Fabricating Girls: Clothes and Coming-of-Age Fiction by Women of Color

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Abstract:
Given the long history of prejudice against clothing as a serious subject of scholarly analysis, dress has remained insufficiently explored in literary criticism as a feature of the *bildungsroman*, or the coming-of-age fictional narrative. Choice of dress has been, however, a crucial element in the establishment of identity and in the process of maturation, particularly in narratives about girls and most especially in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century works about girls of color. This essay examines the role of dress in three representative texts by women of color—one Australian, one Afro-British, and one Chicana.

Keywords: dress; fashion; coming-of-age narratives; *bildungsroman*; girls of color; identity formation

What happens when we focus on the intersection of two subjects that traditionally have been considered of lower status in many academic settings—i.e., girlhood and clothes? These two topics may long have attracted interest among popular audiences, but when it comes to literary criticism, in particular, they are only now beginning to accrue prestige, or what is often called "cultural capital." They have been long neglected, in particular, in the very place where they might have been expected: studies of the *bildungsroman*, which tracks the progress over time of an individual fictional protagonist. Conventional discussions of maturation in coming-of-age narratives, and conventional formulations of that genre, have mainly reflected masculine notions of development, pivoting on what Maureen Corrigan describes as episodes of "male extreme adventure"—i.e., "a one-shot testosterone expenditure of physical courage that pits man against nature/man/himself, with man (the narrator usually) left standing, bloody but unbowed" (Corrigan 2005, 5). This road to manhood—that is, through the testing of physical prowess and courage—has been acknowledged as a significant one; social experiences on the path toward becoming a woman, such as choosing what to wear or dealing with the responses of others to one's choice, have had no such cultural importance attached to them, and thus they have been overlooked in the construction of literary theory. Especially in "the late 20th century . . . [when] binary opposites . . . had yet to lose their grip," as Rosemary Hill emphasizes in her "Introduction" to *Frock Consciousness: Writing about Clothes from*

the London Review of Books, dress was absent from literary criticism in general, for a "subject as delicate as the history and meaning of clothes could not easily get a purchase" (Hill 2019, 2).

If the concerns of girls and their process of maturation only recently have begun to receive full scholarly consideration, especially through the growing field of Girlhood Studies, so too have narratives about clothing. Both in texts and in life, attention to dress was long associated with feminine preoccupations (albeit with a few exceptions, such as during the period of nineteenth-century male dandyism); was taken as a sign of vanity and insufficient intellectual or political seriousness; and was even viewed as a moral failing. As Daniel Miller tells us, in his "Introduction" to *Clothing as Material Culture*,

> Since it is used as a covering or as a surface, clothing is easily characterized as intrinsically superficial. . . . We struggle with what might be called a depth ontology, a very specific Western idea of being, in which the real person, myself, is somehow deep inside me. . . . This denigration of surfaces has been part of the denigration of clothing and, by extension, of those said to be particularly interested in clothing, often seen as women. (Miller 2005, 3)

More recently, in the Introduction to a 2015 volume titled *The Memory of Clothes*, the Australian arts educator Robyn Gibson has put this even more bluntly: "Almost every fashion writer . . . insists anew on the importance of fashion. However[,] typical responses from outside the discipline border on cynicism, ambivalence or irony." Why? Because fashion allegedly provides "evidence of women's inherent frivolity and flightiness," as well as being a topic seen as "trivial, ephemeral and unworthy of scholarly investigation" in itself (Gibson 2015, xiii).

Feminist criticism, too, has sometimes been harsh in its responses to the question of concern with clothing, albeit for a different reason. In her polemic *Beauty Sick: How the Cultural Obsession with Appearance Hurts Girls and Women*, Renee Engeln, for example, warns readers of the psychologically damaging pattern—i.e., the "lifelong tendency toward body surveillance"—that is established, when women learn in their youth to pay attention to matters of dress (Engeln 2017, 79). Even feminists who do not automatically denigrate the subject of fashion often have proven ambivalent toward it, at best. While claiming initially, in their Introduction to *Fashion Talks: Undressing the Power of Style*, that "fashion—like power—is neither inherently good nor bad," Shira Tarrant and Marjorie Jolles move with surprising rapidity toward qualifying this neutral assessment and reminding readers of the "problem" with fashion, which includes the fact that its positive "possibilities are easily co-opted" and turned to "exploitative" uses (Tarrant and Jolles 2012, 2). In the process of defending "dress culture" as having the potential to communicate both "artistry" and "creativity," Christine Bayles Kortsch feels obliged to acknowledge nonetheless, in the "Afterword" to her historical study of materiality in late-Victorian women's fiction, that "[attention] to dress and textiles has been associated with patriarchal oppression" (Kortsch 2009, 182).

