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## “Saigon to Seoul”: Sartorial Desire, National Costume, and Transnational Crossdressing as Social Empathetic Practice

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### Abstract

This article is a theoretically-grounded experiment in social empathy involving a sartorial exchange between the national dresses of the Korean *hanbok* and Vietnamese *ao dai*. They are worn on the “wrong” bodies as a source of sartorial solicitation. The article begins by revisiting Levi-Strauss’s notion of totemic objects as social markers of things “good to think (with)” in cultures and communities that have socially important objects of which their use itself is indicative of certain social values and norms. (Lizardo 2010). Instead of animals as totemic object, it is national dress, totemically understood, that indicates all sort of notions national communities have of themselves both within the national community and outside of it. National dress is explored as deeply hybrid and much more glocally-produced than local. The paper ends by theorizing the mechanism of transference of such subjective feelings as “national soul” which the structure of the clothing itself must work though as an embodied and neurologically-based mechanism. The fact that social messages can be transmitted through clothing in such a reliable and consistent manner also suggests the existence of a sartorial-kinaesthetic empathy hitherto left both untheorized and never applied as a part of understanding the nature of clothing culture, sartorial visibility, and social empathy in social science.

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## Theory

### *Sacred Totems*

A TOTEM is a class of material objects which a savage regard with superstitious respect, believing that there exists between him and every member of the class an intimate and altogether special relation.” (Goldenweiser, 1910: 179)

National dress is “good to think” with, as a totemic object. So goes the Levi-Straussian logic, in which totemic objects can be seen as metonymic markers of a culture’s values as well as useful heuristics with which to know that culture. We can see some indication of this in the glib observation that has often been made regarding the Korean *hanbok*’s restrictive dimensions as indicative of the Joseon era’s repressive social norms, especially regarding women. In that sense, the *hanbok* is a representative cultural object (a *totem*) with which it is good to think about Korean culture. Importantly, it is also an item that the Joseon-era *hanbok*’s contemporaries would have used with which to think about *themselves*. In that sense, the *hanbok* served a truly useful totemic object of the people

from the past while also a useful heuristic through which people today can parse other bits of cultural data.

At the time of his writing, Levi-Strauss was trying to push back against his European anthropology contemporaries' own "totemism" in trying to theorize the totem as a universal aspect of (non-white and non-European) human experience. This idea of a theoretical structure that could be laid out in typologies that explained how all human societies worked was as ethnocentrically pat as it was theoretically glib. In this sense, the totemizing tendency was western anthropology's own totemic object, as well as a major theoretical failing, which Levi-Strauss busied himself with trying to point out. Once social scientists defined and popularized totems as both metonyms and guideposts for all societies, all they saw were totems.

Indeed, in his meta-commentary *Totemism*, Levi-Strauss raged against the totemic machine:

Totemism is like hysteria, in that once we are persuaded to doubt that it is possible arbitrarily to isolate certain phenomena and to group them together as diagnostic signs of illness, or of an objective institution, the symptoms themselves vanish or appear refractory to any unifying interpretation...But where the comparison with totemism suggests a relation of another order between scientific theories and culture, one in which the mind of the scholar himself plays as large a part as the minds of the people studied, it is as though he were seeking, consciously or unconsciously, and under the guise of scientific objectivity, to make the latter — whether mental patients or so-called "primitives" — more different than they really are. (Levi-Strauss, 1962: 1)

In *Totemism*, Levi-Strauss goes on to call this the "totemic illusion." In applauding the later work of the Durkheimian Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, who abandoned "naturalism" and social science's essentialist attempt to map what it saw as the rules of primitive human societies, Levi-Strauss says:

The animals in in totemism cease to be solely or principally creatures which are feared, admired, or envied: their perceptible reality permits the embodiment of ideas and relations conceived by speculative thought on the basis of empirical observations. We can understand, too, that natural species are chosen not because they are "good to eat" but because they are good to think [with]" (Levi-Strauss, 1962: 89)

With the much later commentary from Omar Lizardo (2010), we can dig a bit deeper into the specific regard Levi-Strauss had for structures in the social sciences:

Structures are tools aimed at the simulation of practices and cognitive operations that could be thought to account for the patterns observed in carefully collected empirical materials. If through the manipulation of a (relatively simple) structural model the observed diversity of empirical facts could be generated (or some unobserved empirical facts could be predicted to exist) then the structure had

served its explanatory purpose. It is in this way that Levi-Strauss differentiated observation that is the recording of empirical facts from the world and experimentation that consists in the manipulation of structural models “built up” by the analyst with the aim of reconstructing the (presumably) unobservable mechanism that presumably generated this observes social facts (Levi-Strauss, 1963: 280). (Lizardo, 2010: 659)

The key theoretical takeaway here is the understanding that structures are not meant to reflect etic reality as a thing unto itself, separate from agentic, human action. If anything is to be made of structure, Levi-Strauss would likely call it a means to see or understand not just the observed culture and people under the lens, but also to understand the limiting biases of those behind those lenses. Or, as Albert Einstein would have said: structures are merely heuristics that aid in understanding the world; they are not the universe themselves but merely the language to describe it.

Taken quite simply and as a way to introduce the next crucial section of this paper’s argument, one can see “national dress” such as the Korean *hanbok* or the Vietnamese *ao dai* as totemic objects that are both the metonymic product and constructed symbol of the national values and historical/structural forces that quite deliberately produced them. What is more, they are not just totemic objects but quite literally wearable structures themselves that interpellate subjectivity through tactile force.

