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**Dress Practices as Embodied
Multimodal Rhetorics**

Dressing for Childbearing, the Patriarchy, and Me

Auto-Ethnography in Three Parts

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Abstract

This essay explores my experiences with dress practices as I have pursued a career path both inside and outside of the academy. Divided in three sections, I unpack and consider my positionality as a white, straight, ciswoman who has evolved from finding comfort in a blazer to struggling to merge “professional dress” with a post-pregnancy body, particularly as my own understanding of dress as embodied multimodal rhetorical action continues to evolve. I reflect on my previously willing compliance with traditional dress practices, and what I can and should do about how I read and employ this embodied rhetoric.

Seemingly, we have been forever content to let voices other than our own speak authoritatively about our areas of expertise and about us. It is time to speak for ourselves, in our own interests, in the interest of our work, and in the interest of our students. (Royster, 1996, p. 39)

How does it feel to be the problem? How does it make you feel to be the one in the way of progress, no matter what you have said or what your agendas are, how hard you worked, or how sincere you are? It’s unfair, isn’t it? You are good people. And yet you are the problem, but you don’t want to be. Think about that for a minute. You can be a problem even when you try not to be. Sit and lament in your discomfort and its sources. Search. If our goal is a more socially just world, we don’t need more good people. We need good changes, good structures, good work that makes good changes, structures, and people. (Inoue, 2019)

Introduction

As Asao Inoue urged in his 2019 CCCC Chair’s address, we—white people—need to sit in our discomfort and fragility more, and what follows is an attempt to do just that. I articulate here my varying levels of ease and engagement with—and exploration of subversion against—the cultural norms of female professional bodies that I have experienced as a young woman, pregnant graduate student, and post-partum assistant professor at an institution with a uniformed student body. I share these private experiences in a public and peer-reviewed forum

intentionally, despite my intense discomfort, with the hopes of supporting a feminist approach to academia that is personal, practical, and productive.

This piece owes its existence in significant part to Jacqueline Jones Royster's "When the First Voice Your Hear Is Not Your Own" both in form and content, responding to her essay so that more of us might spend time with the "need to understand human difference as a complex reality" (1996, p. 29). I am uncomfortable as I share these experiences on the page, intentionally and publicly exposing and unpacking the armor that protects my inner self. I want to contribute productively to a conversation about the "the kinds of identities ... women construct for themselves will both condition and be conditioned by the kinds of interpretations they give to the experiences they have" (Moya, 2000 as cited in Ledbetter, 2018, p. 29), but I still grapple with the risk/payoff that feels inherent in this very personal kind of work. As Nedra Reynolds writes,

When feminists dare to interrupt one another in public places, the risks are very real. When their interruptions occur in texts that are published and widely disseminated as critique, the consequences deepen. Within these risky spaces, however, writing agents find opportunity... Following through on the implications of feminist agency means, for me, finding specific conversations in composition studies where it is necessary to interrupt a troubled inattention to the influence of feminist theory and politics. (2009, p. 903)

My aim here is twofold. The first is to interrupt myself, to disrupt the "disciplinary tendency [that is] is either to presume one normative body (white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, abled) that is neither labeled 'cultural' nor 'signifier,' or to recognize an 'other' body, which is both" (Johnson, Levy, Manthey, & Novotny, 2015). The second, however, is to reflect with the "ethos of care, respect, and humility" that Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch describe toward the research subjects in *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* (2012, p. x). I am the subject in this essay, my experiences the lens through which I advocate for the reading of bodily rhetoric on myself and others with that same care, respect, and humility that we bring to our academic work.

