

LIVING ART, LIVING HISTORY, LIVING MATERIAL: EXPLORING THE  
IMPACT OF HERITAGE CLOTHING AND MATERIALS ON  
MUSEUM EDUCATOR PEDAGOGY

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Historical dress as a museum theater and research process encompasses material, technological, and cultural experiences from the past in the present. This research examines how intimate experiences with heritage materials, processes, and environments may impact development of educator pedagogy. Historical attractions in the US draw visitors due in part to providing guests with context for the objects and built environments displayed. New Materialist theory offers insights into how inanimate objects and environments “teach” human and non-human entities in their own right. Using a New Materialist lens, I observed, interviewed, and conducted participant observations through a novel research methodology, intra-active narrative inquiry, with costumed museum educators to better discern how relations between humans and historical materials intra-act as embodied experiences of object knowledge in museum pedagogy.

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By

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## LIVING HISTORY, LIVING ART, LIVING MATERIAL: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF HERITAGE CLOTHING AND MATERIALS ON MUSEUM EDUCATOR PEDAGOGY

The deep iron intonation of a school bell echoes through the trees and homes that dot a small valley. After releasing the hemp rope dangling from the bell, the schoolteacher who rang it dusts off her cotton gloves. She removes them once inside, along with her damask shawl and poke bonnet, standing in front of the wall-to-wall chalkboard to take up her dip-pen for attendance. She avoids the scalloped wrought iron legs and feet of the connected rows of wooden and metal desks that line the one-room schoolhouse. The teacher's heavy corded petticoat, weighted with rows of braided cotton rope, keeps her skirt off the floor and a safe distance from catching on the heels and toes of her elasticized leather gaiter boots so long as her steps are small and measured.

Questions from the students start to pour in, although many are off topic from the botanical illustration lesson. One little hand from the front of the room shoots up into the air: "How do you walk with one of those waist-things?" The teacher's experience informs her that 'one of those waist things' indicates her cotton canvas corset. Another student, a curious middle-schooler and fan of the Wilder family's *Little House* series, follows up with "doesn't [the corset] make you faint?" The students in the one room schoolhouse are learning about the Civil War and its impact on children's opportunities to learn as a historical event at a heritage village located in the former Confederacy. The costumed educator's museum theater belongs to the liminal space created between the past and present every bit as much as the surrounding heritage village environment, facilitating the site's work as a conduit of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Meredith Wilcox-Levine's master's thesis in historical fashion discusses how educators, their costumes, and cultural spaces transform locations themselves as a conduit for knowledge. *Dressing History: Costume as Communication in Massachusetts Historical Tours*. Pp. 4-6.

In this situation, the corset itself demonstrated *agential force*, or the ability of an animal, person, object, or environment to impact others regardless of perceived sentience. Agential force is a key component of New Materialist theory, a framework that shaped this study. New Materialisms, a posthumanist theoretical lens, examines materials to uncover new insights with close examination. Museum educators wearing historical fashion for living history experience historic materials moving and working with their bodies, especially when engaging in heritage tasks such as chopping wood or spinning cotton. The corset's agential force transformed the course of the lesson. Instead of simply learning about the role of botanical illustration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the corset sparked learning about the expected gender roles for white women and girls in rural areas of the United States. The corset ignited the students' lively discussion, taking them off the planned, botany track. I simply facilitated, taking liberties to speak for the garment.<sup>2</sup>

I am that teacher. My work as an art educator in living history settings requires slipping in and out of garments and time to create immersive, storytelling and object/architecture-based learning experience for site guests. Living in the material trappings of bygone eras taught me much about how socio-cultural concepts, such as fashion, gender roles, and even a person's perception of reality is imposed upon the body through materials and their culture. The agential force of each trapping, trapped or acted on my body and understandings of how material works on me, my gender, my breath, and performance of knowledge in material. These embodied intra-actions of material—living and non-living—spurred me on to delve further into these relations with other bodies and materials. Two sites graciously agreed to allow me to conduct in-depth participant observation with them for the purposes of this study: a mob themed museum which

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<sup>2</sup> Philosopher and theorist Bruno Latour describes the “tricks to make [objects] talk” and “produce scripts” of themselves in *Reassembling the Social*. P. 79. Materials and built environment researcher Luke Bennett expands upon the notion of scripts in his book chapter “Thinking Like a Brick: Posthumanism and Building Materials.” (2016)

focuses on the period between the 1920's to the late 1960s (MM), and a heritage village in the American South which features architecture and programming from the 1840's to the 1940's (HV).