Yet in literature, as in other spheres of life, dress is also an invaluable source of information, for it can make visible the process of achieving individual identity and thus can serve as a crucial

element to be traced throughout the *bildungsroman*. As Sophie Woodward writes in *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, "Because clothing is worn habitually over a period of time, it comes to define a person during a particular period of one's life. . . . [It] becomes intimately connected to the wearer and [serves as] . . . a material archive" (Woodward 2007, 24–25). But it also conveys other sorts of truths, especially in terms of its broader cultural meanings. What we wear, as Woodward notes, "is always situated in particular social, economic and political contexts, and through its material propensities, it articulates social categories such as gender . . . and ethnicity" (Woodward 2007, 25).

This last element—the issue of ethnicity, and along with it such matters as race and religious difference—has too rarely entered the critical discussion, even in literary studies that do focus on dress. Frequently, the focus has been exclusively on white women authors and on their white female fictional characters in otherwise fine (and class-sensitive) studies such as R. S. Koppen's *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity* (2009), Katherine Joslin's *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* (2009), and Celia Marshik's *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow and British Garment Culture* (2017). Lori Harrison-Kahan rightly has objected to this limited perspective: "The feminist literature on fashion has mostly failed to take into account the ways that gender and class intersect with race and ethnicity, despite increasing critical attention to intersectionality within the broader field of feminist studies" (Harrison-Kahan 2011, 207).

I would like, therefore, to begin thinking seriously about the images presented in a —necessarily small—sampling of late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century fiction about girls as they come of age, and to consider the importance of the descriptions of the particular clothes that they wear in this process. In doing so, it is crucial first to ask what coming-of-age means, especially in terms of the lives and experiences of girls. If it is an event connected with the transition to a new status—i.e., a movement toward maturity—where and how does it occur? In *Girls on the Verge*, a study of modern rites of passage, Vendela Vida claims that that there has been a noteworthy change, thanks to "time and feminism," both of which have "liberated sexual mores" (Vida 2000, xiii). At least in the West, "yesterday's coming of age rituals," which had "inducted young women into adulthood based on sexual development," were turned instead, during the second half of the twentieth century, into "initiation rituals—ones that seek to secure adult identities that have less to do with first menstruation . . . and more to do with personal choice" (Vida 2000, xiii).

If Vida is correct, then we would expect to see evidence of this shift not only in day-to-day reality, but in the sphere of representation—in fiction about girls, as well as in fiction written with a young audience in mind, especially in texts created during and after the period that she identifies. Coming-of-age fiction provides older readers with a way of reflecting upon their own pasts and their own paths; it is also a tool that prepares younger readers for their futures, by allowing them to envision and to rehearse imaginatively what they are about to undergo. The power of a girl's coming-of-age narrative lies in its potential to shine a critical light on the shaping of identity and on the forces that either impede or assist in that effort. Coming-of-age stories do show us young female

protagonists exercising, as Vida says, "personal choice" (Vida 2000, xiii), as well as reacting to situations in which choice has been wrested from their grasp.

The category of contemporary literature that has focused most often on moments when identity undergoes a transformation is Young Adult (also known as YA) fiction. In the Fall 2010 issue of *Ms* magazine, Jessica Stites paid tribute to this genre with an article titled "Kick-Ass Girls and Feminist Boys: Young-Adult Fiction Offers Fabulous Fantasies of How the World *Should* Be." In it, she asserted that coming of age "can be rough for girls," while praising the ability of literature to intervene positively in the process: "For many of us destined to become feminists, there's a period when gender roles become ill-fitting and maddening, but we're not sure why. At that crucial moment, certain books can offer refuge or escape" (Stites 2010, 37). Among the most helpful books, according to Stites, are those specifically designed to appeal to young adults—a niche market of publishing "first carved out of children's books in the late '60s" (Stites 2010, 37). Stites claims, moreover, that the YA genre also has a special role to play, when it comes to young women of color: "For girls of color, marginalized by the triple whammy of age, race, and gender, YA can provide a thrilling moment of self-recognition" (Stites 37). Some YA texts, of course, encourage readers to follow the happy fates of female protagonists who manage, against the odds, to move from margin to center and to achieve a sense of empowerment. But others allow them to identify with the frustrations of fictional characters whose "personal choice," to use Vida's phrase (Vida 2000, xiii), has been restricted or taken away from them entirely.