### *Pressing the Flesh: The Interpellative Force of the Dress*

Before discussing “national dress,” it is important to outline the meaning of the concept. In the introduction to her edited volume *The Encyclopedia of National Dress: Traditional Clothing around the World*, Jill Condra (2013) notes the different affective valences of terms that denote the totemic dress objects we will consider. She sees *fashion* as a reference for “clothing that is of a type or style acceptable to a large number of people over a period of time” and *dress* as “actual garments and how they are put together into ensembles and is often the term seen in discussions of the history of clothing and textiles.” *Costume*, Condra believes, tends to be “used to discuss the clothing people wear in the performing arts: in films, in television, and on stage” (x-xi). In terms of how we will understand worn, totemic objects as constructed items with which to frame subjectivity and transmit social messages, this paper will choose the most neutral term that refers to the objects themselves — dress — which will be combined with an analysis of social and in the end, *national* concerns.

“National dress,” in all of its various forms imagined by national projects all over the world, is a deliberately constructed object imbued with specific meanings as variegated as they are unified by singularly nationalist social goals that are common to all nationalisms. In this way, all forms of national dress are consummately *glocal* in the sense of how Roland Robertson popularized the Japanese concept and term in the *Harvard Business Review* in 1980 as “the simultaneity – the co-presence – of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies” (Dumitrescu and Vinerean, 2010). In this

sense, all nationalisms are glocal phenomena in that they all perform the same function across a variety of geographies, histories, and circumstances, yet possess vastly different, specific features in order to perform those national goals. In exactly the same way, national dress is a glocalized object through which both local and global interests are directed, reflected, and interpellated.

As a specific national dress type and constructed totemic object designed for national consumption, the *hanbok* in Korea tends to be the least historicized and deconstructed object in a pantheon of national totems that help define a veritable metaphysics of (South) Koreanness. This can be explained in terms of *hangukinron* (theory of Koreanness) (see Hurt 2014) that is the homologue of the much more deeply academically explored phenomenon of *nihonjinron* (theory of Japaneseness). Defined a bit more broadly, *hangukinron* has served as a “a popular discourse that posits a logical and obvious relationship between the purity of the Korean race/nation/culture (*minjok*) and that country’s high level of economic success.” (Hurt, 2014). It has furthermore been an ideological “iron cage,” a genre of thought that sought to define who and what was Korean, often in ethnocentric and self-congratulatory terms. If *hangukinron* was an ideological wellspring from which one could rely upon to give a supremacist answer to the who/what/how of nearly everything found in Korean society, then the *hanbok* was the ultimate national symbol which legitimized and naturalized this nationalist discourse, fusing quite modern notions of Korean pride as national spirit with the chimeric notion of pre-modern “tradition” in the most perfectly Hobsbawmian sense imaginable.

Indeed, in his recent 2017 article “The birth of modern fashion in Korea: Sartorial transition between *hanbok* and *yangbok* through production, mediation, and consumption,” Jungtaek Lee (2017) historicizes and theorizes the *hanbok* against the grain of the ahistorical tendencies in which it is often contextualized as eternal, essential, and unchanging — a totemic national symbol. Lee explains the modern notion of the *hanbok* in terms of Korea’s sudden encounter with modernity in the late 1800s into the Japanese period of colonization as “inevitable experiences of sartorial encounters, namely between two types of clothing — Korean dress (*hanbok*) and western dress (*yangbok*)” that both played the role of “‘a power and pervasive cultural intermediary’ between Korea and Japan or pertinent western powers” (185).

In this way, the *hanbok* was never a pure and static remnant from Korean traditional antiquity in the way it is often popularly imagined, but instead was a sartorial site of constant contestation. Specifically, it was an item of clothing that symbolized a resistance to interpellation into Japanese national or western cultural subjectivity. This fact was clear to any Korean alive at the time and not simply a matter of high theory. That the *hanbok* was a symbol of national and cultural resistance to interpellation is an obvious fact even to the well-studied elementary school child in Korea. Of real interest to the truly informed historian of dress such as Lee is the fact that, even beneath the obvious story of the *hanbok* as semiotic-sartorial object of ethnonational resistance, there are many ways in which the *hanbok* was already quietly a glocal object even at the time that history represented it as solely local. Lee points out how the entire Korean textile industry shifted

from one importing primarily British textiles until around 1904 to a completely Japanese-dominated one after 1905. Indeed, with the advent of patriotic efforts to buy Korean-made textiles, “the *hanbok* reflected a sense of hybrid modernity in its varying individual designs and forms during the colonial period” with Japanese patterns and color schemes in more modern *jeogori* (top-blouse) and other adornments such as western-style pockets or even a button instead of a ribbon in some cases (Lee, 2017: 190-191). This doesn’t make the *hanbok* any less Korean, but Lee’s historical excavation does demonstrate how deeply the contested, hybrid product of the *hanbok* was a product of modernity before it was reified into the static, existentially authentic totem of the nation that contemporary South Koreans have constructed.

In fact, the *hanbok* plays a dual role as the ultimate totemic object of the nation. It is both a symbol of the greater historical processes in which most people imagine it to be a natural remnant and hence source of a historically based national pride, but it is also —that very remnant and symbol — a *hangukinron*-interpellating, Weberian “iron cage” that uses sartorial force to push the wearer into very specific and desirable directions of mentality and comportment. Perhaps, as a sartorial “iron cage” of national ideology, it would be better to call the *hanbok* a “cage dress” in line with Parson’s liberal translation of *Gehäuse* from German as “cage” into English, as opposed to the more accurate choice of a “shell” (Baehr, 2001). Still, the translation choice of “housing” seems a better match in English.

In the sense that the original German referred to “*stahlhartes*” (“hard as steel”) “housings” as Parsons popularized the translation as “iron” despite steel being a much more modern material, but chose “iron cage” for its more idiomatic and idiosyncratic feel in English (Baehr, 2001), navigating socio-linguistic conventions while respecting the German original, Weberian concept would seem a good choice. Given the fact that a “cage dress” is an existing and well-understood item in fashion, and is a sartorial skeleton/undergarment that gives structure and shape to a dress item itself (usually a woman’s skirt or dress), the “cage” is a desirable linguistic convention to keep, perhaps an “iron cloak” or the like. Especially since “iron” has always seemed a poor choice, dropping that pre-modern material for that product of modernity — “steel” — seems a good choice to make. And by way of continuing to navigate a balance between the German, Weberian origins of this terms in sociology and the conventions and feel of English that dominates the term to this day, going forward, the terms “steel cage of dress” seems most apropos (and rolls off the tongue much more naturally than “steel cage dress,” which would imply the existence of quite a bizarre sartorial object.