In the heritage environment, storytelling contextualizes matter and vice versa—the objects including artwork, environments, and architecture of the past—for people of the present.<sup>3</sup> Living guides in historical dress maintain the illusion of a liminal space existing between the present and the past.<sup>4</sup> Immersion in the museum liminal space may aid the museum to “foster [the] strong connections with visitors” that trigger deep engagement.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, this study unfolds through a relational, material, and storytelling-based methodology that I created for this study named intra-active narrative inquiry. The lessons I learned from my own historical dress process inspired me to investigate the relationships between costumed museum educators and their pedagogy through a New Materialist theoretical lens, using participant observation, material analysis, and interviews with others in the field. These lessons inspired the research question: how might museum educators' pedagogies be impacted by their researching, curating, creating, wearing, and living in historical costume?

As of this writing no literature exists that has directly addressed the potential impact of a New Materialist theoretical framework in the heritage museum environment, let alone the potential implications of viewing historical costume upon educator pedagogy from a matter-first

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<sup>3</sup> In his book *Living History: Effective Costumed Interpretation and Enactment at Museums and Historic Sites* (2016), living history museum scholar David B. Allison compiled case studies of three large living history museums to examine the impact of costumed museum educators in informal learning environments. The work investigates data collected over ten years, and extensively discusses best practices in the niche sector.

<sup>4</sup> Historical costume researcher Wilcox-Levine's (2015) thesis, *Dressing History: Costume as Communication in Massachusetts Historical Tours*, explores costume itself as a tour guide/educator's tool to aid in creating an immersive historical environment and as a pedagogical implement.

<sup>5</sup> Museologist Cynthia Robinson's article, Museums and Emotions, investigates how personal, emotional engagement with museum content can create meaningful, deep engagement with guests. “Museums and Emotions.” *Journal of Museum Education*. 46-2, (2020): 147-149.

New Materialist perspective. New Materialism is a post-humanist theoretical position that investigates the entanglements and “intra-actions,” or how matter acts upon and is acted upon others, between discursive meaning and matter. Rather than seeking a linear, Cartesian research process, New Materialism theory seeks new lines of inquiry due to the rhizomatic, or multi-branching, streams of data produced by research.<sup>6</sup> This study is one such offering.

### Intra-Active Narrative Inquiry

Storytelling goes beyond a recitation of facts to include feelings, experiences, and visual/auditory performance. The storyteller-as-researcher serves as a midwife, facilitating the birth of stories and knowledge into the world through careful performance.<sup>7</sup> Since we tell stories with, of, and through our bodies, listening to and engaging with storytelling creates embodied meaning.<sup>8</sup> Intra-active narrative inquiry therefore draws upon writing and narrative to translate data obtained through material analysis<sup>9</sup>, participant observation and self-study, along with interviews, in this case, with costumed museum educators. This novel methodology mirrors heritage pedagogy in its efforts to create an immersive experience to provoke personal connections for the audience. The resulting data, including what museum educators perceive

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<sup>6</sup> New Materialism responds to matter as having force and power. Bill Brown’s chapter, “The matter of materialism: Literary mediations” within the volume, *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History, and the Material Turn* (2010), acknowledges the dependence of humanity on nature and matter to survive through literature. In the modern era, directing focus onto the material world in an open-ended fashion may mitigate loss of sensory engagement in an increasingly digital world. (pp. 69-70)

<sup>7</sup> Education scholar Jeong-Hee Kim’s book, “Understanding Narrative Inquiry: The crafting and analysis of stories as research” (2015), describes the process of narrative inquiry as a humanizing method of research. Kim shares how fields as diverse as medicine, economics, anthropology, the arts, and business utilize narrative inquiry. Pp. 3-5.

