
by Willow G. Mullins

“How many of you are wearing jeans?” I asked. All but two students raised their hands. “How many of you are wearing or carrying some item with the name of this university on it?” All but one. “How many of you have a backpack with you?” Everyone. They laughed, a little self-consciously. “How did you know, when I walked in on the first day of class, that I was the professor? Probably because I wasn’t dressed like you. I was wearing English Department Chic.” They laughed at me, and we thought about what that phrase – English Department Chic – meant.

The third chapter of Maxine Hong Kingston’s Woman Warrior, “Shaman,” opens with a deep description of three scrolls, the last material documents of her mother’s career as a doctor in China. They are further accompanied by a set of photographs, showing one parent or another in their past. Kingston ruminates on the faces, haircuts, and clothes, seeming to probe how they combine to make the people she thought she knew. These scrolls, with their strange smell and delicate feel, and photos offer Kingston a doorway into her mother’s life and show her an aspect of her mother’s identity that might seem divergent from the American laundries of Kingston’s own childhood (1975:58-61).

Fashion historian Juliet Ash similarly finds that her understanding of her deceased husband takes on new shapes as she looks at his old ties. Her meditation about what those ties might have represented for him, how he embodied them, and how they now embody her memory of him, provide her with new insights about both the objects and the person who wore them. Ash explores the difference between clothes worn objectively and clothes worn subjectively, and how they come to represent a “possible variety of identities of people in the present,” past, and future (1996:220). Both these writings encapsulate Marcel Proust’s famous remark, “The past is hidden... beyond the reach of intellect – in some material object” (qtd. in Kirchsenblatt-Gimblett 1989:330). Both demonstrate the ability of objects to hold meaning: meaning that both incorporates and goes beyond the sum of its material parts; meaning unlocked through close observation.

Building from these readings and many more, from across costume, English, folklore, anthropology, archeology, and art history, I have long used material culture generally and dress, or photos of dress, specifically to encourage students to look at a single object more closely. Through their looking, I ask them to encounter their own cultural identities as cradled within this one small thing. In brief, the assignment works like this: Students are asked to choose either an article of clothing that has been around their family for a while or a photograph that shows them or a family member wearing some specific article of clothing they wish to research. They are then asked to describe the article in as much close detail as possible and to guess at materials and how it was made. Moving a little further back, they must describe who wore it, for what occasions, and why. Stepping back again, they situate the article into larger ideas about family, fashion, and cultural norms. Finally, they must write a paper summarizing what they have found and exploring how that single item of clothing may be both a product of a culture and an individualized, creatively used marker of their own cultural identity.
I set the stage by bringing a set of objects into class and placing them at the front of the classroom for the first half of class while we discuss other things. The objects become mysterious as they sit there unreferenced, and few of us can resist a good mystery. Finally, the students divide into groups and spend ten minutes discussing an assigned object. Some objects are obvious – a scarf or a set of pens in a case. Some are less so – a clip for pinning cloth diapers, a bat for a game played only in Ireland. Each group then presents their object. What is it made from? What do they think it is? How did they come to that conclusion? What kind of person might own this object? What might the object mean to them? These last two questions require the students to think about what they know about the world around them. After they present, I offer the story of each object. Did they notice that the bat had been chewed on by a child? Did they notice the Russian words on the bottom of the pen case? The scarf, with its old-fashioned floral print and stamped with “Liberty” in the corner, clearly belonged to someone older.

Sometimes they guess a grandmother (they are right), and sometimes they suspect that it was for more special occasions. The size and pattern alert them to how it might be worn, around the shoulders or over the head. Occasionally, they know Liberty of London as a brand and draw conclusions about wealth and travel.

At the end of this class, the students are given their assignment: Choose an item of dress or a photograph and using the kind of thick description we performed in class, investigate how that object embodies some aspect of its owner or wearer and a cultural group to which they belong. There are parameters for their object: Upon first glance, it must be something “important” to them or to someone they know well; upon second glance, it must be something that inspires questions about who made it or how it was acquired or who owned it or what happened to it. It must, in short, be something that they find themselves returning to, that begs to be looked at again. For this reason, I suggest that they will be more successful with everyday clothes, like Ash’s husband’s ties, or casual snapshots of daily life. Clothing for special events, like wedding dresses or festival clothing, may offer obvious interpretations, but they rarely give us much insight into the specific identity of the wearer.