Necessarily, the analysis should continue on to the Vietnamese *ao dai* at this point, since the analysis of the *hanbok* is a useful way to explain the concept of a “steel cage of dress” and the Vietnamese *ao dai* example will demonstrate the concept’s applicability to other national cases.

Sociocultural anthropologist Anne Marie Leshkovich (2003) tells us that the *ao dai* is a worn object that symbolizes the Vietnamese “national soul” especially in the international context. She brings up the ethnographic antidote of Miss Vietnam Truong

Quynh Mai winning the “Best National Costume” in the 1995 Miss International Pageant, which “represented a victory for her entire homeland” (1). Yet, as she points out, the *ao dai*’s success on the literally global stage is what actually revived its popularity within Vietnam domestically, leading to an “*ao dai* craze” within Vietnam. In this sense, the *ao dai* as a cultural product tasked with the glorious purpose of bottling national pride in the present, which is distinct from the traditional aspects of the clothing item from the past. This makes the *ao dai* a deeply glocal object: a totemic object for contemporary Vietnamese that addresses contemporary Vietnamese social ideas and problems. The *ao dai*, like the *hanbok*, is the perfect “Best National Costume” (as the Miss International Pageant described it) precisely because it possesses a hybrid history with elements that indeed extend far back into the historically murky mists of vaunted tradition, yet at the same time has evolved in relation to contemporary concerns. Solidified and sanctified into the ultimate object of both the apparently victorious nation and culture, the national dress has become a totemic object, the ultimate national totem, truly the “beginning and the end” of all matters concerning the essential *dasein* (or “being there”) of the feeling that helps produce national subjectivity and national subjects themselves.

In this way, it is important to understand the *hanbok* and *ao dai* as sartorial “*Gehäuse*” (iron cages/ steel cages) for national agendas and these pieces of national dress as meeting points of agency and larger ideological forces within respective nations’ projects. In this understanding of Weber’s *Gehäuse*, as well as our consideration of the *hanbok* and *ao dai* as “steel cages of dress,” critical dance theorist Melissa Blanco Borelli’s facile concept of hip(g)nosis is useful as a way to understand what’s happening in the case of national dress. I quote her explication of the concept’s origin in the case of the Cuban *mulata* dancer, who focused and reinterpreted the various forces that would interpellate her into a new, personal and agent fusion of identity:

Hip(gn)osis speaks a boisterous, rambunctious language, especially for those who can follow it...Although floating signifiers want to forcibly envelop the mulata and silence her, hip(g)nosis forces the focus to be the body wielding it. How said body choreographs mulata/herself into being must be dealt with. By choosing to perform whatever aspect of “mulata identity” necessary for some recognition, a mulata enacting hip(g)nosis has some agency in how she is perceived. Caught within the mulata trope, she has situational agency, not projected agency. Her body pertains to an economy of visibility that assigns it loaded signifiers: they supersede her. She can have aesthetic agency because of the different forms of value imposed on her skin, body, hair, or features, and then use this aesthetic agency to its advantage (or not). (Blanco-Borelli, 2017: 20)

This speaks directly to the problem posed by Leshkovich (2003), in that she suggests that the Vietnamese *ao dai* has come to be a garment that imposes and imports Vietnamese-ness itself, as the sartorial object that focuses national desire into and through its wearer, in a one-directional interpellative formation. She quotes its description and popular understanding in a Vietnamese newspaper:

It truly is appropriate only for those with the slight stature and slimness of Asian women. It demands that the wearer have a self-effacing bearing, cautious, moving deliberately, lightly... The goal was to train girls in a modest, cautious, and refined manner in their dress and bearing, so that they can become young, Vietnamese women of grace and politeness (Vainer, 1995: 17). (Leshkovich, 2003: 11)

Indeed, one must understand the *ao dai* as “not just a vehicle for expressing Vietnamese femininity, but a pedagogical tool for inculcating it” (Leshkovich, 2003). It thus holds a socio-political charge of the type that the *hanbok* possesses in Korea as well and in this sense is an ideological *Gehäuse* (and a sartorial “steel cage”) that one wears and must account for. In the end, however, Blanco-Borelli’s hip(g)nosis turns the Weberian *stahlhartes Gehäuse* (iron cage) of national dress’s constructed meanings and turns them into the *flüssiges Gehäuse* (flexible frame) in which agency and ideological iron cages meet in the wearing body.

*Ao dai* as not the only interpellative formation of dress (a “steel cage of dress”); national dress is usually represented in its female iteration in what Nhi T. Lieu calls “the spectacle of the nation in the female body.” This is a phenomenon that is not peculiar to Vietnam, although the strength of the sexualization of the Vietnamese female body seems to be stronger than in other cases, even as the dress itself demurs on the matter by masking the way it actually works to sexualize the Vietnamese woman’s body (Lieu, 2000: 135).

The “wearing body” (usually female) does a sartorial “dance” of interpellation in which the hip(g)nosis happens in the moment in which new knowledge at the intersection of social frames imposed from the top is produced. The modifications to that socially-constructed, ideological frame that come in the wearing moment, define a new top-bottom, heavily interpellated and agentic fusion that constitutes in itself a new frame of sartorial engagement with the social narratives and imperatives informed in its creation. It is in this intersection of forces and meanings that the Korean *hanbok* in Vietnam or the Vietnamese *ao dai* in Korea is defined. In a way, however, this is the easiest part to theoretically argue as true — that the *hanbok* and *ao dai* are totemic objects that define the alpha and omega of the content within the respective nationalisms they denote. But the real trick lies in understanding how a “steel cage of dress” as ideological *Gehäuse* exerts ideological force upon the wearer, i.e. *how it works*.