<sup>8</sup> Disability researcher Brett Smith writes, “We tell stories about, in, out of, and through our bodies. Likewise, as a resource, stories from outside our bodies endow us with a sense of interior, subjective reality and are integral to efforts to communicate our feelings to others [...]. This is a call, in effect, for an embodied rather than a disembodied narrative inquiry.” (Smith, 2007: 395)

<sup>9</sup> Material analysis uses multi-sensory experiences in practical applications when possible with objects to gather information. In a historical setting putting objects in context demonstrates function. Corsetry and a bustle demonstrated the practicality of a curved sweeping broom. The garments restrict bending and moving and curved handles allow one to sweep in hard to reach while standing areas.



from their own embodied experiences reported in interviews, is relayed through narrative. In this case, that loose narrative sheds light on the role of matter in shaping the daily work experiences of costumed museum educators connecting with the public.

### “New” Materialisms, Renewed Theoretical Directions

The MM greets guests walking in from a busy tourist area. Plush carpet in the main lobby bears an Art Deco pattern. These environments and objects always hold the curricular potentiality to “teach” without the intervention of an educator or didactic; a young guest exclaims to his caregiver “even the carpet is old...look at the diamonds [pattern]” as I pass by. Posthumanist New Materialist theory offers a lens through which to examine the quiet lives of material objects along with their environments both largely considered by mainstream Western cultures to be inanimate as they meet human lives through encounter, embodiment, performance, and curriculum facilitations.<sup>10</sup>

Philosopher Bruno Latour’s actor network theory (ANT) states actors such as MM’s carpet are defined as “anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference.”<sup>11</sup> ANT underscores New Materialism, postulating that actors are linked through a network of associations. In this study, each research site operates as a network unto itself, with actors influencing events including human behavior. Within the framework of ANT, geographic features of MM’s area influenced unique tourist attractions and lavish architecture. The layout of the area’s tourist strip funnels guests to MM’s lobby. My clothing, cosmetics, and accessories

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<sup>10</sup> Scholar Jane Bennett describes the tension between a New Materialist theoretical lens and the Western concept of matter as inanimate as a logical challenge. While she notes the liveliness of matter again and again in her work, Bennett also acknowledges how intellectual paradigms for persons of Western/Judeo-Christian schools of thought, including Western secular humanism, might create barriers for acceptance of the agency of matter. *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*. 2010. Pp. 119-121.

<sup>11</sup> Philosopher Bruno Latour discusses the nuances of ANT in his 2005 work, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Page 71.

must appropriately accommodate the locality's climate and terrain year-round; in turn creating a slightly different guest experience than would take place elsewhere while impacting the materials making up our specific actors and their intra-actions.

New Materialism builds upon the agency of materials to include the political agency of nonhuman actors, such as how garbage in a street may inspire human efforts to manage waste.<sup>12</sup> In this study, this politicizing of matter impacts every aspect of an educator's museum theater process. I wear dark forest green clothing at MM as vivid colors were historically racialized in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century US.<sup>13</sup> This results in an *agential cut* on my part: the willful creation of boundaries between matter while simultaneously acknowledging similarities.<sup>14</sup> A thin boundary between hues and styles separates 'white' and in the polite language of the 1930s 'colored.' As a multiracial person of Middle Eastern descent my acceptance by the public at that time would vary wildly depending on if I were thought to be a recent immigrant or a Black American woman. With a few tricks of makeup and fabric colors, my complexion can be written off as a comparatively less marginalized immigrant group. French and Spanish immigrants were two such groups known for darker skin in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By avoiding some colors, I have acknowledged that agential cut which in this case represents a cutting off point of potentially racialized hues exists. Fabric processed, woven, and dyed in a culturally mediated manner is political due to this racializing and class-bearing affect.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Political scientist Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things* 2010, pp. 4-6.

<sup>13</sup> African-American diaspora scholar Noliwe Roks discusses racialized elements of fashion throughout her 2004 book, *Ladies' Pages: African American women's magazines and the culture that made them*. 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Karen Barad 2012 work, *Posthumanist Performativity*, describes the concept of agential cuts, or artificially created dichotomies, on p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A political Ecology of things*, elaborates on how social forces result in the politicization of matter on p. 36.

