset. A built-in pocket was also created, in contrast to the eighteenth century practice of separate pockets that would be tied around the waist and accessed through a slit in the skirt.¹⁴ These anachronisms in the dress are symbolic, telling of the changing needs and perspectives as time has gone on. Ideas about the

¹⁴ Victoria and Albert Collections (June 24, 2009) <<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O318882/gown-brown--co/>> [Accessed January 26, 2023]

feminine form and the necessary functionality of a woman's clothing had shifted, and the new ideas were stitched into the old dress.

Clothing functions both as a material object and societal mediator. It can only be understood in relation to the body, and the re-creating or wearing of historical garments serves as a bridge in understanding that relationship, leading to the generation of new insights and knowledge. There are, of course, problematic aspects to this kind of historiography. There arises an ambiguity between experience and understanding, and a difficulty in determining evidentiary potential of affect itself.¹⁵ Additionally, it is difficult to remove modern perspective from historical 'experience', although the issue of objectivity in constructing historical narrative is seen in all historiography and is not unique to more embodied methods. Specialized knowledge is also needed to avoid historical error in the interpretation of garments. For example, to a non-specialist (such as an interdisciplinary researcher), an elaborate livery suit with heavy trim could be assumed to belong to a wealthy individual, when in reality it was made for a servant in a wealthy household. Moreover, in the absence of extant garments, it is impossible to truly reconstruct historical garments due the lack of availability of the exact same fibers, cloth, and other materials. The creation of a functionally accurate replica requires specialized skills, which limits widespread exploration of this method due to lack of access.

Despite these limitations, a historiography through dress retains the potential for valuable historical contributions. Explorations in this field

reveal not only the owners of the garments but the makers. Giving more thought to the processes involved with historical dress open up lines of inquiry leading to individuals who may have been previously overlooked by historical records, often women and minorities. In light of this, Davidson argues that reconstruction studies have the potential to operate as a feminist, de-colonizing action.¹⁶

While there is much discussion about tacit knowledge making, there is still a need for the articulation of the knowledge generated by the experience of reconstructing the past. The information must be made useful to others in order for it to contribute within a scholarly context. To further this field, interdisciplinary collaboration is necessary. Collaborations between researchers with differing expertise could lend to the development of established methodologies and the sharing of knowledge to enrich both fields.

While it does have its limitations, the re-creation and use of historical objects provides unique insights. If all writing of history is essentially a reconstruction, re-enactment can be viewed as an embodiment of this process. It is necessary for scholars of all fields to reevaluate the implicit concepts of epistemology and potential bias against embodied methods that could exclude valuable insights in their research.

¹⁵ Agnew, 'History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment', p.309.

¹⁶ Hilary Davidson, 'The Embodied Turn: Making and Remaking Dress as an Academic Practice.' *Fashion Theory* 23, no. 3 (2019) 329-62 (p.362).

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