The hardest question in the consideration of how national feelings are transmitted is how to determine a point of transmission, specifically and exactly, in space and time. How does one *know* when certain values are transmitted? What is the *process* of this exchange, cognitively speaking? Such questions have implications for the study of social empathy, specifically considered as an actual mechanism of an exchange of social information. Since dress plays an important role in not just the development of natural human cultures but also in the development of nearly every modern and quite unnaturally developed occurrence of national identities, the importance of investigating the mechanism of dress-conferred social feelings and information should be abundantly clear.

It is, in fact, astounding that such questions have not been seriously addressed in academia until now.

First, we must begin with a brief review of the very idea of “empathy.”

## Empathy

### *The Seat of Feeling*

The most efficient way to talk about a sense of “empathy” is to begin by looking at where the discourse that created and surrounded the word began. Once again, this conversation began in Germany and in German, and it is back to that language the present discussion shall return. One has to remember that the idea of empathy as a *Gefühl* or “feeling” in which one “feels in”(to) someone else (*Einfühlung*) must be sited somewhere (Lanzoni, 2012). The question becomes one of *where* does one feel and *how*. In the same way that the Greeks asked the questions *What is the nature of a thing?* or *Where is the seat of consciousness?*, a similarly ages-old question is *Where is the seat of feeling?* Indeed, these are the very questions the historian of science Susan Lanzoni asks while defining the stakes of the inquiry:

Is it the self or the other, similarity or difference that is emphasized across the empathic divide? Is empathy embodied, or is it primarily a meeting of minds? What epistemological function does empathy serve? Indeed, empathy as a psychological concept is not reserved for the hallowed halls of the academy, laboratory rooms, or philosophical tracts, but winds its way into many corners of our lives, from our aesthetic reactions to our everyday understanding of others. (Lanzoni, 2012; 296)

As we begin a brief overview of the pertinent theoretical thinking relevant to the idea of empathy in this paper, we must begin with the fact that all of the thinking and present line of thinking about empathy itself begins unequivocally in the consideration of aesthetics.

The notion of empathy has been seriously reinvigorated in the “affective turn” of the academy quite recently, although the idea of the importance of *Einfühlung* goes back largely to the 1870s. It was then that German art historian Robert Vischer started thought experiments on humans’ responses to art objects and aesthetic cues, in which “*Einfühlung* [German for empathy] was the projection not only of movements, but of one’s own personality into the object – what Vischer called the creation of a ‘second-self.’ In short, the debate revolved around whether *Einfühlung* caused actual bodily movements and physical responses in the viewer or whether it was more of an abstract response (Lanzoni, 2012). There are two important takeaways here. First, the crux of the debate lies in what the *mechanism* of aesthetic empathy is; it is not a question of its existence or not. Secondly, it was a phenomenon clearly sited in aesthetic experience itself. It was psychologist Theodor Lipps who took Vischer’s *Einfühlung* beyond just human responses

as physical mimicry to aesthetic prompts to responses to the idea of *Einfühlung* as applied to people (Morgan, 2012). Both notions linked *Einfühlung* to the visual sense, a point to which we shall return a bit later in this paper. But the concept of *Einfühlung* is best summarized by empathy's most eloquent champion, who says:

Naming the experience of merging with the object of one's contemplation, it was originally coined in 1873 by the German aesthetician Robert Vischer as *Einfühlung*, and translated into English by Edward Titchener in 1909. Both Vischer and Titchener conceptualized empathy as entailing a strong and vital component of kinesthetic sensation. And both envisioned empathy as an experience undertaken by one's entire subjectivity. (Leigh Foster, 2011; 296)

The debate about *Einfühlung*'s relationship to the human (and psychological as well as physiological) condition went in several directions including debates about sensory perception as *muskel-sinn* (the "muscle sense" or "an awareness of muscular contraction") (Paterson, 2012: 476), which would lead to an elevated conversation about the Aristotelian senses and the notion of proprioception, to which we shall return. But empathy was something that even Charles Darwin and the foundational, sociological interlocutor Charles Spencer weighed in on in the functionalist sense, as they "viewed aesthetics through a much wider temporal lens... [retaining] a focus on a bodily economy of pleasure made up of energies, instincts, and release valves" (Morgan, 2012; 36). In short, the history of the academic debates about empathy, as well as the academic debate about the history of empathy, both diverged and fizzled down to a dull roar that took a sideline to other, more seemingly pressing issues in the fields that the idea of empathy encompasses: philosophy, biology, sociology, and what would come to be dance and art theory, visual studies, and even dance therapy.

In the realm of *kinesthesia* (a sense of the body) understood as a function of aesthetic experience, Mark Paterson reminds us that the Greek notion of *aisthêsis* is translated as "sensation" "sense perception" or perhaps even "sense-data" (Paterson, 2012). Herein lies the trick, or the crucial theoretical point to consider. According to Paterson, "Plato considers and subsequently rejects the straightforward proposal that knowledge is perception" and places information gained from bodily sense at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge. Yet, Aristotle thought differently:

However, touch has a rarefied status elsewhere for Aristotle, and for further clarification of 'inner' touch it is instructive to see why. Capable of fine discrimination in the aesthetic evaluation of objects like a piece of sculpture, nonetheless touch remains at the bottom of the sensory hierarchy as we share it with beasts (e.g. Ethics 1176a1-2). Because there is no obvious single organ to which it corresponds, unlike sight (the eye) or hearing (the ear), touch is distinct since flesh is the medium, rather than the organ, of touch. Aristotle correctly moves away from the locus of skin in order to argue "the sense-faculty of touch is within," like internal organs, rather than "without" (De Anima 423b), like skin, eyeballs or ears. Wearing a glove, we may still stroke an animal or imprecisely

sense an object's texture; similarly, when walking with a stick we apprehend the roughness of the ground. (Paterson, 2012; 475)

This is where we get to the separate, sixth sense of *muskel-sinn* first called proprioception in 1906. Like touch, this “sense-faculty” is within, and not linked to singular organs that offer “exteroceptive” and distal feedback from the environment (Paterson, 2012: 479). In this way, if a raindrop falls on your hand, you feel the sensation as “in” your hand, localized within a specific place on the body; proprioception is a “low threshold touch” provided by afferent feedback (signals coming into the brain from parts of the body), which provides a “sense of embodiment” (Paterson, 2012: 480). Proprioception provides the actual sense of existing in the physical universe— that one occupies space and that one is *there*. In the grand sense, proprioception gives one a sense of existing in the world and is not just a brain floating through cold, empty space. It gives one a sense of existence itself and is the most important sense, despite not being a sense that conveys specific information.