Entanglements arise when material and social forces entwine together.<sup>16</sup> Social forces often infiltrate matter through language. Relying on language alone to develop understandings falls into a culture-trap; the human aspects of language as representative of matter being inevitably bound to the culture from which it that it developed.<sup>17</sup> To break destructive cycles instigated by such culture-traps, it is necessary to engage in listening and embodied knowing to better understand matter: materials, forces, and affect. Such ‘listening’—spending time to explore materials with the senses—forms the basis of material analysis in this study. When I ‘listen’ in this fashion to my lace parasol at HV, I feel how the ventilation of lace—which I once thought as useless in a parasol—still absorbs the sun in place of my skin. The artfully arranged holes make the parasol less likely than an umbrella for rain to be caught up in the high winds common at the HV. However, the cultural entanglement with feminization of the words ‘lace’ and ‘parasol’ in a predominantly patriarchal culture may have influenced my initial thought that the object was ‘useless’ prior to actually working with it.

Theoretical research into the intersection of contemporary fashion and New Materialist theory the exploration of ripples of affect stemming from the creation of clothing. Fashion researcher Ann Smelik discusses the “renewing of older traditions” including animistic beliefs about the agency of matter through exploration of New Materialist theory in the sensory rich fashion sector. The Dutch researcher posits that wearing, moving, and sensing the matter involved in haute couture assists in making connections between fashion and technology.

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<sup>16</sup> Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* clarifies entanglements of social forces upon matter. 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Linguistic culture and shifts in language dictate perceptions of matter, creating barriers to gathering greater understandings from environments and objects. Karen Barad, 2003, pp. 802-803. Karen Barad examines the cultural assumptions that are placed upon matter and environments through language in her 2010 work, *Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance. Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come*. Pp. 43-50. Material analysis allows one to bypass language by using the senses. Art educator and researcher Stephanie Springgay advocates for using touch to gain understandings of the material properties of felt and environmental pressure upon it. 2018.

Language and shared understandings (or lack thereof) dictates whom takes what away from any given discussion within the museum environment. Theorist Rosi Braidotti's *Writing as a Nomadic Subject* argues that language functions as "an ontological site of construction of our shared humanity." Language serves as a framework to make meaning between the self and others as well as to create and respond to shared cultural constructs. Changing understandings within a shared language result in knowledge gaps that may in turn cause alienation from certain learning environments such as art museums. In this study, a multiplicity of voices from contributors may result in enough facets of a shared language to "resist the gravitational pull of the [dominant culture] and oppose it" via inclusion of persons of wildly differing backgrounds and philosophical orientations.<sup>18</sup>

### Reading the Room

New Materialist theory by its nomenclature implies that such "listening" to materials is a new practice breaking with older understandings. This concept of newness ignores and therefore erases the perspectives of adherents to Indigenous and Pagan (Hinduism, Celtic Reconstructionism, Hellenism, etc.). Critical posthumanism, however revives such philosophical traditions as my own that involve animism, or the idea that animals, natural entities such as springs and mountains and "inanimate" objects like my bottle-green—a color popular in the 1930s as a subtle celebration of the end of Prohibition—peridot brooch have sentience that can be observed with careful attention. I can learn about the stone through careful observation of qualities such the unique double-refraction of light passing through it. This attention does not mean that the matter in question makes plain spoken statements out loud in a familiar language,

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<sup>18</sup> Language and writing are in essence a research site, creating new opportunities for understandings. It was therefore important for this body of research to examine and share museum educators' perspectives in their own words so as to disturb the original context as little as possible. Braidotti, 2014, p. 165.

revealing Cartesian truths held onto by dominant, normative culture. Indeed, visual and cultural studies and art history scholar Janet Berlo and art historian Jessica Horton discuss the exclusion of non-Western perspectives in New Materialist theory and how such perspectives can inform material researchers going forward with their work *Beyond the Mirror: Indigenous ecologies and 'New Materialisms' in contemporary art*.<sup>19</sup> Instead, listening with materials involves a cultivated meditative, scholastic, and observational practice that might pull from many traditions in the creation of new insights. New Materialisms is ignited in this study as a door to many ways of knowing matter again.

A colleague, Betsy, discreetly walks through the gallery space. A young female guest compliments Betsy on her dress. Betsy adopts the conventions of a young lady in the 1950s on vacation; her sundress exposes her parasol-pale shoulders. When guests notice Betsy with her cheerful exclamation of, “don’t mind me! I’m just a ghost!,” she elicits a spattering of laughter. Humor including the occasional jump-scare permeate tours dealing with otherwise serious content, providing entertainment for the public and lightening the gravitas of discussions of violence, corrupt politics, and the oppression of Jim Crow. Tour guides at MM practice moving quietly in historic footwear for the chance to startle an unsuspecting guest from dark corners, a safe way to highlight the bodily peril including assassination attempts faced by the individuals featured in the museum.