Following this in-class project, we explore a variety of readings that offer examples of such thick description of objects, from Kingston and Ash to Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida. The specific readings depend on the class itself. Kingston or Eudora Welty’s One Writer’s Beginnings work well in an English or composition class; Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s “Objects of Memory” or Henry Glassie’s The Potter’s Art for folklore; Noliwe Rooks’ “Nappi by Nature” or Sharon Hepburn’s “The Cloth of Barbaric Pagans” for politics of dress. For a more advanced seminar, I might suggest that they each find an article in the journal Fashion Theory to present to the class. Between art history, textiles, and anthropology, in particular, the options for readings can easily be tailored to fit class themes and student interests.
If a model is helpful, we build from E. McClung Fleming’s “Artifact Study: A Proposed Model” (1974). Fleming, an art historian at the Winterthur Museum, hoped to provide a classification system for material culture artifacts, categorizing them according to history, material, construction, design, and function. To arrive at these classifications, Fleming describes four operations that form the basis of object analysis: identification (What is it?); evaluation (How does it compare to others of its type?); cultural analysis (What would it have meant to the person or cultural group who originally might have owned it?); and interpretation (How does it have meaning now?). Like Fleming, art historian Jules Prown describes another system of object identification, similarly moving from close description to interpretive analysis, a method more rooted in the theory of art history (Prown and Haltman 2000). Prown offers a space for pure speculation before using research to bring ideas about the object back to earth. Such speculation allows the students to take their deductions based on their close descriptions and run with them: What might this article of clothing have meant? Where might it have been worn and why? It can give them an imaginative space to consider themselves in the wearer’s position and try to envision how that item speaks to the wearer’s identity. It allows them to ask, what kind of person would I be if I wore this piece regularly? And in asking that question, it fosters a kind of empathy for the wearer.

Fleming and Prown offer students a pathway into their chosen object. In having to provide a more in-depth process of identification, sometimes accompanied by drawings of the object, the students must move beyond simple statements like “it’s a scarf” to seeing the meaning in the details, “it’s a large, square silk scarf with a handsewn hem, densely printed with flowers in red and blue, and stamped with ‘Liberty’ in one corner.” For writing students, these descriptions require them to be specific and hone their exposition; for folklore and textiles students, the descriptions encourage them to look at small details that may reveal important information, like an alteration or stain or evidence of wear. For all of us, such close reading mimics the kind of close attention and analysis we must bring to work successfully with academic materials. In effect, I ask them to perform the same kind of “thick description” of an article of dress that Clifford Geertz advocates for ethnographic events as a way to work toward cultural understanding. Like Geertz’s thick description, the students’ observations become raw materials in themselves for their own explorations of how that object provides a portal into understanding their identities.

The meat of students’ work on their chosen objects lies in how they address Fleming’s last two operations – the meaning of the object to the owner and the meaning of the object to the students themselves and how those meanings reference and contain larger cultural narratives. These questions get to the heart of how objects and meaning play off one another to display and, perhaps eventually, co-create identity. In addressing these questions, students begin to see not only the stories that such small items contain but also how they are constantly negotiating and reflecting their own identities through what they wear. A student who chose to write about his old, battered...
baseball cap, for instance, ended up exploring how fans who support a perpetually losing team may develop stronger community bonds than those whose team regularly wins because of the depth of the identification.

To get at these narratives, I encourage students to look at many sources for comparisons and context. Anything from old fashion magazines to archival photographs to interviews with family members are fair game. Interviews can be particularly useful, as students might tap larger family stories in asking for memories about a single item. Most poignantly, one student who began with a photograph of her father as a child ended up hearing for the first time why the photographs in his family seemed to stop for several years during his childhood – they were lost when troops burned their house during a civil war. Suddenly, her own deep commitment to international human rights and chosen career path in law began to make sense to her as her family filled in their history. Throughout this process, I continue to use one of the objects from that first in-class project. Drawing on my grandmother’s scarf, an item I now regularly wear, I can demonstrate how this seemingly small item contains both larger narratives about nostalgia, fashion, femininity, and global travel, as well as smaller, more personal narratives about who my grandmother was, who I am, and what it means for me to incorporate an article of her dress from the 1950s into my own today.