In the words of the physiologist Charles Bell, one of the architects of the idea of proprioception, “The pleasures arising from the muscular sense” come from the feelings that combine into the proprioceptive sense when dancing or doing things with the body in the world:

The exercise of the muscular frame is the source of some of our chief enjoyments. The beautiful condition of both body and mind shall result from muscular exertion and the alternations of activity and bodily repose ... This activity is followed by weariness and a desire for rest, and although unattended by any describable pleasure or local sensation, there is diffused throughout every part of the frame after fatigue a feeling almost voluptuous. (Bell, 1833:205-6) (quoted in Paterson, 2012: 480)

This is “the rise of kinaesthetic-related pleasure” that comes with jogging, dancing, or playing sports (Cole, quote in Paterson 480). On a simpler level, it is what gives a blind person the sense they are upright in space or lying down and allows any sighted person to not immediately stumble to the ground when the lights go out. Proprioception also allows one to know quite seemingly mundane things such as where one's body ends in space so as not to bump into walls and other people, to easily alight downstairs, or even to know whether one is tired or enervated. These continuous sensations provide a proprioceptive pleasure in doing things with the body, in embodying activities in the world itself. It is quite real, impacts our sense of place and well-being in the world, and is one of the most neglected areas of thought in considerations of art, philosophy, and the social sciences, especially since it is so seemingly obvious that it does not even register in analyses of social phenomena. It is so obvious an inherent and essential social fact of life that it rarely warrants even the most basic consideration in the calculus of social analyses.

### **Embroidered Pleasure**

### *Kinesthesia*

After having gone through some of the ideas surrounding “empathy” it is here that Susan Leigh Foster’s words can provide the best synthesis between the previous and present sections:

Invented in the same decade as the term “kinesthesia,” “empathy” was coined by German aestheticians seeking to describe and analyze in depth the act of viewing painting and sculpture. Calling the experience *Einfühlung*, they posited a kind of physical connection between viewer and art in which the viewer’s own body would move into and inhabit the various features of the artwork. When the term first came into English language usage at the beginning of the twentieth century, it likewise connoted a strong physical responsiveness to both people and objects. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, the term, like “kinesthesia,” changed substantially, eventually residing within the domain of psychology where it has been investigated largely as an emotional, and not physical experience. Sklar, for example, calling for recognition of the fact that empathy entails a kinesthetic level of recognition, names her own technique for observing the actions of others a practice of “kinesthetic empathy” (19). The fact that the experience of empathy needs to be qualified with the adjective “kinesthetic” belies the pervasive assumption that emotional and physical experiences are separate (Leigh Foster, 2019: 45).

In general, “empathy” and “kinaesthesia” have been treated like the red-headed stepchildren of philosophical and sociological thinking about aesthetics, emotions, and the mind. Defined as lesser concerns in the mind/body dichotomy that privileges the former in the study of the social world, emotions and their roles in social life have been relegated to the dustheap of social thought. Indeed, medical anthropologist Nancy Schemer-Hughes lamented this tendency:

As both medical anthropologists and clinicians struggle to view humans and the experience of illness and suffering from an integrated perspective, they often find themselves trapped by the Cartesian legacy. We lack a precise vocabulary with which to deal with mind-body-society interactions and so are left suspended in hyphens, testifying to the disconnectedness of our thoughts. We are forced to resort to such fragmented concepts as the bio-social, the psycho-somatic, the somato-social as altogether feeble ways of expressing the myriad ways in which the mind speaks through the body, and the ways in which society is inscribed on the expectant canvas of human flesh (Scheper-Hughes, 1987: 10).

As we move quickly forward through the body’s importance in empathy as well that of empathy itself, I will begin this necessary further discussion of kinesthesia with Paterson’s facile explanation:

Firstly, kinesthesia or the sense of movement. From Greek *kinein* (to move) and *aesthesis*, kinaesthesia is “a sense mediated by end organs located in muscles, tendons, and joints and stimulated by bodily movement and tensions,” and

relatedly the “sensory experience derived from this sense” says Sklar (1994:15). As part of the haptic system, Gibson (1968:111ff) writes of kinesthesia as the perception of the body’s movement not as a distinct, individuated sense but as cutting across several perceptual systems, a sense that utilizes a range of nerve information including that of muscular tension and balance from the vestibular system, collectively returning sensations of movement (Paterson, 2012: 482).

In this way, kinesthesia is a networked sense and is quite similar to (and partially constituted by) proprioception. Of highest importance for the present paper, “kinesthesia” was suggested by Henry Charles Bastian to replace “muscle sense” in 1880 on the basis that some afferent feedback came back from structures other than just muscles, which included, the skin, joints, or tendons. Dance choreographer Susan Foster Leigh championed the term and concept by “naming a more focused system of spinal-neural arcs that continuously adjust for the the body’s changing relationship to gravity” (Paterson, 2012: 482-483).

Discussion about the theoretical place of kinesthesia has remained relevant in the discussion of dance and dance therapy for the last couple of decades by practitioner-theoreticians such as Susan Foster Leigh and myriad others in critical dance studies as well as dance therapy. As mentioned above, these ideas had received short shrift in academic circles for a couple centuries. With the discovery of mirror neurons, this began to change.