I have been considering this topic since my first child was born seven years ago, encouraged through casual but loaded encounters with other women as we grapple with the surprisingly rhetorical task of what to wear. This essay is a response to Katie Manthey's call for us to "not 'read' people just by looking at them, but instead catch ourselves before we pass judgment and acknowledge our own biases" (2015, p. 41) and Maureen Johnson, et al.'s collective declaration that "all bodies do rhetoric" (2015, p. 42). I contribute here to my understanding of how I, and maybe we, are "assemblers of and assembled by [our] orientations to larger cultural forces" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 42), and to engage with Jill Eichhorn, et al.'s definition that dress practices can be defined as "actions undertaken to modify and supplement the body in order to address physical needs in order to meet social and cultural expectations about how individuals should look" (2003, p. 4). Most specifically, I am drawn to contribute to what Eileen Green describes as the "little attention has been paid to the ways in which women academics, and

women professors in particular, use clothing strategies to ‘place’ themselves within academic cultures which marginalize and exclude them” (2001, p. 98)

Yes, actually, I have a lot to say about that.

At the Margins

What follows is a particularly dense literature review that includes more direct quotes than readers typically encounter. This is intentional for two reasons. First, I do not want to reduce the experiences of others to paraphrases and batch citations; their experiences and their voices are their own, and I include them here so that I can join into an existing vibrant conversation rather than simply leverage them for my own means. Second, I take seriously Reynolds’ words above that the risks are real, particularly in texts that are published and shared. While I will discuss my physical use of the blazer to assert my authority later on, the words of the scholars that follow serve as my metaphorical blazer in this piece, stitched together as rhetorical fabrics that bolster my confidence and allow me to publish this despite the risk I feel. As Michelle Payne writes,

I re-create this incident in such detail because it represents for me not only one of the most difficult situations in being a writing teacher, but one of the most significant issues of being a female academic... I may be writing one of those ‘confessional narratives’ that seems to have no particular audience except the self. Regardless, what I hope to do here is explore the ways in which my personal history, my gender, and my education in composition and critical theory have created for me a rather interesting, sometimes frustrating, always conflicting internal dialogue about my own authority (and authority in the abstract) that often renders me hesitant and distrustful, vulnerable and decentered... To invite my own experiences into the dialogue seems particularly... threatening (*sic*)... By sharing my personal experience, and certainly my feelings, I may be inviting someone to come along and determine I am unfit, unstable, too emotional to be in a position of power—that my presentation of efficiency and capability is exactly that, a presentation. (2003, pp. 400–401)

Feminist researchers have worked diligently to make scholarly room for “women’s perspectives [that] have been suppressed, silenced, marginalized, written out of what counts as authorized knowledge” (Flynn, 2003, p. 245). Tompkins, for example, argues for inclusion of multiple ways of knowing in order to “break down the barrier between public discourse and private feeling, between knowledge and experience” (Zawacki, 2003, p. 317), while Royster and Kirsch advocate for an examination and extension of what is worthy of inclusion. They ask specifically about how we engage with texts that fall outside the boundary of traditional work, how to read “material artifacts as rhetorical activities, even if the writing was done by needle, not pen” (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 63).

The responsiveness and flexibility of a feminist methodology allows us—those whose bodies, experiences, and ways of being fall outside the disciplinary norm—to follow through on Olivia Frey’s hope that that “the brave experiments will make a difference” (Zawacki, 2003, p. 317).

Terry Zawacki deploys Frey's words in "Recomposing as a Woman," encouraging us to be brave because " 'if some of us do not use the adversarial method, or if we explore ideals without reaching any conclusions, or if we get personal in our essays about literature,' we may be able to 'stand knowledge on its head' " (2003, p. 317). Sinor and Goggin ask us "to attend, without irony, to our blind spots, our underbelly, and the remnant of rhetorical activities (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 63). The text examined here—clothes on a body—feels particularly like a risk that requires special attention:

an ethic of hope and care [that] encourages us to assume a more patient, receptive, quiet stand, to sit with' the text, to think about it—slowly, rather than to take a more aggressive stance in order to 'do something to' it as a mechanism for arriving at and accrediting its meaning. Krista Ratcliffe describes this process as rhetorical listening—'listening with the intent to understand, not master discourse.' (Royster & Kirsch, 2012, p. 146)

