

Brownie, Barbara. *Acts of Undressing: Politics, Eroticism, and Discarded Clothing*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017 (160 pp). ISBN: 9781472596192.

From daily routine rituals carried out in automatic precision to elaborately choreographed pieces armed with a challenging or otherwise disruptive agenda, acts of undressing are informed by an array of intentions and lend themselves to rich interpretation.

Barbara Brownie's *Acts of Undressing: Politics, Eroticism, and Discarded Clothing* is a recent addition to Bloomsbury's interdisciplinary series "Dress, Body, Culture" – a bulging, provocative collection of works that examine the connections between culture and dress, from clothing to tattooing and beyond. True to the eclectic spirit of the series, this book undertakes to engage performance art, burlesque, fashion, protest, trauma, commemoration, and gang culture in an off-beat and bold dialogue with each other. The author's main line of argument is that "dressing and undressing may be intended as a meaningful action" instead of a necessary means to an end (i.e., un/covering nudity) and the number of cases she employs is intended to bring our attention to all those "missed opportunities to acknowledge the significance of [this] journey" (2).

The book is comprised of six chapters, as well as an introduction and a conclusion. Its asset is arguably that all chapters are in continuing dialogue with one another and each could potentially be expanded into a separate study. Brownie takes up undressing as a discursive, choreographed event taking place between an actor and (witting or unwitting) observers, with focus predominantly resting on its public, stage-worthy qualities rather than its everyday practice occurring in the privacy of one's home. Brownie's selection of cases allows her to focus on various kinds of intentionality, including eroticism, aesthetic pursuits, fashion statements, provocation to particular ends, protest, resistance, and trauma commemoration.

The book's aim is essentially "to consider the actions that lie between dress and nakedness" and to thus find its place in the burgeoning scholarship of the "liminal, the permeable, and the structurally undetermined" (Reus and Gifford 2013 qtd. in Brownie 14). Brownie's is a sustained argument that, in its implicit focus on Western culture, differentiates between nakedness and the act of becoming naked, with the latter aspect being arguably absent from relevant studies. In the introduction, the author delineates the theoretical and critical frameworks within which acts of undressing occur. As she writes, "to equate undressing with nakedness is to confuse an action with the state," thus calling attention to the fluid, transitory nature of an act of becoming versus the fixedness of a state of being. Even unclothedness itself becomes relative, as it points to various levels of undressed or under-dressed body conditioned by varying cultural contexts. This book thus succeeds in exposing the intricacies of what appears to be a spectrum of potentialities reflected through the shifting perspectives of displacement and replacement of clothes.

The first chapter traces the indistinct line that separates private from public acts of undressing. The author employs a wide selection of examples, ranging from contemporary film to magazines, and spanning from seventeenth-century undressing ceremonies in the Palace of

Versailles attended by a privileged few, to sanctioned voyeurism in early twentieth-century films that presented the domestic space “as if subject to a panoptic gaze” (14). The chapter further delves into the shifting perspectives of participant and observer in order to show how these roles, which have been differentiated over time, become intertwined and blurred in contemporary performance art, where observation, participation, and appropriation interface with debates on agency, control and privacy.

The second chapter looks into burlesque performance and the way it has evolved through time to signify alternative narrative paths of sensualizing the undressing body. It brings into discussion neo-burlesque and its self-referential narrative structures, “boylesque” and its questioning of gender stereotypes, and most interestingly, burlesque performances by people with disabilities, men and women, who have been immensely successful in re-mapping erogenous zones on the disabled body. From the start this chapter clarifies that neo-burlesque is not about nudity as an anticipated destination, but rather about relishing the process.