### *The Energizing Energy of Mirror Neurons*

Through “a series of single neuron recording experiments” on monkeys in the 1990s, Vittorio Gallese and several other researchers discovered that “a particular set of neurons, activated during the execution of purposeful, goal-related hand actions, such as grasping, holding or manipulating objects, discharge also when the monkey observes similar hand actions performed by another individual” (Gallese, 2001: 35).

These “mirror neurons” solved a lot of theoretical problems related to the actual mechanics and workings of a postulated (social) empathy and caused a theoretical sensation in various fields from the “hard sciences” of neurology and cognitive science to the considerably “softer” areas of dance and visual studies in the humanities. As the “smoking gun” evidence for the much-needed physical and incontrovertible proof of empathy’s existence, it strengthened the argument that social empathy plays a clear and empirically definable role in social life, as a fundamental mechanism of sociality (and species survival itself).

According to the cognitive model Gallese (2001) constructed as his “*shared manifold* of intersubjectivity” (44) that is based on an “action simulation” function, macaque monkeys (and by extension, humans) instinctively emulate motions in the world outside of the animal’s mind. Through this cognitive process, there is an observed “meaningful link between agent and observer” that suggest the “relational nature” of

physical (and social) actions taken in response to others (Gallese, 2001: 39). Simply put, and in computational terms, when an agent-individual sees a given stimulus (whether it be a tiger leaping behind a rock or a fellow species member initiating an attempt to take food from his or her hand), mirror neurons preload action routines as a buffer of sorts for easily-executed decisions/motions in the real world. Since mirror neurons are postulated to exist only to internally mirror or model an appropriate response, Gallese calls this “simulator” signal an “*efference copy* of the motor signal” (39). This makes the mirror neuron like a simulation buffer in which the brain preloads a response to stimuli, which provides an instantaneous action simulation option for the brain to choose from, providing an obviously advantageous mechanism for individual (and thereby species) survival. The takeaway from this kind of cognitive triaging system for responding to environmental stimuli is the ability and necessity to be able to distinguish between the *social* actions and intentions of others that are not the self or types of beings like oneself. As Gallese puts it, “*understanding* is achieved by modeling behavior with an action with the help of a motor equivalence between what others do and what the observer does” (39). This is the “shared manifold” of intersubjectivity that Gallese postulates, based on “a direct, automatic, non-predicative, and non-inferential simulation mechanism, by means of which the observer can recognize and understand the behavior of others” such that “when we enter in relation with others there is a multiplicity of states we share with them.” And most importantly, the mirror neurons understand actions in context since “One important aspect of the self is the result of the individuals mirroring in the social organization of the outer world” (Gallese, 2009: 43-44).

This is where Susan Leigh Foster and critical dance theory take center stage again in our theoretical overview. From here, with the scientific basis for empathy established, Leigh’s explication of “kinaesthetic empathy” (referenced above) becomes relevant for our analysis. Kinaesthetic empathy outlines both the sources and the mechanics of the aesthetic enjoyment of dance or any other visually mediated form of art. Theoretician and philosopher Barbera Montero posits a pleasure that can form in a *virtual proprioception* mediated through the visual sense (sight) with which the non-moving observer can occupy a dancer’s body. Upon doing this, the observer can proprioceptively feel what she feels and virtually embody her by merely observing her, all enabled by the powerful empathic engine of the mirror neurons. Such is the “resonance” we feel when watching dancers on a stage: a virtual sense of embodying their proprioceptive pleasure in motion (Montero, 2006: 237). One can imagine then, that this virtual proprioceptive pleasure is also the fundamental mechanism underlying the viewing of Korean *meokbang* (a social media-based show popularized in South Korea in which a presenter loudly makes a show of eating certain foods to elicit a sense of vicarious pleasure), watching fisticuffs in Marvel action films, what causes revulsion when watching body horror in the *Saw* series, or even what allows humans to embody the sexual excitement of watching pornography. From the subtle suggestions of Mona Lisa’s smile in high art down to the physical titillations and moral depredations found in pornography, kinesthetic empathy forces us to embody the socially significant actions and objects we observe.

## Praxis

### *Transnational Crossdressing*

This final section of theoretical scaffolding actually takes the smallest, most conservative theoretical jump from what has been established above and is merely another, parallel application of the theoretical scaffolding described above. Given the long-postulated mental phenomena of *Einführung* (as described by Lanzoni, Paterson, Morgan, and Leigh above), *aisthêsis* (Paterson), kinesthesia, and kinesthetic empathy (Leigh Foster), all enabled by the fact of mirror neurons and all their theoretical implications, the mechanism of kinesthetic empathy is not really a matter of debate whether or not they exist (see Lamm and Majdandzic's 2014 admonition to curb excesses of enthusiasm about their import) even if the literature does quibble about the exact nature of their mechanics and exact, evolutionary purpose. However, as far as our analysis is concerned, kinesthetic empathy as a function of human cognition and a driver of socialization, especially as it is mediated through direct proprioception or even visually mediated proprioception (Montero, 2006), is a neuro-social phenomenon that exists and can be used to account for actual, relations in the social world.

But whether mirror neurons work by way of efference copies-as-simulation (see Gallese above), whether kinesthetic empathy applies to unembodied objects as cleanly as embodied ones, the mechanism of visually-mediated proprioception is a strong one and one of the most compelling (and longest-running) in discussions about art, perception, and emotional states. Through this entry point, it seems quite possible to imagine kinesthetic empathy/proprioception as applicable not just to art objects, motion stimuli, or imagined and embodied, existential states. There is a logical extension of all the modes of empathy thus far discussed—that the most ideal extension of the empathy argument is that of the sartorial. It is in the realm of dress that clothing-as-art-object, motion stimuli, and the ability to proprioceptively embody one level of another person's existential state are modes of kinesthetic empathy that can all be achieved. And with the facile nature of Montero's notion of visually mediated proprioception, clothing has become the ultimate, multi-modally functioning medium of transmitted social information, since so much of clothing's empathetic influence is transmitted photographically, across printed paper, electronic screens, and other media technologies still to come upon the social scene. It is also an art object that can be visually imagined to be worn, then directly worn and proprioceptively experienced. Furthermore, clothing can be subsumed into other social contexts, such as the national *Gehäuse* discussed earlier in this paper, functioning as a "steel cage of dress" that exerts a quite specific, ideological force upon the wearer.