Of all the ways to exercise and display personal choice, whether in life or in literature, none is more immediately and publicly visible than through dress. For the British Jewish novelist and journalist Linda Grant, writing in her 2009 volume of essays, *The Thoughtful Dresser*, "The defining moment in the life of a young girl is the moment when she is able to choose her own clothes" (Grant 2009, 123). All other coming-of-age rituals, such as "first menstruation, first kiss, . . . passing your exams, leaving home, [or] getting a job" are merely "stages. Milestones. Markers" (Grant 2009, 123). But clothing, as Grant points out, embodies and proclaims both the acquisition and the assertion of identity itself: "When you start to dress yourself, you are beginning a lifelong journey into your own future, the subtle, everyday construction of who you are through what you wear" (Grant 20009, 123). Grant's notion of the role of dress accords with that of anthropologists such as Emma Tarlo who, in her study *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, insisted that "buying and wearing a certain type of dress is in fact a creative act" (Tarlo 1996, 12)—a matter of "playing with identities"—for "clothes are not merely defining but they are also self-consciously *used* to define, to present, to deceive, to enjoy, to communicate, to reveal and conceal" [emphasis in original] (Tarlo 1996, 8).

Though the conventional model of coming-of-age narratives may involve social integration, some novels designed for the YA market have been offering images of girls who self-consciously and successfully construct oppositional identities—who, moreover, *fabricate* these by making them literally material through clothes. One clear example of this process occurs in Randa Abdel-Fattah's

chick-lit-influenced comedy, *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, which was released in the U. S. by Scholastic Inc. in 2007, but first published in the author's home country of Australia in 2005. Abdel-Fattah, a Muslim of Palestinian-Egyptian descent, tells the story of Amal—an otherwise unremarkable teenager, devoted largely to the joys of shopping in the Melbourne suburbs and to reading *Cosmopolitan* magazine until, thanks to an old rerun of the TV sitcom *Friends*, she has a revelation. As she watches the actress Jennifer Aniston play a character who is "dressed in a hideous bridesmaid's outfit at her ex's wedding," where everyone is "making fun of her and she wants to run away and hide," but who instead finds "the guts to jump onstage and sing," Amal feels a "rush of absolute power and conviction" (Abdel-Fattah 2007, 1). What she recounts next, through her first-person narrative, is certainly a coming-of-age experience of transition and transformation: "It was like stepping out of one room, closing the door behind me, and stepping into another. One minute it was the last thing on my mind. The next minute this courage flowed through me and it just felt unbelievably right. I was ready to wear the hijab" (Abdel-Fattah 2007, 2). Of course, Amal, who is also the wise-cracking teller of her own story, characteristically undercuts and deflates the importance of this moment with a comic postscript: "That's right. Rachel from *Friends* inspired me. The sheikhs will be holding emergency conferences" (Abdel-Fattah 2007, 2).

Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel addresses two YA audiences at once: a non-Muslim readership, which may be both ignorant and curious about hijab and its significance, and a female Muslim readership, in search of personal validation and representation of its conflicts over issues of difference within a majority white and non-Muslim nation such as Australia. What the author counts on these two disparate audiences sharing is an interest in clothes—not merely in styles of dress, but in the details of fabric choice, color, and cut that are allied to the concerns of the fashion industry. Thus, the unveiling of the veil, so to speak, happens at the local shopping mall, where adolescent girls go "to make an impression" (Abdel-Fattah 2007, 26). Abdel-Fattah details the fashionable "impression" that her protagonist strives to achieve through deliberate and elaborate preparation, especially through the selection and manipulation of material, with close attention to its physical properties:

> I've decided on a navy blue veil and baby blue cotton headband to match my jeans and blue cardigan. . . . I need the headband since the veil is a silk fabric and will slip off without a headband to grip it underneath. The contrasting shades of blue also spice up the look a little. I fold the veil in half, into a triangular shape, and even it out over the headband. I wrap it around my head and face. . . .When I've perfected the shape I fasten the veil with a small safety pin at my neck. I fling the tail ends across my shoulders and join them together with a brooch. (Abdel-Fattah 2007, 26-27)