This assignment rests on strong theoretical underpinnings from across disciplines, which can be engaged in as befits the course. Reading theory in the context of such a hands-on assignment works in both directions: It can make the theory itself feel more relevant by showing how it applies to students’ daily lives and also reveal how students’ daily lives and the objects they surround themselves with work within larger cultural systems. The connection between dress and identity is hardly new, and many writers have examined the ability of objects and dress to provide pathways into identity. Thus, a large repository of scholarship exists for students to draw upon as they think through their own projects. Many of these writings develop from symbolic interaction. In the 1950s, sociologist Herbert Blumer, building on the work of George Herbert Mead, defined symbolic interaction as the way that people define themselves and the world around them through their interactions with one another. In turn, people express their identities through mutually agreed upon forms of communication, verbal and nonverbal, and, most crucially, dress, as Gregory Stone described in 1962. By the early 1990s, symbolic interaction had become one of the major theories used and explored in the fields of textiles and dress by scholars such as Joanne Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins, and it has remained central to textile study since. For example, Emma Tarlo’s *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* examines the cultural and political implications of individual dress in a post-colonial setting. Anthropology and history also rely on such linking of meaning and objects. James Deetz’s *In Small Things Forgotten* beautifully describes the mine of cultural information gleaned from archeological objects, for example, while cultural anthropologist Igor Kopytoff and sociologist Mihaly Czikszentmihaly also have written on the meanings of the everyday objects.

In performing Fleming’s last two functions, the meaning of the object to the maker/wearer and the meaning to us now, students must delve into the original cultural context of their object and see how culture and the expression of identity have shifted over time, subjects much discussed in visual culture studies and art history. In doing so, they deploy Michael Baxandall’s concept of the “period eye,” which sought to describe how an artist’s (or wearer’s) culture shapes what they produce. Similarly, students tap into Jonathan Crary’s ideas about the interrelationship between what we see and the available technology. As we contextualized the photos and clothing, we think about the current trend of dressing up for “selfies” and the presentation of identity on the Internet. We are inclined to see such carefully crafted self-presentation as a modern phenomenon. However, Joan Severa’s *Dressed for the Photographer*, a collection of 19th-century photographs, suggests a history
as long as photography itself, and, if we look to studies of portraiture, perhaps longer. Other connections with theory abound, from memory studies like Ash and Barthes to discussions of how gender, race, and class become embodied through dress. Thus, such theory, which can feel remote to students, becomes more accessible, and they begin to see how they are already engaged with it.

This idea of using close visual description as a pathway into both identity and culture, while discussed here as a classroom assignment, can be adapted to other environments, such as museum exhibits. To use Juliet Ash’s terms, many exhibits use clothing objectively. The clothing stands in for a group of people, symbolized most typically through festival or special occasion dress. Yet the individual narrative can make the representative article of dress into something more. For example, I once watched visitors at a display of one of the early astronaut’s spacesuits at a science museum. While it spoke of technology and the space race, most of the visitors seemed more interested in the astronaut’s own description of wearing the suit and what it meant to him. It mattered that it had been worn. Finding ways to connect clothing to personal narrative, to make it subjective, can provide visitors with that same sense of how clothing can encapsulate the fluid connection between individual identity and cultural identity.

The dress and identity assignment can prove one of the most interesting and thoughtful of the semester. It combines both detailed microanalysis of a single object in one single moment and larger, macro-level concerns of cultural structures and norms. It encourages students to make connections between their own lives and their academic work, as they move into the larger cultural narratives. Most importantly, it gives students a chance to see value in their own lives and families, to see how they use and remake culture through their identities, and to take pride in what they wear, even if it is simply a pair of jeans.

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**Works Cited**
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