At this point, we can talk about the specific mechanism that distributes this force, which is primarily that of proprioception. And it is also at this point, at which we have successfully made the lateral move from a more general, kinesthetic empathy to a more specific form of sartorial-kinesthetic empathy, that we must turn to an empirical, ethnographic exploration in the real world to explore how clothing presses into flesh, proprioceptively impressing tactile, sartorial force in an ideological shape on the wearer in the form of a nationally-specific "steel cage of dress."

In August, 2018, after an initial research trip and conference presentation in Danang, Vietnam in order to follow up on the influence of Korean fashion ideas after an initial foray into Saigon in November, 2017, and in cooperation with Dr. Caroline Kieu Linh Valverde's New Vietnam Studies Initiative based at UC Davis, the author set up the "Saigon-Seoul Street Studio" project as a photographic and theoretical sandbox in which to empirically test how model-subjects embodied different types of national dress across national borders. The "MISSION" page on the main project site<sup>2</sup> states the nature of the project most succinctly:

The project will generate social data and create new frameworks of understanding by remixing sartorial symbols across national borders. This form of "semio-sartorial elicitation" will foster new mental connections, spark new conversations, and forge new modes of cooperation and collaboration across the imaginary lines that separate us. The picture itself can stand as a meta-text that instantly questions and even erodes old binaries and other lines of separation, creating a visual space for increased social empathy.

Methodologically speaking, semio-sartorial (or alternatively, sartorial-kinaesthetic) elicitation is a *Gedankenexperiment* (thought experiment) that brings together aesthetic/semiotic elements around the embodied form of a model who is selected by the photographer/author. This constitutes the basic parameters for possible interaction, with the model as the main variable as she embodies the national dress and makes agentic decisions that reflect the social information contained within a piece of national dress as a "steel cage of dress." Importantly, it is the model who brings together all the elements of the elicitation moment — the dependent variable upon which all others rest. Without the model, the *hanbok* or *ao dai* is just a lifeless object unable to convey any social information, and the photographer/investigator a theoretician merely making unproven suppositions. Setting up, photographically carrying out, and conducting post-shoot interviews is all part of the elicitation process and yields a vast amount of ethnographic data.

First of all, the data is generated by funneling all of the human and aesthetic elements of the elicitation into a singular photographic instant is both predictive and ethnographically descriptive. The theory would suggest that focusing steel cages of dress through real, human bodies, then interpellating them proprioceptively, while the model interprets these signals through her own agency hip(g)notically, will produce particular interpretations of the ideologies carried in the threads of the dress, which would then be forced into specific interpretation by the exigencies of the posing moment in front of the camera. Interpellative interpretation as ethnographic data is elicited by and inherent to the process. Thereby, the photographic process is both a sociological heuristic and assay at the same time. In other words, it predicts some degree of national dress-specific reactions and outcomes while remaining open to simply being an ethnographic data-gathering method.

In November, 2018, the first stage of the photographic/empathic exchange project began in earnest, with the author traveling to Hanoi for Vietnam International Fashion

Week (VIFW) and bringing 3 modernized *hanbok* from Seoul-based designer Heo Hye-Yeong's brand *Heo Sarang*, along with 10 pieces from renowned street brand and runway designer Park Yeon Hee's hot brand GREEDILOUS. GREEDILOUS jumped into the international (and domestic) spotlight after Beyoncé was spotted sporting the brand on several occasions, and Paris Hilton mentioned it as one of her favorite brands. In Hanoi, I photographed not only the modern *hanbok* as national dress on two models, but the street and high fashion looks from GREEDILOUS as a new kind of "national dress" that the model-subject had far more interest in, but actively "knew" how to pose and accept it. She treated it not as an interpellative "steel cage of dress" made by a national project, but as an organically constructed national brand/look/aesthetic that had independently evolved from the ground up, and which has presently swept across Asia and the world. I discovered that Korea had in fact, evolved *two* national dresses. One was the standard "steel cage of dress" that many nation-states possess and the other was what has come to be seen as the Korean look that has spread across Asia and the world.

Here, it becomes important to show how traditional notions of national dress press into flesh, as found in anthropologist Japan Ofra Goldstein-Gidoni's (2007) description of a kimono school owner's description of a crucial wearing moment with the kimono:

When you wear kimono it reaches your feelings, it enlarges your mind and makes you calm; even if you want to run you cannot. You have to move in a natural way. So, if the feelings become calm so are your thoughts. Even if something bad is done to you, you do not react immediately, you think first before you act. A Japanese woman like this guarded the Japanese household [ie]. I would like the young women to be a little like this.

For the kimono expert, the kimono is much more than a constraint on the body; it has a mental influence and its ultimate role is to cultivate the perfect Japanese woman. (Goldstein-Gidoni 163).

This is one main cultural message and function of the *kimono*, with its highly specific, gendered social messages transmitted through it. The *hanbok* functions in the same way, albeit with a different history and culture-specific message in its bottle, or steel cage of dress. What was interesting about the moment of wearing for Nhung Bui, who wore the modern *hanbok* from Heo Sarang in Figure 1 above, was that she reported back in her post-shoot interview that she felt immediately like twirling, which she did quite a bit in the photo shoot. The reason she gave for this was that "the top and skirt of a real *hanbok*" made her feel like "wanting to play" and "pose in the way that one poses in a *hanbok*....and cutely."