Here, the actions of the fictional character, in her attention both to clothing and to cloth itself, mirror the concerns of actual Muslim women, such as those whom Özlem Sandikci and Güliz Ger discuss in "Aesthetics, Ethics and Politics of the Turkish Headscarf." For many Turkish women, as Sandikci and Ger suggest, "Fashion . . . changes the preferred patterns, colours and materials" of hijab, so that "the currently trendy designs are Burberry, chequered, small floral or almost abstract

floral, and leopard . . . while 'crinkle' (crumpled thin fabric), chiffon, and a combination of velvet and tulle are trendy fabrics" (Sandikci and Ger, 2005, 67; 69); moreover, as they add, "Once the 'right' scarf is selected, which also requires considerable work, the woman faces the intricate process of tying it" (Sandikci and Ger 2005, 73). There is, they assert, "a learning process, an acquisition of cultural capital in learning to tie in different styles" (Sandikci and Ger 2005, 75). Through the pride that comes with new knowledge, the "beauty work around the scarf gives the subject the sense of [becoming] a self-constructing person, who can take control of her own body and image" (Sandikci and Ger 2005, 79).

The production of a religious identity may be a spiritual issue; yet it is also *material* in the most literal sense, both in reality and in fictional representations such as Abdel-Fattah's novel for and about girls. For *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Abdel-Fattah creates a title which, of course, plays comically on the notion of big-headedness as something that indicates pride, but also on the clichéd question that women supposedly ask when trying on jeans—"Does my ass look big in this?—as a sign of anxiety over weight, size, and body image in relation to clothing. In the narrative, the protagonist's concern in advance about how non-Muslim white Australians will react to her wearing of the headscarf—an anxiety that results in her producing a joke-filled "To Wear or Not to Wear List" that mirrors the sorts of lists featured in women's fashion magazines (Abdel-Fattah 2007, 17)—proves to be justified. The visible expression of difference sets off repercussions in her community and especially in her school, where Muslims are a minority. There, the most immediate conflict is with the woman principal, who is convinced that hijab is not what Vendela Vida would call an exercise of "personal choice" (Vida 2000, xiii), signaling adulthood, but something that Amal's parents must be forcing upon her against her will. When the principal finally is persuaded otherwise, she signals acceptance and compromise through fabric, informing Amal's mother that her daughter must confine herself to headscarves that match the school uniform:

> "'What color did she agree to?' I ask, hoping it isn't the awful maroon or yellow of our official colors.
> 'Maroon,' my mom answers. 'And don't scrunch your face like that. You should be—'
> '—grateful, yes, I know,' I groan. (Abdel-Fattah 2007, 59)

The lighthearted and universally familiar image of a teenager "groan[ing]" to her mother about the impossibly tasteless, unfashionable clothing directives of adults serves here to normalize the situation for both Muslim and non-Muslim readers alike. Abdel-Fattah draws throughout on clothing-related comedy and on girls' interest in style and fabric—in color, draping, and shaping—to create a narrative that will allow its audience to "try on," whether literally or figuratively, a non-majority religious identity and to negotiate successfully the consequences of assuming it. Young adult genre fiction functions here as a safe space—the equivalent of an adolescent's bedroom, complete with a wardrobe and a full-length mirror—for the imaginative rehearsal of one sort of coming-of-age experience which, in the world outside the text, has been fraught with political

tension and social conflict (and which, in some countries such as France, was made illegal for girls attending state-sponsored schools.)