Patricia Bizzell writes in her introduction to Royster and Kirsch's *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* that feminist research "tended to be 'dialogic [balancing multiple interpretations], dialectical [seeking multiple viewpoints,] reflective [on the intersections of internal and external effects, reflexive [about unsettling one's conclusion and deferring argumentative closure]" both regarding research subjects and scholarship itself (2012, p. x). Lindof and Taylor's *Research Methods* lays out six specific characteristics of feminist research goals:

Feminist research goals: "First, feminists hold that since the production of knowledge is an act of power, researchers and their participants should ideally be equal partners in that process...second, feminist researchers generally reject objectivist premises that have historically contributed to the suppression of women's voices under the guides of scientific rationality and detachments... third, qualitative research potentially serves feminists grappling with the complex politics of diversity...fourth, feminist researchers are sensitive to the ways that *all* forms of research may be affected by the corrosive forces of sexism, racism, homophobia, and class discrimination...fifth, feminists hold that since data is produced in the context of a relationship, it should be recorded and represented accordingly ... Six, feminist commitments dramatically influence the form of qualitative research narratives. (2011, pp. 59–60)

I mean to contribute with this essay to Ellen Cushman's push towards "deroutinization—of what can be the first steps to social change on microlevels of interaction" (1996, p. 13), and to push back against research that takes place in "libraries—clean, well lit, with cubicles and desk to use as we silently mine books for information" (1996, p. 14). And while this article speaks to a different population, one that is arguably more privileged and less in need of activism than those Cushman describes, I believe this topic is important to expand conversations about how we construct and perceive authority and ethos in classrooms, and that it aligns with her declaration that "Through communication, the exchange of questioning and asserting, we come to identify with each other and challenge the bases for our differences" (1996, p. 19).

This essay takes to heart the words of Jill Eichhorn, who struggles with how much to reveal to her students about her experience as a pregnant academic (2003), and Terry Zawacki, who

pushes back against the gendered boundaries of personal and expository writing and the conviction required of any one, and specifically any woman, to “find the form for one’s own life comprehension” (2003, p. 319). Alexander and Wallace argue that scholars must make room for, and participate in, stories of difference because “When we cannot speak our truths, our sense of agency is restricted, and the potential of using our differences to forward critiques of systemic discrimination is hampered” (303). I write this article because, like Eichhorn, I hear the internal voice that urges me to “share some of the life of your body with them if you want your female students [and colleagues] to value their own bodily experiences and your male students [and colleagues] to respect those experiences” (2003, p. 376). Eichhorn and I are both distinctly uncomfortable in this choice, and perhaps it’s not fair to ask it of ourselves. But “to risk this vulnerability is to offer myself and perhaps some of my female students [and colleagues] the chance to heal the split that separates our bodies and ourselves, the chance as well to critique the political structures which have created the split” (Eichhorn et al., 2003, p. 376).

Finally, though, I return to Reynolds, who I have been proud and privileged to work with during and after graduate school. I consider her words the collar on my metaphorical blazer, the part that gives the garment shape, form, and clean lines:

For composition we need to rethink radically the forms of writing we find acceptable. The result might be the breakdown of some of the rigid boundaries that separate life and politics inside and outside the academy. Those of us working at the intersections of feminism and composition can explore, without enforcing either silence or complicity, how interruption emphasizes discontinuities. Interruptions, contributing to a larger cultural studies emphasis on the everyday, resisting theories of subjectivity that diminish action or choice, and negotiating between speech and writing, offers a tactical, practical means towards discursive agency. (2009, p. 907)

This essay is my interruption of myself, articulated in a formal publication as a rhetorical act to build a discourse community within public academic space that welcomes women and/or mothers to value their own bodily experiences and men and/or fathers to respect those experiences, as a tactical, practical, and very personal means towards discursive agency.

Embodied Rhetoric in Three Parts

I draw on Royster’s methodology in what follows, drawing on three significant phases of my life and the embodied rhetoric that mark those phases for me in order to understand how I negotiated my identity in relation to those around me, how I established authority internally and externally, how I developed strategies for action, how I moved forward, and how I was “compelled by external factors and internal sensibilities to adjust belief and action (or not)” (1996, p. 29).

