

Reviews

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Lauren S. Cardon, *Fashioning Character: Style, Performance, and Identity in Contemporary American Literature* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2021, \$49.50). Pp. 302. ISBN 978 0 8139 4589 7.

Leah A. Milne, *Novel Subjects: Authorship as Radical Self-Care in Multiethnic American Narratives* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021, \$54.00). Pp. 258. ISBN 978 1 6093 8762 4.

Anna Poletti, *Stories of the Self: Life Writing after the Book* (New York: New York University Press, 2020, \$29.00). Pp. 248. ISBN 978 1 4798 3666 6.

How are subjectivities formed, fragmented, and reassembled in the turbulent social spheres of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century US? This is the question to which Lauren S. Cardon, Leah A. Milne, and Anna Poletti broadly respond in their respective new works on fashion, radical self-care, and mediated autobiography. Cardon, Milne, and Poletti each strive, first, to understand processes of identity formation as relational and, second, to grasp how individuals forge a sense of personal autonomy when one's identity is as much self-determined as it is fashioned through various social discourses. Where Cardon and Milne bring different perspectives to the role of literature in articulating fluidities of self, Poletti explores what she calls "self-life-inscription" *beyond* textual narratives. This review surveys how each author differently interprets the place of storytelling—broadly conceived—in representing the forces which shape modern US cultural identity.

In *Fashioning Character: Style, Performance, and Identity in Contemporary American Literature*, Cardon considers the role of clothing in shaping different cultural, ethnic, and gendered identities against the backdrop of rapid transformations in the postwar US fashion industry. In developing the historical aspect of her argument, she shows how, following the end of World War II, the US began to split away from French fashions in order to center their own designers. America emerged from the war with an expanding economy that would "rely on the purchasing power of the middle class" (18). New technologies in mass production and mass marketing seemingly democratized sartorial choice; this not only increased the material availability and diversity of clothing, but also created the conditions for what Cardon identifies as "personal style." In other words, a new ideology of public identity and image was in the making. The symbolic power of clothes changed during this time, Cardon implies, and became irrevocably entangled in identity politics and mythologies of upward mobility.

How, then, do these historical changes manifest in literature? Cardon explores socially marginalized characters who lose themselves in, yet sometimes come to reject, the "trappings of the materialist mainstream" (162) and its associated illusion

of social mobility. She differentiates between textual representations of fashion which “reinforce problematic constructions of race, gender, and sexuality” (3) and those which regard fashion as a subversive tool for “performing and ... constructing identity” (4). Some characters, she argues, are so seduced by the glamour of American fashion – “often coded in stylish, expensive clothing” (162) – that they become consumed by their own “self-destructive archetypes” (3). Others instead use their awareness of “fashion as a set of signifiers” to construct self-determined “personal” identities (3). These latter characters are attentive to the ways in which “American ideals of individualism ... fail to encompass [their] multifaceted identities” (145); they treat clothing as a means toward personal transformation, with, Cardon suggests, “the ultimate aim of finding a skin that feels like one’s own” (4).

For the writers included in Cardon’s study, fashion is a dynamic process of becoming. *Fashioning Character* is a survey study which covers an array of postwar US literary texts and movements. The book itself is organized into five chapters which move chronologically from the 1950s through to the late twentieth century. The first two chapters tell polarized tales of attitudes toward, and literary representations of, clothing and identity in the 1950s US. Cardon starts with the writing of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, exploring how both writers articulate the postwar pressure to conform to prescriptive gender identity roles in the name of safeguarding a conservative, anti-communist American national identity. She juxtaposes this with an analysis of the countercultural aesthetic movement depicted in selected texts of beat writers, many of whose personal sartorial choices also played a part in glamourizing their rebellion against McCarthyism. The topics of chapters 3, 4, and 5 are broadly arranged into expedient, though perhaps limiting, “identity categories.” Chapter 3 considers the ways in which Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Danzy Senna recall and respond to the black arts and black nationalist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This chapter begins a discussion about ethnic authenticity and cultural (mis)appropriation, which Cardon carries over into her readings of how Native American writers such as Joseph Boyden and Winona LaDuke grapple with the widespread poaching of indigenous styles and traditions by mainstream fashion industries. The final chapter argues for the centrality of fashion to the deconstructive gender performances articulated in the trans narratives of Jonathan Ames, Janet Mock, and Leslie Feinberg.

Cardon’s inquiry into the relationship between fashion and identity performance is most fluently and insightfully articulated in chapters 3 and 4. In her analyses of Walker, Morrison, and Senna’s writings, she teases out the challenges that the black female protagonists face in forging so-called “personal identities” alongside a “collective identity” championed in the Afrocentric fashion styles of the black arts movement (102–3). Cardon argues that while “black women’s fashion ... [is] a site of bonding,” it is also the case that “black fashion and style have produced their own controlling images” (104). A similar tension between authenticity to oneself and to one’s cultural heritage is also explored in chapter 4 through the lens of “misappropriation.” Boyden and LaDuke, by telling stories through clothing, “caution against the American mythology of self-interest and upward mobility at the cost of community or environment” (161). The characters in their novels at first succumb to, and latterly overcome, the exploitative glamour of the US fashion world, learning that forsaking their identities as indigenous Americans opens them up to misappropriation by external agents.

Cardon’s analyses in these chapters is astute and attentive to the texts in question, centering close readings and textual examination. Overall, however, her study would have benefited from a closer and more consistent consideration of literary detail.

The chapter on beat writing, for example, loses its focus on literature and is largely a discussion of the style choices of authors themselves rather than of their literary representations of fashion. The breadth and scope of *Fashioning Character* is at once its strength and its weakness. While Cardon's argument that "fashion plays a role in constructing meaningful personal identities in relation to [race, class, and gender]" (123) is a perceptive one, it also runs the risk of imprecision. For example, the link she draws throughout between characters' "fluid" expressions of identity (through clothing) and their broader "rejection of privilege" is not always clearly worked out (3). However, her study ultimately offers an impressive historical overview both of the US fashion industry and of literary genres, making it ideal for both scholars of fashion studies and students with an interest in fashion history and literature. Most importantly, it raises key questions about agency, fashion, and personal style: what autonomy does an individual have in choosing their own style? To what extent does a "personal style" choose them, i.e. through the limiting filters of race, class, gender, availability, and access?

Multiculturalism – its efficacies and its limitations – is everywhere implicit in Cardon's monograph, while in Leah A. Milne's dazzling study of radical self-care, it takes the center stage of her critique. In *Novel Subjects: Authorship as Radical Self-Care in Multiethnic American Literature*, Milne challenges existing corporatized definitions of "multiculturalism" and "self-care" through analyses of scenes of writing across a range of ethnic American novels. Her study is a powerful reclamation of the notion of self-care, returning the term to its roots in black women's writing: Milne founds her study on Audre Lorde's powerful claim that "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (2). Through Lorde, Milne argues that contemporary ethnic American authors practice a form of "radical, vindictive, willful, and intrusive" self-care in order to both "define the borders of their literary homelands and identities" and generate collaborative multiethnic affiliations (18, 3). Through such collaborations, the authors in this study – ranging from Louise Erdrich to Carmen Maria Machado, Ruth Ozeki, and Miguel Syjuco – critique and revise multiculturalism. These authors wrest multiculturalism back from "governmental frameworks" (10) that whitewash the lives of those who do not fit easily into its principles of cultural "wholeness," "unity," and "easy categorization." Milne's book is at once an unsparing critique of multiculturalism and a defense of the alternative possibilities that multiculturalism can embody under the conditions of radical self-care.

Milne defines self-care as "informed and collaborative self-definition" (3). What, then, makes self-care "radical" is its inherent "willfulness." She draws on Sara Ahmed's concept of willful subjectivity to explain how the mere act of existing, for marginalized subjects, is *willful*, in the sense that their existence is always already an intrusion upon spaces where they are not welcome. In a literary context, radical self-care is a will towards telling stories in one's own way. Milne makes a specific case for metafiction as a germane literary genre for expressions of radical self-care. Acknowledging that metafiction has been the domain of a postmodern tradition historically marked as white and male, Milne reframes the genre as uniquely serviceable to ethnic American writers. Not only does "metafiction's intentional self-consciousness and reflexivity ... make it particularly attuned to discussions of identity and self-care" (3), but also it can be seen as "multilayered, vibrant, and responsive to the needs to marginalized storytellers" (104). "Scenes of writing," Milne writes, "are simultaneously scenes of self-care" through which authors embrace "the fluidity and dynamic nature of the self as well as the cultural and material realities of particular ethnic identities"

(18). That is, acts of self-care are *relational*, emerging through dynamic intradiegetic exchanges between so-called “author–characters” and through active extradiegetic interactions with readers.

Novel Subjects, then, looks at eight metafictional works by authors from a range of ethnic backgrounds (Filipino, Jewish, Japanese, Cuban, African, and Native American). The study is loosely comparative as it includes four chapters, each of which brings together two authors: Gina Apostol and Louise Erdrich, Carmen Maria Machado and Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss and Ruth Ozeki, and Percival Everett and Miguel Syjuco. Milne focusses particularly on fictionalized versions of the authors themselves who either manifest as characters who identify as writers or appear explicitly in the novels under their own names (e.g. the character of “Jonathan Safran Foer” in Foer’s novel *Everything Is Illuminated*). The first two chapters make striking cases for what might be called “incorrect” modes of writing. Chapter 1 investigates forms of “silenced or subdued communication” in Apostol’s *The Gun Dealer’s Daughter* and Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag* (28). Milne argues that the novels’ protagonists, Sol and Irene, mobilize “indirection and secrecy” in their autobiographical writings to care for themselves against the reductive expectations of, respectively, Sol’s family and Irene’s husband (28). Chapter 2 argues that Machado and Foer, in their respective texts (“The Resident” and *Everything Is Illuminated*), arrive at historical truths and ethical modes of storytelling through lying, plagiarism, and strategic use of “unreliable narrators.”

Chapter 3 explores how author–characters in Krauss’s *Great House* and Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* form collaborative relationships between and across nations and time by “writing about objects” (103, emphasis added). Objects, in both novels, “inspire intersubjectivity” (103). For example, Krauss’s lonely, self-isolating protagonist embarks on a search for her writing desk that ultimately connects her to a long history of Jewish writing; this transnational, cross-temporal relationship enables her to challenge “exceptional models of Jewishness” upheld by US multiculturalism (111). Finally, in chapter 4, Milne looks at how Everett’s *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* and Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* challenge multiculturalism’s emphasis on “authenticity” and the ways in which this informs the practices of literary critics who read multicultural American literature for its “distinct ethnic content” (142). She shows how Everett and Syjuco both channel their critiques through collaborative dialogues between father–son writerly relationships. In both this and the third chapter, she centers the agency of readers, arguing that multiethnic texts invite a “co-operative” mode of reading that embraces readers in the texts’ practice of radical self-care.

There is much to praise about *Novel Subjects*. Each chapter is rich in attentive close readings that are grounded in narratological and etymological analysis (e.g. chapter 2 offers a striking etymology of the term “untrustworthy” in relation to narration). Milne has a strong knowledge of “traditional” narratological theory (Bakhtin, Foucault, Todorov). Yet she also recontextualizes the discipline – sometimes seen as antiquated and dominated by the proverbial white male academic – through an inspiring citational practice which prioritizes the work of scholars of colour and of multiethnic backgrounds (Ahmed, Anzaldúa, Chow, Mwangi – to name just a few). What also stands out is Milne’s clever methodology. Following similar examples set by Takaki, Dimock, and others, in her comparative methodology she seeks to replicate the ethnic alliances and cross-cultural encounters that take place within the texts themselves. She does not read the texts “through single ethnic groupings,” arguing instead that “radical self-care emphasizes dialogue across seemingly inflexible rubrics of identity,” meaning that scholars “can no longer study these works in isolation if [they] want to

understand the diverse and dynamic cultures that Americans inhabit” (17). It is a powerful case for moving academic research in the humanities away from restrictive identity categories (a practice in which Cardon’s study, for instance, participates, resulting in her unconscious reproduction of somewhat narrow conceptions of identity).

No study, though, is perfect. Perhaps because of her (excellent) methodology, Milne withholds an explicit comparative cultural analysis between her textual pairings. Highlighting, even if briefly, some of the ways in which cultural difference informs her selections would be as beneficial as augmenting their affinities. Milne’s theory of “digital diasporas” in chapter 4 also makes slightly naive claims about the democracy and “nationlessness” of the Internet; her analysis here would have benefited from an awareness of scholarship which critiques such views (see, particularly, Josef Trappel’s edited collection *Digital Media Inequalities* (2019)). Nevertheless, *Novel Subjects* provides a rich foundation for further research into the notion of “radical self-care”; through this lens, Milne makes a truly original contribution not only to US and post-colonial scholarship, but also to theories of multiethnicity, narratology, and literacy.

Milne’s celebration of relationality is shared by Poletti, who similarly valorizes our “inherent relationality” to one another as human beings (4). *Stories of the Self* is an innovative, interdisciplinary study in which Poletti argues for the significance of media’s materiality in autobiography, or what she calls “self-life-inscription.” Her principal claim is that an overdetermined focus on textual artefacts in life writing studies, and the marginal study of autobiographical forms in media studies, has resulted in scholars overlooking the myriad ways in which humans find reasons that make their lives, quite literally, *matter*. Looking specifically at how people “inscribe” themselves in a digital age, she opens with the pressing question: why are people so prepared to exchange personal communication data (email addresses, phone numbers, files, and so on) for low-cost or free digital services? If this sort of private information does not “matter,” then what does? Poletti argues that the paradoxical ways in which humans lead their digital lives reveal life as “a dynamic experience of lived relations” (2), where what matters most is our need to give an account of ourselves – in an act which renders us “vulnerable” and reliant upon “others to apprehend us” while we in turn are responsible for apprehending them (7).

In addition to bringing together both media and life-writing studies, Poletti’s book weaves an impressive critical tapestry, from new materialism, thing theory, and object-oriented ontology to feminist, queer, and posthumanist theory. Barad’s work on materiality and Butler’s writing on life and grievability constitute the critical pillars of the book, while in individual chapters Poletti draws deftly on Berlant’s notion of “intimate publics” (chapter 3) and Sedgwick’s concept of “periperformative utterances” (chapter 4). With such an array of theory underpinning her study, Poletti assembles an eclectic corpus that spans the analogue, digital, visual, and textual. Through analyses of diverse media forms such as Andy Warhol’s *Time Capsules* and the crowdsourcing project PostSecret, Poletti reclaims various materialities as legitimate modes of self-life-inscription.

Poletti perceptively demonstrates through this methodology that there is no one way to *read* media and matter. In each chapter she adopts a different practice of reading which is responsive to the materiality of her given media object(s). Her first chapter, for example, looks at Warhol’s mammoth hoard of cardboard boxes. She argues that the boxes – by virtue of their scale and excess – are “stubborn” in their “refusal to be accessible or legible” (29). They resist impulses toward narrativization, since, as Poletti claims, “the cardboard box is a means of storing, not storying, lived

experience” (55) and so cannot be read like a novel. Poletti instead proposes “rummaging” as a method of analysis encouraged by the boxes themselves; it is a physical mode of reading that is responsive to the “massive [material] presence” of the boxes. Elsewhere, she argues that reading queer documentary requires a *reparative* approach (chapter 4).

Poletti makes many such compelling arguments throughout her book. Through the second to the fourth chapters, she builds up a case for displacing the “centrality of a unique voice as a guarantor of the truth of autobiography” (128). In her second chapter, she seeks to understand the role of the camera – specifically as it is used in documentary filmmaking – in a search for “the truth” about a self, a life, a personal history. She reads Sarah Polley’s *Stories We Tell* and Nev Schulman’s *Catfish* for the ways in which they both position and problematize the camera as an apparatus for the facilitation of truth. In chapter 3, she explores how crowdsourcing projects such as PostSecret turn autobiography into a “group rather than individual activity” (80). The thousands of anonymous confessions written on handcrafted postcards – and their online remediation into blog posts – not only testify to the importance of nondigital objects in materializing self-life-inscriptions. They also signal the possibilities of autobiography as “transmedial” and “collective” (82), where the “truth” of autobiography is rooted not in a single unique voice but instead in the apparent authenticity of anonymous authors’ private-turned-public confessions. Poletti then turns to queer collage as a similar form of autobiography which displaces stable relationships between text and author. Feminist and queer scholars will find value in chapter 4, as she uses Sedgwick’s notion of periperformative utterance and reparative reading to analyze the queered relationship between the narrating “I” and narrated “I” in Jonathan Caouette’s 2003 documentary *Tarnation*.

The structure of the book is masterful, as it returns full circle in chapter 5 to discuss the “privacy paradox” through an analysis of the public reading of both analogue and digital dossiers. Poletti concludes her book with a reading of Ai Weiwei’s #SafePassage, using the media form of the selfie to tie together her claims about privacy and self-life-inscription as transmedial. Like *Novel Subjects*, the organization of *Secrets of the Self* cleverly materializes Poletti’s methodology: the structure of the book is spatial, with readers encouraged to “think of it as an exhibition made up of a series of rooms” (8). Movement through these “rooms” is designed to replicate the “messy,” multi-modal ways in which everyday lives are inscribed and remembered, as we rummage through cardboard boxes full of mementos or as we take and send selfies to our friends and family through social media. That is, we live and account for ourselves through a shifting amalgamation of analogue and digital forms. Poletti’s use of theory to delineate this argument is often deft, though at times it dominates the chapters, usurping space that could otherwise be given over to more precise close analyses of her corpus. For example, she is overly reliant on Barad in chapter 2, which could have benefited from including more scholarship on documentary filmmaking. The dense theoretical approach throughout is stimulating, but perhaps makes this book less accessible to students or scholars outside the disciplines of media and life-writing studies.

This all being said, *Secrets of the Self* is a perspicacious and original inquiry into the role of media and materiality in autobiography. Poletti concludes with the powerful statement that self-life-inscription, ultimately, is a scene of possibility, the outcomes of which are not predetermined. The same, in turn, can perhaps be said for Milne’s

Novel Subjects and Cardon's *Fashioning Character*, both of which also, in their own ways, celebrate the infinite possibilities of subject formation.

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Julia Havas, *Woman Up: Invoking Feminism in Quality Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022, \$34.99). Pp. 282. ISBN 978 0 8143 4656 3.

Two issues are immediately apparent to anyone undertaking the study of quality television. Firstly, the terms of the enquiry are highly contested – just how *do* we define “quality,” who exactly is the “we” that provides the definition, and to what extent are these definitions adopted by audiences? The other issue, one that is particularly pertinent to those of us interested in issues of equality in the creative industries, is that both the content of quality television and the academic work on it has overwhelmingly focussed on men; as Havas herself states, the canon of quality television was formed almost exclusively of an “exploration of white masculinities” (23). This masculine focus has remained strong despite the prominence of shows such as *Homeland* (2011–20), *Girls* (2012–17) and *Broad City* (2014–19). The persistence of such issues makes Julia Havas’s book *Woman Up: Invoking Feminism in Quality Television* all the more timely and makes the depth and breadth of its academic enquiry all the more welcome and important.

Combining traditional feminist research methods with the burgeoning field of television aesthetics, the core argument in *Woman Up* is that what made feminist quality television at the start of the twenty-first century unique was how it overtly responded both to the quality television that had come before it and to developments in feminism, particularly postfeminism. Thus, for Havas, feminist quality television “strategically mixes different modes of transgression by linking discursively novel treatments of form and narrative with novel thematizations of content associated with popular feminism” (33–34). Indeed, it is this admixture of gender politics along with the formal and stylistic experimentation that accompanied it that Havas argues is central to the designation of “quality” in feminist quality television. Havas advances this argument using a series of in-depth case studies organized into two sections, the first focussing on comedies and the latter focussing on dramas. *30 Rock* (2006–13) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009–15) are analysed as prominent examples of feminist quality comedies, whilst *The Good Wife* (2009–16) and *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–19) are used as key examples of female-centred prestige dramas.

Chapter 1 lays out the theoretical groundwork for the enquiry that follows, and it is in this that the breadth of Havas’s research is most on display. Simultaneously defining quality television and discussing the dominant arguments in its field of study, Havas ably navigates the reader through the complex intersections of meaning inherent in research on quality television in general, and feminist quality television in particular. The chapter also does sterling work in reinscribing women into the history and development of quality television. Identifying quality television’s concerns with gender issues as well as aesthetic and structural experimentation in shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77) and *Cagney and Lacey* (1981–88), Havas demonstrates that rather than being separate from it, feminist concerns have been central to quality television since its beginnings.

In a canny structuring move on Havas’s part, the chapters in each constituent section largely mirror each other. Thus chapters 2 and 5 both focus on the interplay