Historic costume scholar Malcom-Davies’ visitor study, *Borrowed Robes: The Educational Value of Costumed Interpretation at Historic Sites* investigates the economic and

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<sup>19</sup> Indigenous and Pagan acknowledgement of the liveliness of matter side-steps Jane Bennet’s concern that contemporary persons of Western backgrounds may struggle to grasp material analysis and intimacy with matter. Horton and Berlo’s research of contemporary American Indigenous artists postulates that persons of non-Western philosophical and intellectual traditions who see the liveliness of matter as a given may not face similar barriers to engaging with materials. 2013.

perceived educational value of costumed museum educators such as Betsy and I based in the US, Canada, and the UK. This study found the three primary goals visitors identified for their visits to heritage institutions were education, a sense of the past, and entertainment. The author asserts that education and entertainment “cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive; both are required for the visitors to feel that their visits are worthwhile.” The author’s observations underscore the value of museum theater in attracting members of the public. Malcom-Davies’ inquiries into the sites themselves and their investment and training of costumed educators as correlational to guest enjoyment; one could infer that rather than simply encouraging employees to play dress up, museums who successfully employ historical dress do so with an eye towards accuracy and contextual historical knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Betsy takes style inspiration from photographs and media focusing on teenage girls and young women. Period appropriate dress, including folded socks and sneakers that indicate she is still a teenager, embolden typically shy Betsy to joke and even laugh at herself behind the mask of museum theater. When a guest asks Betsy about her shoes and why she doesn’t wear heels, she cheerfully informs them that girls her age frequently wore informal footwear such as her canvas sneakers or saddle shoes.

Thomas raises his cane in greeting as we pass each other in the veritable warren of hallways and rooms behind MM’s public facing areas. Thomas, a pre-professional cultural anthropologist, creates historically authentic designs through his fascination with outsider cultures in a multitude of eras. His lavender suit draws my attention before the friendly greeting. Thomas’ cultivated style of a made man of the 1920s and 1930s represents the entanglement of social and material forces. Thomas’ zoot suit would have been considered highly subversive during the war years. Rations on wool meant that his long jacket would be considered indicative

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<sup>20</sup> Malcom-Davies, 2004, pp. 286-287

of criminality at best and anti-American at worst in mainstream circles.<sup>21</sup> Thomas shares this information with his tour, including the fact that LA county's laws still allow for his arrest just for wearing the garment.<sup>22</sup>

Textile conservator and researcher Meredith Wilcox-Levine's *Dressing History: Costume as Communication in Massachusetts Historical Tours* explores historically costumed museum theater "both as a creator of 'historical' space and as a conduit for the transfer of meaning as observed on costumed guides in the spectacle of guided tours."<sup>23</sup> Thomas' use of costume, language, and gesture entangle the social within material, including the proper carrying techniques employed by a gentleman with a cane. Wilcox-Levine's primarily quantitative work also serves as a cautionary tale for stakeholders unconvinced of the potential value of the added employment concerns in historical dress. Visitors engaging with historically costumed guides were overwhelmingly likely to see their guide as "a connection to history," while only slightly above half of guests with an educator in a polo shirt and khakis reported feeling such a connection. In this way, costume entangles, offering visitors ripples of affect. Wilcox-Levine's findings may imply that the personal connection or "deep engagement" guests feel when working with a tour guide with at least some embodied experiences of museum content may in turn create a more personally and emotionally involved guest experience.<sup>24</sup> The loud roar of applause as Thomas' tour draws to a close certainly attests to the level of deep connection guests

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<sup>21</sup> Fashion historian Katrina Reddy's *Fashion Timeline*, a resource from SUNY's Fashion Institute of Technology, clarifies socio-political conditions in the US and abroad that contextualize fashion shifts. 2020.

<sup>22</sup> The Los Angeles Almanac's article concerning the 1943 Los Angeles zoot suit riots makes an important point: many of the Latinx persons targeted by military personnel for wearing zoot suits were enlisted themselves. Latinx individuals in Southern California enlisted in the military in higher ratios than their white counterparts. <http://www.laalmanac.com/history/hi07t.php>

<sup>23</sup> Meredith Wilcox-Levine, 2015, p. ii.