In fact, many women—and, in particular, authors who are also women of color—have, in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, been writing coming-of-age narratives that turn similarly upon the acts of dressing or of being dressed by others and that offer readers the opportunity for *reflection*, in all senses of the word. They have been doing so, moreover, even in texts that are *not* targeted so explicitly at the young adult market. Indeed, the classification of such novels as "YA" sometimes proves controversial, if not inaccurate. In an essay cleverly titled "Hairitage: Women Writing Race in Children's Literature," Dianne Johnson, an African American scholar and a children's book author herself, categorizes as a "young adult novel" Simi Bedford's *Yoruba Girl Dancing*, which focuses on "upper-class Nigerian characters born into a newly postcolonial Africa and sent to England to receive their formal education" (Johnson 2009, 340). For Johnson, Bedford's fictional narrative (published in Britain in 1991, but covering a period from the mid-1940s to the late-1950s) is a story about "black hair"—about its racial and political meanings—in which "Bedford teaches young readers that cultural cues indicating not just gender but also class and race can be misread outside of a specific context" (Johnson 2009, 341). But Penguin Books, which has kept Bedford's work continuously in print since its publication nearly thirty years ago, has promoted it always as a contemporary novel, never as a children's or even a YA text. To Helen Lock, in "*Yoruba Girl Dancing* and the Post-War Transition to an English Multi-Ethnic Society," Bedford's work is a sophisticated political exploration of hybridity "from a child's perspective" (Lock 1999, 120), rather than a narrative directed at an audience composed of children. In *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (2000), Wendy Griswold raises quite a different concern, asking whether this novel should properly be called a work of Nigerian literature at all, since its author, Simi Bedford, has lived most of her life in London. Griswold, however, never questions its status as a novel meant for adult readers, taking that as a given.

I, too, would dispute Dianne Johnson's attempt to claim *Yoruba Girl Dancing* for the category of children's literature, even as I would disagree that its primary emphasis is on the relationship between the protagonist's "sense of belonging," in diverse environments, and "hair [that] is distinctly African" (Johnson 2009, 340). The coming-of-age story that Bedford has created invites multiple audiences to engage with the comic voice of Remi Foster and to do so differently, depending on their own age and location. It is, moreover, an account of "belonging" and also of displacement and alienation that focuses explicitly throughout on dress. Images of fabric and fashion and information about clothing styles, rather than hair, dominate the narrative. The first-person narrator's development of an identity follows a line through repeated instances of oppression by white Englishwomen who forcibly clothe her in ways that deny or denigrate her heritage, her race, and even her gender, until she reaches the moment when, as Linda Grant might have put the matter, "she is able to choose her own clothes" and thus to begin the "lifelong journey" toward her "own future" (Grant 2009, 123).

Throughout the first sections of Bedford's narrative, in which the young Remi describes her idyllic and privileged childhood as part of the ruling class of Lagos, the clothes that she sees around her and in which her Nigerian relatives dress her signal pride in family membership and aesthetic appreciation of black women's skin and bodies. These outfits are carefully chosen and complexly designed, following traditional fashions but also adapted to modern tastes and sometimes worn with "the latest hats from Paris" (Bedford 1991, 18). Nigerian identity allows for hybridity, but it also demands thought and attention to self-presentation; in the words of the fashion historian, Rowland Abiodun, "Although not as grave as being without clothes, dressing inappropriately is highly offensive to Yoruba aesthetics and life-affirming sensibilities" (Abiodun 2010, 3).

As Linda Grant has suggested when reflecting upon her own very different childhood as a white Jewish girl of the post-Second-World-War era in Britain, "[Becoming] a woman was about dressing up. . . . Clothes were not what you wore to be comfortable: they were how you built your femininity" (Grant 2009, 122). That is certainly true for the fictional Remi Foster's observations about fashion and mid-twentieth-century Nigerian femininity. At the wedding with which the novel opens, the guests show that they belong to the bride's or the groom's party through the colors of their gorgeous silk garments, which are decorated with "gold thread, silver tissue and lace" (Bedford 1991, 24) and accompanied, in some cases, by the elaborately tied "magnificent" headdress of "full Yoruba costume" (Bedford 1991, 24). In these early sections, too, Simi Bedford reflects her young narrator's familiarity with Nigerian women's clothing styles that are unfamiliar to Western readers, and the text offers those readers a kind of glossary of fashion, as she describes a wedding guest whose headdress, or *gele*, and blouse, or *buba*, are of "the same blue material as . . . her ero, worn wrapped around like a skirt and knotted at the waist, her ipele which was bound tightly across her hips and the eborun, folded lengthwise and thrown over her shoulder" (Bedford 1991, 24). These are the garments of adult womanhood to which Remi Foster aspires. In the meantime, nonetheless, she is clothed in a body-affirming two-piece "'up and down,'" which consists of a tubular bodice and a skirt "fitted just as tightly all the way to the ground"—a style of "Sierra Leonian" origin "that the young women were wearing," and about which Remi's aunt notes approvingly that "it showed the figure off to perfection" (Bedford 1991, 24).