Part I: Establishing, Negotiating, Developing

I grew up in a coastal New England town where my parents were fairly high profile in our very small community. I had comfortable clothes that I wore inside the house for private family time and more polished clothes that I wore outside the house for public-facing roles. The four of us

would routinely enter the house and immediately shed our protective, costumed outer layers, thinking nothing of the sigh of relief we uttered when we could exist in our natural environment without negotiating our identities for an external gaze.

As a high school student, I wasn't interested in mainstream fashion, but I was already fascinated by embodied rhetorics even if I wouldn't come to know that term for another two decades. I dressed to establish my own ethos in the student body, hovering somewhere between those who cared about identification with "the latest look" and those who deliberately carved a distinct visual path. I understood then that we were all building senses of selves in physical and social spaces. In retrospect, I'm also aware of the white, middle class, primarily presenting straight and cisgender bodies around me; while I thought I didn't fit the norm, I see now how deeply embedded I was within my race, sexual orientation, and class privilege.

I more fully experienced the embedded and embodied power dynamics of a white woman in a blazer when I was 16 years old. I was on a high school trip to Washington DC with Project CloseUp, thrilled to be wearing the blazer and heels that I thought would give me the agency, authority, and expertise of Agent Dana Scully. And I was right. All day, folks wearing clothing that clearly marked them as tourists asked me for directions and instructions as I walked the underground tunnels between the capital buildings, information that I happily shared with confidence, hiding the fact that I was a tourist myself. For that day, I was successful and valued as an individual in my own right, validated by an exterior that facilitated and authorized my inner self to be a force in the world.

I regularly wore blazers for the remainder of my junior and senior years of high school.

My relationship with dress codes and embodied rhetoric began to feel more layered and loaded as I moved through college and my early career years, timing that feels inextricably tied to my growth as an autonomous individual in a larger world. I was too casual for my college roommate, my mismatched plaid clothes for relaxing in our dorm room cause for her to actually submit a request for *E's Fashion Emergency* television show to remake my wardrobe. I began to curl my hair and more carefully select my outfits, and she soon dropped the fashion emergency campaign.

When I began my first professional job in Boston, MA, I wore smart business clothes and conducted myself as a professional as I understood it—calm demeanor, focused attention, muted emotions. Feedback from my supervisors was that I was very good at my job but cold and unrelatable to colleagues. One day, I wore a t-shirt and jeans for a community service day, and a young female colleague commented on how much more relaxed I looked; she hadn't realized "[I] even owned clothes like that." We became friends soon after. I left that position to move to England, where I worked for three years in a high performing small business in central London. Dress codes in London were as varied as I had ever seen them, and given that I was not in a client-facing role, I often wore jeans and nice but casual tops to the office. Infrequent evaluations yielded the same feedback on my performance—highly competent but unapproachable. About two years into that position, a fashion-minded friend came to visit, and

she talked me into buying one of the blazers I had so loved. I began to wear smarter clothes and consistently applied makeup. I cut and donated my long hair to charity, returning to work with a much-admired stylish bob. Around the same time, I seemed to find my groove with colleagues, and my relationship with my female boss improved dramatically.

These events may be entirely unrelated, but they continue to shape how I read and perform professional dress to this day. I share these experiences to challenge my own evolving perspectives, and because I want to highlight the power dynamics that accompany these interactions so that others, particularly but not exclusively women, can begin to reflect on dress practices as embodied rhetoric that make meaning and shape power dynamics. As Lutgen-Sadvik, Dickinson, and Foss share in their chapter on woman bullying woman (WBW), “the struggling for status among people is going on all the time, ‘and the pernicious effects occur *because we don’t talk about it*. Once it becomes an explicitly part of a relationship, we have a lot more control over how it plays out” (2012, pp. 64; italics in original). I share my experiences here because I want to control how they play out, to become more conscious of the embodied rhetoric that I suspect shaped those interactions and that I know influence my rhetorical read on other bodies.