<sup>24</sup> Cynthia Robinson, 2011, pp. 107-108.

felt on his tour, even if it evades articulation, but is instead a felt sense embodied encounters with matter.

During the winter, Thomas switches from his bright lavender suit to a deep black one of lightweight wool. The transition in clothing brings out different qualities of his dark violet silk jacquard vest and pocket square. The tactile qualities of the fabric of Thomas' suit are similarly explored via material analysis in art educator and researcher Stephanie Springgay's *How to Write as Felt: Touching Transmaterialities and More-Than-Human Intimacies*. The author borrows the entangled structure of woolen felt, a fabric created through agitation, heat, and the contraction of different strengths of tensile fibers as a metaphor for how embodied engagement with a material can generate new understandings of both the material and knowledge acquisition itself.<sup>25</sup>

While nobody has tried to touch Thomas' clothing, guests occasionally ask to hold his walking stick. One guest, a biker wearing a 1% patch attending Thomas' tour with the rest of his motorcycle club, asks to handle the geodesic dome capped walking stick for a moment.<sup>26</sup> The guest towers over Thomas. The biker's eyes grow wide. "That's an ass-whuppin' stick," he proclaims. Much as Springgay learned new information about the nature of felt via touch, presumably through his own personal experiences with hand-weapons, the biker guest was able to gauge the weight and balance of the walking-stick to learn that Thomas' stick served him beyond pointing out artifacts.

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<sup>25</sup> Stephanie Springgay, 2018, p. 61

<sup>26</sup> Most members of motorcycle clubs are ordinary, respectable citizens, including many clubs geared towards those with religious and sober lifestyles. However, approximately 1% of motorcycle clubs engage in systematic law-breaking. Persons who wear 1% patches, including all 17 members of the club present on Thomas' tour, identify as members of a group that may be classified as a criminal organization.



## Heritage Materials, New Perspectives

Who museum educators are shines through in their material choices in historical dress. For Thomas, a Dionysian priest and ordained minister, playing roles is as much a part of him as the mutable eye color that picks up on hues from the fire in his opal earrings.<sup>27</sup> Piercings and mostly hidden tattoos historically recall an element of criminality Thomas deliberately includes in his costume. In Thomas' worldview, museum theater serves as an embodied devotional practice to cultivate the ability to shift between roles as well as gaining insight into the self. For Thomas, layers of matter work with his body to create the illusion of history. He acknowledges the entanglement of the social and material of objects as seemingly mundane as underwear in his museum theater practice:

[Y]ou need to do the full thing one way or another, because half-assing the costume, stuff starts snapping/falling apart; you actually have to wear the full thing from that time to make sense and understand how people could go about their day to day wearing that shit... You know, the correct undergarments, the correct socks and straps, as much as it's a pain in the ass and more expensive sometimes...[but it's] part of a larger cultural context that if you want to embody it you [have to] go full tilt and embody it.

I take a brief break from the museum to visit Jacinda, a former MM educator who now manages a vintage clothing store. Jacinda's kindergarten teaching background makes her especially skilled at working with groups containing large numbers of children and teaching museum behaviors. She applies the lessons she learns from her own historic dress practice to create educational opportunities within the retail environment. The store supports professionals who use historic dress in the area. Jacinda creates didactic panels for the shop about articles of clothing such as the role of snoods in WWII-era fashion. She also squeezes her body into a

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<sup>27</sup> Dionysus is the Hellenic god of wine, madness, theater, and rebirth. Both historical and contemporary devotees and clergy of this deity practice theater skills, rhetoric, and alcohol production as devotional acts.

perfectly laced corset every day to endure and achieve the hourglass shapes of most 20th century fashions.

Jacinda spoke candidly about her experiences with MM and how storytelling shaped her own pedagogy. As a Catholic, she was excited to learn that her hometown's mob boss for over 30 years donated the stained-glass windows to nearby Catholic church in which Jacinda grew up.

The more I learned about [local] history, the more I felt connected to the places around me. It got me thinking about why history classes were usually boring, when it could be deeply personal and exciting. Why why why did I suffer through the dulllest lectures on American, and even [state] history when it can be related to the individual?