If Remi expects the wearing of this fashionable and flattering garment to represent her first step toward coming of age in a Nigerian setting, she soon receives a rude shock. Almost immediately, she is turned over to the care of her step-grandmother, a white working-class woman from suburban London, and then sent to boarding school in England. As this step-grandmother, known to Remi's parents as "Bigmama," explains to her own white relatives, "'Remi's family . . . believe that it's imperative for their children to receive an English education, so that when the time comes and their country is given independence they will be ready and prepared: they are the ones who will be running things in the not too distant future'" (Bedford 1991, 67)

In the new environment of England, however, Remi finds to her dismay that white people will not permit her the freedom of "running" anything whatsoever, including the process of covering

herself; instead, the author makes her protagonist's utter powerlessness visible and *material*, as Remi is clothed against her will in outsized, unattractive coats that overwhelm her developing body. These are garments so big, as she puts it in comic terms to the reader, that they seem designed to "last me the rest of my life" (Bedford 66). They not only rob her of individuality and of connection to her own community, but obliterate her gender identity. Riding the bus in London to Harrods, to purchase the clothes necessary for attendance at an elite boarding school, she is surveyed and subjected to the white bus conductor's intrusive, insulting question to Bigmama, " 'Is it a boy or a girl?' 'I am a girl,' I said, offended" (Bedord 1991, 65).

Far more offensive and humiliating, however, is the encounter that follows, with a shop assistant at Harrods who fits her out in the wardrobe required for English school-life. This is a uniform made entirely of an unrelieved shade of brown to which the saleswoman quite blithely and unselfconsciously appends the *n-word*, as a descriptive adjective. Remi's horrified response to seeing herself in the dressing-room mirror, wearing clothing implicitly tied to the *n-word*, is to "burst out crying, [as] great racking sobs shook me to the ground where I lay watering the sable carpet with my tears, while Bigmama and the saleswoman looked on helplessly" (Bedford 1991, 67). It is a moment both of comic incongruity and of high tragedy.

Here, the drabness and the ugliness that the protagonist perceives in the cloth itself combines with the psychic violence of the racist name for its color to produce a deeply felt psychic wound—an injury from which Remi does not begin to recover until the end of the narrative, when she has graduated from boarding school and, though still living and studying in London, finally can enjoy the liberty of dressing herself. Control over her clothing indicates control over her own fate and self-definition. When we last see her, the adolescent Remi declares, through her clothing choice, her identity as a young woman who is now part of a community of color, in both a literal and a political sense—a group of Africans, South Asians, and Central Americans who consider themselves beautiful and sexual: "We dressed to look alike deliberately and we didn't care who stared at us now . . . When asked who we were and where we were from, we smiled mysteriously and moved on, languidly swinging our hips, all of us in our high, high heels and our tight, tight skirts" (Bedford 1991,184).

The choice of these late-1950s modes as their vehicles of expression is a reminder, too, of Linda Grant's observation about women's fashion of the period: "Clothes were not what you wore to be comfortable"; they were instead a "costume" that invited a woman to become "a person who had an existence out in the world" (Grant 2009, 122). In the case of Remi Foster's circle of friends, which she describes as looking "like a swarm of iridescent dragonflies" (Bedford 1991, 184), the "world" for which these women are deliberately dressing themselves is a postcolonial one, in which it will not only be possible, but desirable, to embrace and to celebrate color as a form of power. They are an elite and educated group—Remi herself is now studying law—who will make use of Western styles for their own purposes and be neither limited nor oppressed by them.

But not all girls' coming-of-age fiction ends in triumph. Both Amal, in Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel, and Remi, in Simi Bedford's, are young women of color who enjoy lives of economic privilege—in the case of Remi Foster, of extraordinary class privilege, too, with access to many opportunities and choices (including, as she reaches womanhood, the choice of aesthetic clothing that suits her body and expresses her personality). For these girls, the ability eventually, if not always immediately, to select their own garments and thus to take control of how others will see them and will read their characters can function as a source of social power.