Lutgen-Sadvik, Dickinson, and Foss use four facets of a construction metaphor “to explain, critique, and move WBW into discursive consciousness without undue personalization so women might have more choice and control over who they are becoming” (2012, p. 65). They describe the process of priming, painting, peeling, and polishing that women draw on when building professional identities with the (patriarchal) societal materials at their disposal, and argue that an intentional examination of those materials can productively thwart bullying behaviors. They note, however, that “Parties must be open to the ‘truth’ of women’s claims that they are viewed and evaluated differently because of their gender, that they feel pressure to perform differently, or that they may not know why they are behaving aggressively” (73).

When I moved back to the United States at 29 years old, I left business to teach college writing. I was hardly older than some of my students, and still re-adjusting to living stateside after spending most of my formative young adult years in London. I did not yet have my PhD, and my only college teaching experience at the time had been as an undergraduate teaching assistant and writing tutor, but I was determined to succeed and carve out my path as an expert and authority in the classroom. I knew I could meet two of the three aspects that David Farkas outlines as integral to procedural discourse, the ways that we guide others though a task like writing (1999, pp. 43–44): I knew I could adapt to the needs of my students, and I knew I could convey why learning to write effectively was important. I was more concerned by the third, the need to establish my credibility. More specifically, I wasn’t sure how I could deploy a visual rhetoric that would convince my students that I was a “fully knowledgeable and trustworthy source” who would “respect [their] investment of time and energy” (43). And, if I’m honest with myself, I wanted to *feel* like a professor.

So I put on the blazer, and I believed that I looked like I was supposed to look. I wore “professional dress” every day I taught as an adjunct for two years, and then into my PhD

program, even after the day that the blazer literally, and increasingly metaphorically, wouldn't fit anymore.

Part II: Moved Forward

My first day as a graduate student was spent putting others at ease as I smiled, extended my hand, and said, "Hi, I'm Jenna, I'm a PhD student in the rhet/comp program, and yes, I AM seven months pregnant." I would spend every day after that proving to those people—and to myself—that my pregnant (then mothering and postpartum) body really did belong in these academic spaces. I could smooth over and work through the fact that I was already different as an older student at the ripe old age of 31, had worked in business, and completed my MA abroad, but pregnancy literally announced itself before I could finish walking through the door.

I want to clarify that my department and cohort peers were enthusiastic and supportive; they did not make me feel unwelcome. Graduate school in the United States and pregnancy were both unknown territory for me, and pregnancy for students in grad school also seemed new to those shepherding me through the strange apprenticeship that is a PhD program. I am still determined to believe that everyone did the best they could, even if I might advise others to do differently in the shoes I wear now. To make all of us feel better about my pregnant body that didn't fit into this academic space, sometimes literally when I couldn't sit in the chairs with built-in desks, I continued to wear smart clothes, style my hair, and apply light makeup to class every day, even when my classmates showed up in far less formal attire. The effort was often more of a time-suck than I want to acknowledge and more of a challenge than I would like to admit. In between naps and coursework, I occasionally watched YouTube videos on hair style techniques so that I would look polished and professional in the place where I lived—my brain—even if the rest of my body was lost.

No one made me do this, and perhaps I am simply projecting my own internal sexist onto how I thought I was perceived. Katie Manthey describes her own encounters with her internal sexist voice that demands that her students "dress more professionally when they work here" as it tells Manthey herself that she needs to cover up (2017, p. 182). She shares:

I feel like I need to reinforce the idea that in different contexts, their appearances (especially as young women, many of whom are women of color) will be treated in many different ways... I teach them these things not only so that they can help others with their writing projects, but also so that we can have a shared critical vocabulary for talking about dress. I try to teach them about how rhetoric can be a tool for both recognizing and resisting systems of power. Rhetoric is always embodied. (2017, p. 182)

And, as Lehua Ledbetter writes, "rhetorical moves create a dynamic with the audience that encourages community continuity and enables members to demonstrate their credibility in other ways that are not tied to their technological prowess" (2018, p. 293).