Jacinda always found ways to relate larger events to personal stories within her museum theater performances. She took inspiration for her own costumes from images of her grandmother gambling in one of the many underground casinos near MM during the 1940s and 1950s, complete with a half-veiled pillbox hat. Materials inspired Jacinda's research as well:

I have this antique hat that was made in 1945 where you can see the imperfect stitches where the tag was sewn to the inside and it made me think about how long it must have taken...I fell into a Google powered rabbit hole about where the materials would have come from and who would have made it.

Jessie, HV's program manager, makes an excellent point on using historical dress to tap into memories and emotional connections of guests. Jessie wears fashions from the WWII era nearly constantly in her daily life, and as such has gained valuable material observations about how women of the time were forced to move and engage with their world. She shares with me how she must ask for help at grocery stores with objects on high shelves as the corsets and dresses she wears do not allow the wearer to raise their arms above shoulder level. Jessie speaks eloquently about the ability of materials to trigger highly personal memories and embodied sensations with an audience:

My favorite reaction though is a nostalgic reaction from the generations who lived it. Whether it was themselves or their mother/grandmother...to see their eyes light up and

the memories resurface in their hearts is a beautiful thing. It's those reactions that bring a smile to my face and encouraged me to dress this way as often as I can because I want to make people smile...and remember.

Elizabeth's work with her father on an organic farm brought her into contact with the HV through the museum's seasonal farmer's market. Elizabeth works diligently to share her wealth of matter-generated knowledge with the public. Direct experience with the matter of the natural world breeds many understandings for Elizabeth, including a sense of responsibility and stewardship with the earth. As a Mennonite, she also expresses a sense of historical empathy borne out of her experiences with matter that colors her pedagogy.<sup>28</sup> The most frequent question guests ask Elizabeth is, "aren't you hot in that?!" Her response is succinct and bears a trace of weariness. Elizabeth writes,

I generally smile and say "no, not really." It's hard to convince anyone in our society today what everyone knew 100 years ago that the more coverage [you wear] of natural materials like cotton, but especially linen, the cooler you will be.

### Understanding the Understandings

Consciously or not, creating appropriate historical costume encourages museum educators to consider their own selves as actors impacted by matter within complex, liminal environments, shaping the development of their teaching processes. Nurturing one's own performance art practice as a museum educator appears to enable educators to work with the public with grace and aplomb; rolling with changes in the moment and embodying a teaching persona able to balance education with the public desire for entertainment. This small study demonstrates highly individualized and interest-based pathways for museum educators to

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<sup>28</sup> Mennonites are an early Protestant church descended from Anabaptists. The group adopted Enlightenment principles and were often persecuted in Europe and the Americas for refusing to participate in military conflicts. Today, most American Mennonites restrict their use of technology to only what is necessary to function economically in the world around them. Many live rural and agrarian lifestyles similar to—but less insular than—communities such as the Amish.

develop their own emerging pedagogy when employers support educators in fulfilling their need to know.<sup>29</sup> More broadly, the observations gathered may imply that the pedagogical tools of professional costumed museum educators may aid in public outreach and programming in the traditional art museum. Expanding pedagogy to include embodied, matter-based and storytelling heritage methodologies could be vital to future growth of the art museum world as the sector adapts to demographics changes.<sup>30</sup> These educators know this historical matter as intimate, embodied, and sensual forces that they are uniquely qualified to animate and share in their pedagogies making for museum visits that embrace the vibrancy of matter.

Scores of possibilities exist with museum educators who routinely dress in fashions and engage in activities depicted in museum content to create embodied, engaging experiences for guests: spending time in a bustle-dress while painting to better discuss the work of Berthe Morisot or using a quill to write by candlelight to share engravings of Phillis Wheatley. Daring researchers might even attempt recreation of historical poverty diets and spending a few days in an unimproved cabin during uncomfortable times of the year to share James Ensor's *Skeletons Warming Themselves* (1889) a painting at the Kimbell Art Museum in Ft Worth, Texas that meditates on the lives of the underclass. These are privileged approaches to building one's own pedagogy; playing at a poverty diet while simultaneously affording a rental cabin may be quite harmful if such a brief experience leads the educator to believe such poverty can be tolerable long-term.