What happens, however, to girls who do not have the luxury of exercising this control and who, because of their circumstances, may never have it? In her 1992 volume, *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, Sandra Cisneros focuses on one such girl, in the short story titled "Eleven." The protagonist, Rachel, who is Chicana and poor, describes an event in the classroom that transformed the day she turned eleven-years-old from a celebration to an unforgettable assault on her sense of self. This traumatic episode begins with an adult publicly imposing on her an item of clothing and, by doing so, forcing upon her a despised social identity:

> 'Whose is this?' Mrs. Price says, and she holds the red sweater up in the air for all the class to see. 'Whose? It's been sitting in the coatroom for a month.'
> 'Not mine,' says everybody. 'Not me.'
> 'It has to belong to somebody,' Mrs. Price keeps saying, but nobody can remember. It's an ugly sweater with red plastic buttons and a collar and sleeves all stretched out like you could use it for a jump rope. It's maybe a thousand years old and even if it belonged to me I wouldn't say so.
> Maybe because I'm skinny, maybe because she doesn't like me, that stupid Sylvia Saldivar says, 'I think it belongs to Rachel.' An ugly sweater like that, all raggedy and old, but Mrs. Price believes her. Mrs. Price takes the sweater and puts it right on my desk, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.
> 'That's not, I don't, you're not . . . Not mine,' I finally say in a little voice that was maybe me when I was four.
> 'Of course it's yours,' Mrs. Price says. 'I remember you wearing it once.' Because she's older and the teacher, she's right and I'm not. (Cisneros 1992, 7) [ellipses in original]

As the child-narrator does not say, but as the adult reader (who is implicitly the audience for this story) understands nonetheless, there is a third category of hierarchical authority that enables "Mrs. Price" to decide arbitrarily what is and is not the truth: she is "older," she is "the teacher," and also, judging from her Anglo name, she is white or at least not Chicana, unlike the children over whom she has power in this school. Thus, her false memory of having seen Rachel in the sweater becomes "right," as her words overrule the narrator's. Worse yet, in an act of what the narrator experiences as psychic violence, she orders the girl to put the sweater on her own body. Lacking any way to answer or to counter the insult implicit in Mrs. Price's association of her with an item of clothing that is dirty and "smells like cottage cheese" (Cisneros 1992, 8), the narrator, humiliated, regresses in age: "I'm eleven and it's my birthday today and I'm crying like I'm three in front of everybody" (Cisneros 1992, 9).

Cisneros depicts a reverse coming-of-age for the narrator, who loses both maturity and agency throughout the course of events leading her to being clothed in a sweater that is not hers. At the same time, this narrative encourages the adult reader to come of age politically, through awareness of the social vulnerability and disempowerment inherent in Rachel's plight, as a non-privileged young girl of color—a situation embodied in the distasteful and shame-inducing materiality of the garment that she has been made to wear. By the end, the narrator is counting backwards, while also leaping far into the future, to describe the desire she now feels not to exist at all. The story concludes with these painful words: "I'm eleven today. I'm eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, and one, but I wish I was one hundred and two. . . . I want today to be far away already . . . like a runaway balloon, like a tiny *o* in the sky, so tiny tiny you have to close your eyes to see it" (Cisneros 1992, 9). Rachel has indeed undergone a transition from one phase to another, but only in the most negative sense, as she now yearns above all for invisibility and flight, even at the price of ceasing to live. To be defined by others as nothing more and nothing better than that red sweater is to be, in effect, shamed to death.

In his study *Clothing: A Global History*, Robert Ross affirms that "people decide for themselves what clothes they will wear, which is why wearing clothes (and certainly not wearing them) is almost invariably a political act," for it is "one of the most public ways by which people can announce to their fellows who they are, or at least . . . who they would like to be, or who they would like to be thought to be" (Ross 2008, 169). For young women characters in the fictional genre of the *bildungsroman*—and perhaps especially for young women characters of color—it is often one of the few means by which they can or do make these announcements. This circumstance is a reflection, moreover, of something that is equally true in the actual lives of girls, who often feel themselves helpless, silenced or, like Cisneros's Rachel, with nothing at their command but a squeaky "little voice" (Cisneros 1992, 7). As Eugenia Paulicelli and Hazel Clark remind us, in *The Fabric of Cultures*, clothing "is part of material culture and has a double face. It is at one and the same time public and private, material and symbolic" (Paulicelli and Clark 2009, 3); thus it is a medium "through which to gain a new understanding of cultures, and individual lives" (Paulicelli and Clark 2009, 1). Representations of dress in girls' coming-of-age narratives, whether or not those texts fall within the category of "Young Adult" literature, have much to tell us as readers, whatever age we may be, and a great deal of information to offer about the experiences of girls of color in an often hostile world.

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