In Nhung Bui's case, she had a pre-existing impression of the *hanbok* and had actually worn one before, so she already held clear notions of the clothing item before the wearing moment. However, she did note that the clothing itself conveyed clear posing and personality imperatives to her, which she followed and embodied into expression in the model-esque ways she knew. Of note here is the fact the photographer did not direct

these poses or expressions. All of the models took their cues from the clothing and their interactions with it.



Figure 1 Vietnamese model-subject, Nhung Bui poses in Hanoi in a modernized *hanbok* from Heo Sarang Hanbok, based in Seoul. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2 Vietnamese model-subject “Salim” poses in Hanoi in street/high fashion brand GREEDILOUS by Park Yeon Hee based in Seoul. Photograph by the author.

However, the above case involved a clear example of national dress (a “Korean look”) which all Vietnamese informants agreed was concrete, recognizable, and unequivocally Korean.



Figure 3 “Salim” poses in a GREEDILOUS blouse. Noteworthy is the fact that Salim styled and posed this blouse as a dress. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4 Korean model-subject Songi poses in Hanoi-based *ao dai* fashion brand La Pham in Seoul. Photograph by the first author.

Indeed, it was the ten GREEDILOUS pieces that attracted the attention of Hong Kim Ngan (a.k.a. “Salim,” one of Vietnam’s most powerful influencers and Instagrammers<sup>3</sup>), as well as the fact that I was a fashion photographer visiting VIFW *from Seoul* that swayed her to positively answer a request to shoot/interview together in the project. In terms of embodiment and hip(g)nosis, as well as the fact Korean high/street fashion as national dress is far from a “steel cage of dress” but instead was constituted out of a fashion subculture with the glue of agency and without top-down interpellation, Salim used her formidable amount of fashion and beauty *habitus* to do what top Instagrammers do best — wear and embody looks made worn and embodied by others look truly individualized and nearly bespoke even when that might seem nearly impossible. In short, the GREEDILOUS items she and her stylist chose were all recently walked on the runway by 180cm+ models. Salim is 158cm tall, yet she was able to style and wear her looks and make them look naturally part of *her* look and brand, with the photograph produced in the moment of sartorial-kinesthetic elicitation one of the most aesthetically pleasing and satisfying images for all parties — photographer, model, and designer. Indeed, the Salim shoot with GREEDILOUS street/high fashion as a new kind of national dress throws the other examples into sharp relief. Importantly and tellingly, Salim had no interest in the *hanbok* and was quite excited by the idea of posing in a hot Korean, high fashion brand, as this seemed to be of highest likely interest to her many followers, who look to many Vietnamese influencers to channel Korean fashion trends and looks. This is the commercially-informed “national dress”-as-national dress that seemed to motivate Salim the most, with this understanding of organically-evolved Korean coolness — importantly, bereft of interpellative force from above — that informed her choice to work with our project and even pose how she did. In short, Salim was not interested or willing to be interpellated in a “steel cage of dress.”

Phase two of the project took place in Seoul during Seoul Fashion Week in March 2019 and involved Korean models shooting Vietnamese *ao dai* brands such as La Pham Hanoi. Commentary from involved Vietnamese designers and stylists included notes about the *ao dai* being a “feminine” form of dress and required appropriately “not overly modern-looking” poses and looking sufficiently demure. In this case, which involved multiple *ao dai* sent over to Seoul with the goal of mutually beneficial photographic/brand collaboration, the photographic interaction invited much more direction of the model and elicited/invoked the “steel cage” of the *ao dai* as a major part of the interaction as the model navigated how to embody the dress “properly” while being interpellated.

Each stage invoked and elicited interpellation differently. Phase Three of the project will involve a photo exhibition of the images produced in Phases One and Two, staged in Hanoi in February 2020 and thereafter in a venue in Seoul. In Phase 3, the goal will be more traditional photo elicitation, with the mechanism of visually mediated proprioceptively-based opinions on focusing the responses that will prompt conversations about the social messages conveyed through national dress. This aesthetically based project will be the perfect way to to continue the process of examining

## Conclusion

The sartorial-kinesthetic elicitation project that comprised the final part of this paper was both a proof-of-concept in terms of the theory involved, as well as a methodological exercise. The purpose of the methodological exercise was to find a way to collect ethnographic data with the camera as a way to bring different aesthetics and actors together into the photographic frame to elicit social and psychological responses that can test whether social data is transmitted via clothing. The choice of national dress as a kind of “imaging dye” made a lot of theoretical sense, since the “steel cage of dress” seemed the most concrete and trackable form of press-the-flesh, as much of a proprioceptively-transmitted kind of kinesthetic empathy as there could be. However, one weakness in the process (which may be baked into the ethnographic nature of the data collection) is the fact that it is difficult to quantify the empathic strength of any particular piece of dress or even separate that from the particularities of any one model-subject, who herself reacts to the dress as a result of interaction with the environment and investigator. But with enough exchanges, and with more data — especially as it finds mediation across screens and in photographic exhibitions, the aesthetic import of these exchanges will find sharper focus by the empirical data yielded by further elicitation exercises such as photographic exhibitions, which can gain countless more subjects proprioceptively perceiving through the eye and virtually embodying the still cages of dress that is national dress. In this way, an additional, third-dimensional vantage point can be gained that can add depth to a flat-plane analysis that photographer-investigator, model-subject, and other involved actors may find it difficult to step outside of. This third-stage analysis is the next logical step for this project, which functions within the very aesthetic that the idea of “empathy” began to be theorized within from its very beginnings in Greek philosophical thought. In order to be properly theorized and explored, we must remember the unity among aesthetics, empathy, and the senses. The concept itself started in the aesthetic realm, and I believe that it is within aesthetically sited methodologies where one can find the key to exploring most fruitfully one of the most important concepts and mechanisms of human social existence.

## Notes

1. The quote is generally attributed to Abraham Maslov.
2. See <https://www.saigonxseoul.com/about>.
3. Instagram ID @salimhwg, with 873,000 followers as of this writing

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