

Book Review

***The Textile Reader*, Jessica Hemmings (ed.), Oxford: Berg, 2012**

You wait an age for a new, go-to publication of textile scholarship then two come along at once! Jessica Hemmings' (ed.) *The Textiles Reader* and Catherine Harper's (ed.) compendium *Textiles: Critical and Primary Sources*, both for Berg, feature several duplications in content but by contrast of sheer volume the two publications have varying uses.¹ While Harper's tome will surely become an essential reference tool for academics, Hemmings' more concise *The Textile Reader*, under review here, will undoubtedly be utilized as a key handbook for undergraduates, but also valuable introductory reading for postgraduate and doctoral students. Hemmings has selected papers which provide examples from a broad spectrum of textile activity—art, curation, conservation, design, manufacture, and fiction—and has edited the *Reader* with innate textile thinking. Its six parts, “Touch,” “Memory,” “Structure,” “Politics,” “Production,” and “Use,” are clearly defined whilst the content overlaps and interweaves.

The Reader appropriately starts with the topic of “Touch” as it is

the primary means by which we understand textiles yet one that, as several of the authors in this section argue, has been undervalued in academic writing on the subject. As I read the work of the contributors in this section I note that I am not so much considering touch and touching textiles but “to feel and be feeling” textiles, as in the somatic sensation Harper mentions in her piece on Reiko Sudo, which here adds a narrative approach to academic writing that left me appropriately fantasizing about surfaces. To understand the shape-shifting qualities of textiles as they permeate our language, culture, and senses, Victoria Mitchell's work is well placed as the opener to the book, providing a means for a broader understanding and reading of textiles in contemporary culture which leads usefully into Anne Hamlyn's influential explanatory study with its many rich starting points for other authors or future academics.

In the second part, “Memory,” the contributions vary in impact, from powerful pieces by Jenni Sorkin, Peter Stallybrass, and Robyn Healy to the less effusive

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texts by Jane Wildgoose and Sue Prichard. I feel this section could include more texts that provide a balance to the notion of memory in/on/as cloth that goes beyond that of the “silent witness.” Happily, James Fenimore Cooper’s characterization of a handkerchief provides a clever counterpoint to this aspect and reminds us of the way cloth carries memories and traces throughout its various forms and contexts, from raw flax to rare find. The majority of the inclusions in this section discuss textiles applied in material object form, bearing primarily the memory of the wearer or owner; there is little discussion of the designer/maker’s trace.

As Hemmings states, the Deleuzian perspective, which is influential throughout the *Reader*, is never more apparent than in the section on “Structure.” This section provides approaches to textile as metaphor and model for thought in a multitude of its forms; nets, patchworking, grids, loops, woven, felted, folds, and clothing, each encompassing the fiber and the form within the examples. The collection included here allows the reader many jumping off points for their own imagination and practical and/or theoretical work. I am glad of the inclusion of Pennina Barnett’s seminal essay bringing attention to “soft logics” and the sack thinking of Michel Serres. A welcome alternative cultural perspective is offered by Catherine De Zegher’s detailed paper on the work of Chilean artist/poet Cecilia Vicuña.

The section on “Politics” provides an addendum to the concept proffered in earlier

chapters of textiles as mutely personal, with many of the inclusions here citing textiles as a site of resistance, communication, and potential transformation on an international scale. Here, Hemmings offers varied and rich historical sociopolitical contextualization amongst her selection, for example Arthur Danto paralleling Kantian definitions of “genius” with weaving via Plato’s *The Republic* and Sarat Maharaj’s complex essay interweaving Greek mythology and postcolonialism with making and meaning in textiles. Papers by Elissa Auther and Diana Wood Conroy focus on the ever-present art/textiles discourse, but the specificity of the contexts they choose help to provide more opportunities to rethink the debate, in particular Wood Conroy’s triangulation of the relationship between tapestry with craft and painting and as metaphor for the development of the cultural identity of modern Australia. Unusually for collections such as this, the feminist perspective on textile-making and the textile object is limited here to the inclusion of the late Rozsika Parker’s updated introduction to her seminal book *The Subversive Stitch* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s evocative short story. The inclusion of Pamela Johnson’s poem *100% Cotton* adds some wit and brevity to this challenging chapter.

Anyone looking for an exploration of “making” in the section devoted to “Production” will be deprived as the inclusions here are on the whole firmly grounded in the social or industrial aspect of producing textiles, with

minimal emphasis given to the production of the singular textile designer/maker. This wide-ranging section touches upon gendered textile production, sustainability, innovation, historical perspectives, legislation, socioeconomic impact, and globalization, amongst other issues surrounding the textile in production, the production of the textile object, and textile structure. The inclusions vary from academic papers to blog posts and artists’ statements, which make for an interesting and varied read. Kirsty Robertson’s paper sheds light on the economic power of textiles and the dichotomy in status of the textiles crafter/designer versus the “raw” textile maker. The inclusions from Rebecca Earley and Suzanne Lee, a transcription from a panel discussion and a blog entry, offer a snapshot of the discourse in future textiles, a field of rapid change.

I agree with Hemmings’ own judgment on the final chapter “Use” as “eclectic,” but what other term could better sum up the wildly varied applications of textiles, then, now, tomorrow? The selected papers cover textiles’ use as a signifier and a method of communication and transformation as much as their technical, functional use. Matilda McQuaid’s contribution provides an astounding roll call of textiles’ technical achievements. Lou Taylor’s paper reminds us of the intrinsic (or leading) role textiles play in the fashion garment, adding value and encoding information. Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” closes the *Reader* with poignancy and inimitable wit.

My criticisms of the book are few but notable. Some papers were

generously and on occasion needlessly or poorly illustrated, while others would have greatly benefited from accompanying photography, particularly the Yinka Shonibare interview. On the basis of content, I question the inclusion of a couple of the papers, while very worthy substitutes were merely included in the advice for further reading. One aspect I felt warranted further exploration

throughout is motif, pattern, and generally the decorative qualities of textiles. Printed textiles are somewhat marginalized too.

Nonetheless, Hemmings' tone in the introductions and précis for each paper is accessible and explanatory, an encouragement to the novice academic and welcoming to those more experienced. In *The Textile Reader*, Hemmings advocates a wide range

of writing styles and formats intending to move more textiles practitioners to write about practice in a way that compliments, enhances, or is intrinsic to textiles activity.

Note

1. *Textiles: Critical and Primary Sources* will be reviewed in a forthcoming issue of this journal.