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<sup>29</sup> Luke Bennett uses his experience with parkour, a type of exercise involving running, free-climbing, and acrobatics in the urban environment, to describe how the 'need to know' what surfaces will hold weight or support jumps creates seemingly preternatural sensory skills. The vital need to work with objects and environments results in observational skills that accommodate individual needs. 2016, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> In the US, demographics of museum visitors narrow as that of the general public diversifies racially, economically, and socially. Wilkening and Chung, 2009. Beatty, 2018.

The research also suggests reexamination of hiring practices within the museum sector. Embodied knowledge as observed in the study injects reality into the performative storytelling of the costumed museum educator; for individuals such as Elizabeth, Thomas, Jessie, and Jacinda, close engagement with materials sparks the cycle of learning, teaching, and gaining additional understandings of pedagogy as a lifetime practice. Their material inquiries should be fostered, accessed, and shared. Borrowing from the materially informed museum theater practices of the heritage environment may open avenues for the art museum to forge personal connections with the public. This may imply an “inversion of ethnography.”<sup>31</sup> Instead of sending researchers into communities with material knowledge to act as an intermediary, the in-depth knowledge and willingness to continuously research in pursuit of creating accurate historical dress and lifestyle demonstrations suggests that bringing community members into the museum field with firsthand material knowledge can be beneficial to a museum’s pedagogical mission. Any woman from Elizabeth’s Mennonite community, for example, may not always have academic credentials required in many traditional museums but can speak authoritatively on spinning wool in the 19<sup>th</sup> century at a living history museum, or share embodied knowledge of the physically demanding work depicted in Millet’s *The Gleaners*. Thomas’ daily practice including cultural traditions involving alcohol makes him an expert on moonshine production with little or no technological resources; he ignites curiosity around the antique still in one of MM’s gallery spaces. In conclusion, as the colorful educators who participated in this body of research demonstrate, frequent, practical, embodied experiences with historical matter have the potential to inspire educators to develop their own museum pedagogies that enable museums to translate and contextualize objects and artworks in a relatable way to the public.

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas, personal communication, May 22, 2021.

### Disclosure Statement

I have a working relationship with these locations as a paid part time employee with MM and as an intern/volunteer and independent contractor with HV.

### About the Author

I am an art education MA student at the University of North Texas. I hold a graduate certificate in museum specialization. I earned my bachelor's degree in art education at the University of Arkansas—Little Rock. I discovered I enjoyed teaching while training deploying personnel in first responder skills while serving in the military. My own art practice draws heavily upon historical craft practices to create functional pieces, including many of the reproduction items she wears for living history experiences. Curriculum is a fundamental element of my art practice and I enjoy developing museum programming. I plan to begin a doctoral program in the field in 2022.

APPENDIX  
COSTUMED MUSEUM EDUCATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me about yourself. Who are you? If you feel comfortable sharing, what are your cultural and philosophical/spiritual/religious affiliations? How do you feel this background influences how you think about your teaching?
2. What motivated you to work with your heritage institution?
3. Consider your role as a storyteller, and how that makes your tour/teaching unique. What are some of the stories at your institution that you personally feel are important to share? How do you feel the storytelling, or teaching with personal narratives instead of simply reciting facts about people/objects in your museum, is/is not different from how you were taught in school?
4. Please describe your process and thoughts in putting together a complete outfit, including how you research what you wear.
5. Do you behave differently when you are in costume, especially when you are teaching? How so, and why/why not? If yes, please consider and share any material reasons, such as having to always stand up straight in your costume, that may influence a change in your behavior.
6. Did you wear historical clothing before working with your museum? If you regularly wear clothing that appears to be historically based, how do you feel teaching about in an environment where the way you dress and present yourself fits more closely than when you are in the community at large?
7. What is the physical environment (weather, buildings, surrounding area, etc.) like at your museum? Please discuss if/how the environment may or may not impact you differently, or if you notice different things about it, when you are wearing your historical clothing.
8. What lessons have you learned from wearing historical clothing? Have any particular pieces or materials, including shoes, hats, accessories, fabrics, etc. given you insight on what it might have been like to live through the time period reflected at your museum? Please share your experiences.
9. What are some of your favorite articles of clothing/accessories to wear when you are working with the public? Why?
10. What kind of responses do you get from the public when you are wearing historical clothing? Please share examples of experiences that stick out in your mind.



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