The suggestion or promise of undressing rather than the completion of the act is the focus of the third chapter. The author identifies striptease qualities in fashion catwalks that mobilize Roland Barthes’ thoughts on the eroticization of flesh exposed right “where the garment gapes” (44). The hiding-and-seeking of flesh allowed by the fluid motion of the fabric turns out to be far more erotically stimulating than total nudity. Drawing on cases such as Versace’s bold openings activated by the wearer’s movement, Chalayan’s robotic garments of remotely controlled panels migrating along the models’ torsos, or Errazuriz’s dress consisting only of zippers instead of seams, Brownie demonstrates how “the migration of a piece of clothing can simultaneously be an act of dressing and undressing,” granting wearers not only “the option of customizing their dress” but also of turning it into “a mode of communication” and an “extension of body language” (57).

The fourth chapter in turn sheds light on the aggressive explicitness of gestures of undressing (i.e., streaking, mooning, and flashing), the accusations they have met with, and the circumstances under which they have become legitimized. The author’s intention here is to draw a distinction between acceptable political protest, like women’s or animals’ rights, and other more trivial ones, like the “sanctioned deviance” (72) during certain festivals and the commercial value of the temporarily naked bodies that have now come to be a regular (and jocularly welcomed) disruption of major sports events. Such delineations attest to the fact that “it is not bodily exposure, but rather the intention behind the gesture that defines an indecent act” (64).

Undressing can also, as the fifth chapter indicates, become a weapon of defiance and resistance in the hands of the oppressed, “a last line of defense that is almost universally accessible” (80). Returning to FEMEN’S strategies of “protest undressing” examined in the previous chapter, Brownie discusses the conscious exploitation of the female body through the dynamic removal of clothes in order to instantly “distract and disarm” (82); she suggests, however, that this appropriation of sexuality can only work as long as the female body is itself the agent (not the victim) of this appropriation. The discussion shifts to yet more transgressive acts of defiance, such as anasyrma (i.e., skirt lifting to expose one’s genitals), transforming the female body from “erotic object” into “intimidating Other” (83). The chapter closes with a fascinating discussion of

undressing as “a prelude to execution,” one of the most pervasive images of the Holocaust. The author examines how the piles of clothes, and shoes in particular, found in concentration camps were re-located to memorial museums and inspired various art installations that “employ location as much as materiality to preserve the memory of past event” and invite us to contemplate stepping into them (92).

With the image of empty shoes, Brownie segues into the final chapter, which seeks to track down the destination of clothes once these are separated from the body. From jackets left on theatre seats to shoes tossed on top of power lines to demarcate a gang’s territory or denote one’s presence in the area at a past moment, the fifth chapter examines ample variations of garments as an extension of the body and the multivalent ways they reference back to it as a “defense to one’s own absence” (108); Brownie concludes the chapter with her interpretation of permanently abandoned clothes: symbolic gestures of leaving the old self behind; signifiers of tragedy; or strategies of deception (pseudocide).

Brownie ends her book by gesturing toward further possible explorations of her topic, such as mutual undressing; denuding as dehumanizing practice; in various settings like prisons or airports; biblical acts of undressing; and anthropological aspects of unveiling for Europe-based Islamic populations.

For scholars of anthropology, visual and performing arts studies, and related humanities disciplines, *Acts of Undressing* is an engaging volume. One cannot help feeling, however, that a glimpse at public performances of undressing in other cultures and parts of the world—for instance the naked protests and genital cursing in Nigeria, Uganda, and elsewhere on the African continent (Diabate 51)—would have added interesting angles to the author’s argument and would have enriched its scope significantly and substantially. One can also readily imagine another chapter dedicated to theatre acts of undressing. These suggestions for extending Brownie’s subject attest to the liveliness of her discussion and the richness of her topic. With its eclectic blend of primary and secondary materials and wide-ranging bibliography, *Acts of Undressing* is an altogether useful and fascinating addition to the growing scholarship of dress culture in cross-disciplinary studies.

Works Cited

Diabate, Naminata. “Women’s Naked Protest in Africa: Comparative Literature and Its Futures.” *Theorizing Fieldwork in the Humanities*, edited by Shalini Puri and Debra A. Castillo, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 51-71.

Vinia Dakari
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece