

**Two anachronic parables for the work of Johanna Unzueta
(Or, How Sometimes When You Turn the Same Faucet, Something Different
Comes Out)
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Polar Belongings

In June 1883 a young German, with a doctorate in physics but interested in geography, set sail from the Port of Hamburg on a trip that would take him to Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic. His research on the optical properties of water had led to an interest in the relationship between geography and perception. A career in geography at that time required an excursion to some unknown place; so the young man embarked upon his journey accompanied (at the insistence of his family) by his servant Wilhelm Weiike. He brought along advanced measuring instruments—including anemometers to measure the wind and thermometers to verify the extreme temperatures of the North Pole—and hoped to produce a topographic map of exact precision. However, he also had a secret agenda: he wanted to prove that the natural environment was the principal factor in the definition of human behavior by gathering scientific evidence of how landscape shapes human culture. (This contradicted diffusionist theories, then in vogue, which argued that cultural variations were due to the influences of contact and migration.) He planned to not only live among the Eskimos but to commit himself to analyzing his surroundings in minute detail.

The young adventurer dedicated many months to the patient observation of snow, icebergs, and ice edges, all basic components of the Eskimos' landscape. He passionately immersed himself in the study of icebergs, their forms and behavior. He observed how in contrast to an immaculately white iceberg the water's edge appears green. He also recorded how when the sky is clear the icebergs still look white but their shadows turn a deep, dark gray. He became interested in the way in which icebergs appear greenish at a distance and how they seem to float and their shadows are elongated due to refraction. In this way he observed how, compared to the ice in the ocean, the snow onshore looks unmistakably yellow. All of this was meticulously recorded by the young physicist in a series of diminutive watercolors, increasingly precise in their understanding of the landscape's function as well as its colors, forms, and alterations.

At the same time he became interested in the Eskimos' objects—under which circumstances they were produced, how they functioned, and what they were used for. He kept buying more and more objects from the Eskimos, despite the fact that the available space in his campsite was shrinking as it was progressively invaded by these artifacts of study. Furthermore, even though both he and his servant/secretary had traveled prepared with enough clothing and the latest technology to protect them from the elements, the physicist decided to purchase a pair of Eskimo winter suits made from caribou fur. He impatiently waited for his suit to be ready and complained about the delay in several diary entries. On October 24 he wrote, "My things are gradually getting finished; thus my stockings and pants are ready" but he could not refrain from expressing his frustration that "naturally the caribou hunters are all long since returned; yet I still have not been able to buy enough skins for my winter clothing."¹ Although the letters and diary entries from this period show him to be consistently respectful, patient, and empathetic to

¹ Ludger Müller-Wille, ed., *Franz Boas Among the Inuit of Baffin Island. 1883-1884: Journals and Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

the Eskimos as well as sincerely interested in their worldview, he would write with clear irritation one month later: "It is just too silly that I cannot get my caribou clothing made. Their beliefs forbid the Eskimo women to work at it before the moon is past, so it will be another three weeks before I can be properly outfitted." On December 2 he expresses concern over the prospect that a walrus hunt will be successful, because the women would have to stop working on his caribou suit, which was by then almost ready.

Thus it is no surprise that once the trip ended, although the young scholar's topographic surveys resulted in the first maps based on exact geodesic measurements of the area and his journey immediately garnered interest from the cosmographic community, the young scientist shut himself away in order to continue working with his artifacts. Eskimo life and the immensity of the ice fields they inhabited seemed to be encrypted in those objects, among which his winter suit became especially relevant. In a photographic study of Minden two years later, the young scientist made what appeared to be a series of self-portraits dressed in his caribou suit with a harpoon and snow knife in hand, carefully seated in Eskimo seal hunt pose. But the suit was more than just a suit. Just like the Eskimo way of life, it demanded to be observed on its own terms. It could not be compared to or measured with geographic instruments; its significance was not included on the precise map elaborated by the young scientist. The suit allowed young Franz to continue pursuing the Eskimo feeling in an embodied manner. In Minden, he would discover in his caribou suit a way to inhabit a specifically Eskimo world, although he knew perfectly well that he was not—nor would ever be—an Eskimo, that in the photographic studio in Minden there was only a simulacrum of that breathing hole in the ice of Cumberland Sound, and that the seal at which to aim his harpoon would never appear. Nevertheless, Franz waited, and in this way he came to experience and feel, once again and in greater depth, what life in the North Pole was all about.

Textile Reign

In 1832 Flore-Celestine-Therèse-Henriette traveled from Paris to Lima where she spent two years in a vain attempt to claim her Peruvian father's legacy, which her uncle Juan Pío de Tristán, a royalist general, politician and the last Spanish viceroy of Peru, had claimed for himself. Flora thus witnessed an era in Peru marked by post-independence instability, where she observed and experienced all kinds of human misery. Flora was no naïve little girl and it is said that this trip awakened her political conscience, so that she went on to become an important figure in the international proletariat and feminist struggles. ("Workers of the World Unite" is a phrase famously robbed from her and attributed to Marx). However, in Lima she also found something which led her to affirm that "There is no place on earth where women are more *free* and have more influence than in Lima: They reign there uncontested. They are the instigators of everything."² Even more unusual was that this extraordinary situation in the middle of the nineteenth century had come about thanks to a form of attire that, according to Flora, was one of a kind and only existed in Lima. Its origin was impossible to trace because it had no relation to European clothing and had only become known to Spaniards after they had invaded the Americas. The outfit in question was called the *saya* and it consisted of a simple skirt and a cloak that

² Flora Tristán, "Lima y sus costumbres," in *Feminismo y Socialismo. Antología*, (Madrid: Libros de la Catarata, 2003). Originally published in "Peregrinajes de una paria," 1838.

covered the shoulders, arms, and head. The *saya's* coquettishness, according to Flora's account, was unrivalled by the sophisticated Parisian dress with which she was familiar. The skirt, whose fabric varied according to the social rank of its owner, was, Flora claimed, "of such extraordinary craftsmanship that it deserves a place in museums as a curiosity."

"This type of costume can only be made in Lima, and the Liméniennes claim that one must be born in Lima to be a maker of *sayas*; that a Chilean, an Aréquipénien, a Cuzquénien could never succeed in *pleating the saya*. This claim, whose truth I am not anxious to verify, proves how different from all known costumes this dress is... To make an ordinary *saya* one must have twelve to fourteen ells of satin; it is lined in a soft, thin silk or in very light cotton; the dressmaker, in exchange for your fourteen ells of satin, brings you a little skirt of three quarters of length that, from the waist, measured as two fingers along the hip, goes down to the ankles; it is so close-fitting that at the bottom it is only wide enough to permit one foot to be put before the other as one walks with tiny steps. Thus one is held as tightly by this skirt as by a corset. It is pleated from top to bottom in very narrow pleats and so evenly that it would be impossible to find the seams; these pleats are so firm and give such elasticity to this sack that I have seen *sayas* that had lasted for fifteen years and still kept enough elasticity to show off the figure and respond to all movements.

The *manto* is also artistically pleated but made of a very light material; it cannot last as long as the skirt nor can the pleating resist the continual movements of the wearer or the humidity of her breath. High society women wear *sayas* of black satin; elegant women also have them in fancy colors such as violet, brown, green, dark blue or striped, but never in light colors because the prostitutes have adopted these by preference. The *manto* is always black, entirely covering the bust; only an eye is left visible."

Flora even claims that the same woman from Lima dressed in a *saya* and in an elegant dress brought from Paris is simply not the same, since an onlooker would search in the Parisian attire in vain for that seductive woman attending church that morning. She also adds that foreigners go to church in Lima completely indifferent to the service or the priests, with the only objective being to admire the "women of a different nature" dressed in the national costume. Because of the peculiar phenomenon that allows the woman to simultaneously remain hidden within the costume while still flaunting all of her charm and potential, Flora concludes: "Well, with no fear of being contradicted I can affirm that the Lima women in this costume would be proclaimed queens of the earth . . ." And although Flora recognizes that this is not enough, that the woman who wears the *saya* needs to be independent in order to preserve the superiority that the costume gives her, these clothes allow her all kinds of freedom. The woman of Lima can occupy public life in a much more independent and liberated manner than that of her European counterpart, so much so that even her own husband doesn't recognize her if he passes her on the street.

"Thus these ladies go alone to the theatre, to bull fights, to public meetings, balls, promenades, churches, go visiting, and are much seen everywhere. If they meet people with whom they want to chat, they speak to them, leave them, and remain free and independent in the midst of the crowd, much more so than the men, whose faces are uncovered. This costume has the tremendous advantage of being at once economical, very neat, convenient, and always ready without needing the least care."

Flora Tristán concludes the description of her discovery arguing that the women of Lima find in the *saya* a freedom comparable to that of men who grab their hat and depart from any situation they find unpleasant. Moreover, she describes a way to disguise oneself by using a *saya* that is poor, old, and shabby. According to local custom nobody would think to follow a woman in disguise, which would be "inappropriate and even unjust," as it is assumed that there is good

reason for the disguise. Thanks to the unrestrained protection of the *saya*, women did not have to resort to secretly going out or tiptoeing around, but were able to do whatever they wanted, allowing themselves to enjoy daily pleasures and freely stroll about in public. An enormous power was then invested in one article of clothing from Lima's nineteenth-century textile industry. It was an artifact that simultaneously offered protection and camouflage, like a bland and flexible armor that embraced its wearer. A mobile room of one's own. Flora went on to become a celebrated activist for the rights of the proletariat and a fervent supporter of the idea that the emancipation of the working class depended on the emancipation of women. Whether or not she tried to protect herself with a *saya* when her ex-husband tried to shoot her after her return to Europe is unknown. We also don't know if she recommended the use of this impressive attire to women who formed part of the workers' union, or if her grandson, Gauguin, spoke to the nude women he painted about the revolutionary power of the *saya*, which he had been familiar with during his childhood in Lima.

You Be My House, I'll Be Yours

The relationship between these events and the work of Johanna Unzueta may seem extremely remote. She has never been to Baffin Island and although it is possible that she's visited Lima, she has probably never seen or had the opportunity to own or dress in a Peruvian *saya* or a winter suit made of caribou fur. However, in some way she has her own campsite full of artifacts, among them an almost complete collection of hardware, which she meticulously studies. She makes her own *sayas*, in the sense of ready-to-wear architectural sculptures that remain autonomous from their wearers. There is also an interest in the strategies of camouflage typical of normal things—those that Franz considered important, like the objects that were part of the everyday life of the Eskimos but that also held their secrets. For example, the networks of prosthesis (gutters, ducts, pipes, etc.) dress buildings and cities as well as sustain them, and without them we would be lost. These are artifacts that depend on a seemingly basic but specialized knowledge, which we only notice when they stop working. They are also characterized by their prudence. However, they are now resurfacing, which in a city like New York demonstrates how it is good for capitalism to preserve a certain degree of backwardness. In this way these objects look at us and remind us of tasks we usually forget. They are as forgotten as gestures preserved by the body after years of repetitive work—the profound and invisible traces of reiterated movements. The social *gesture*, for example, of the character in *The Threepenny Opera* who always refuses to take his hat off because he is certain that every roof will eventually collapse on his head. In fact, this hat could perfectly well be a work of Johanna Unzueta. It could go to the supermarket, ride a hang glider, and travel to Siberia. Or like many of her pieces, it could migrate between one work and another, fold, come unstitched, and reawaken at the opening party of a new project, or in an exercise in the snow, in a garage, in an elevator, without anyone taking much notice. After all, who really minds if a gentleman simply does not wish to take his hat off anymore?