Though Ledbetter is talking about how an online community of women who publish makeup tutorials establish credibility, I read both her and Manthey as articulating that communities, and women-dominated communities like my graduate program, build credibility through

embodied rhetorics that echo Lutgen-Sadvik, Dickinson, and Foss's construction metaphor. The highly visible nature of pregnancy placed me outside the norm that I had constructed for myself as expert/authority as identified by blazer. And while I had managed a professional wardrobe earlier at accessible and economical shops like TJ Maxx, I now struggled to find and afford maternity clothes that did all the things I needed them to do. To be fair, I was asking them to do a lot—I wanted these clothes to accommodate my expanding body in ways that made me still look and feel professional, and attractive, and capable, and like I wasn't drowning in my own body. I had been a strong-minded person who walked her own path for most of my life, and now something else was literally living in my body, determining what I could do physically and directly impacting how I felt emotionally.

This feels like oversharing personal information, but, like Payne, I am intentionally re-creating these experiences in detail because they have shaped embodied meaning-making for me and those around me. These details make up my experience and my ethos as a person in academia who just happened to be female and pregnant. The visible, physical nature of my private family choices meant that my female-ness—my very not-male-bodyness—literally stood between me and my students. I couldn't scoot between rows of classes to peek surreptitiously at drafts or eavesdrop on group discussion, though I did my best to ignore my physical condition as much as possible. Like Eichron, I worried that I "risked validating the notion that women physically are incapable of performing certain kinds of traditionally male jobs. Although I knew how to make the argument against this assumption, I didn't have the emotional energy for the confrontations. I feared, God forbid, breaking down in tears" (2003, p. 375).

More specific to my academic self, I had built an embodied ethos on blazers that had been rewarded at various points in my life; how was I supposed to be "me" if I wasn't wearing them, especially when my body already didn't feel like me? I could go to class and do the reading and be brilliant in class discussion, but I was always still pregnant; I was always still defined by my state as a woman, a pregnant woman marked by the obvious condition of my body.

It was one of the first times in my life that my body was not one of the privileged bodies moving through my habitual space. I had spent time living in Japan, Spain, and England, so I knew what it was like to feel like the Other when I was literally a foreigner and outsider. I went away, went on adventures, but then I came home again where I understood the conventions and embodied the expectations of bodies in those spaces—I had never experienced that bodily friction at "home" before. I expected it would pass in time, once the child was born and I could be me again. Right?

This is where current-me hands young-and-naïve-me a large glass of wine and reminds her about Royster and Kirsch's whole "ethos of care" thing.

Part III: Compelled to Adjust Belief and Action (or Not)

My daughters are now seven and nearly five years old, and I'm still grappling with all that the blazer entails. I've stopped feeling like I need to explain that "I just had a baby" to justify my

midsection that still looks three months pregnant on a good day. I've found a decent collection of jackets and black slacks that fit, and I've lost enough weight that I can start wearing carefully curated tops under blazers and almost look "normal." And in retrospect, I think I had it pretty easy moving from PhD student to job market candidate. After all, my preference for more formal professional dress meant that I already had a wardrobe that was suitable for the job market, but I've heard heartbreaking accounts from new mothers on the job market, told to wear "professional" clothes that are built for bodies that have never nurtured and/or nursed a tiny human life into existence. But on the job market, those professional clothes (and arguably, the bodies they are designed for) are "normal," they are what is expected. To wear anything else is to risk embodying the gap that already stands between us and the mostly older white men who are hiring us (see Manthey, 2017).

Normal, though, is much more complicated than I had realized. And normal, is, in fact, a fiction. A dangerous, hegemonic, restrictive, and subjective fiction in which I had participated and perpetuated. Like Renata Baptista, "What I do know is that I too have played into the rules of 'professionalism.' I've dressed the part and played the role and I too am complicit" (2015).

When I thought I wanted to look like a professional, I actually wanted to look like a dominant narrative of power—I couldn't be a man, but I could be a polished professional woman. That was the same, right? I was already white, able-bodied, well-educated, cisgender, and straight. I had to buy my way in with wardrobe, cosmetics, and hair products, but I could do it if I could afford it. There was nothing about my existing body that hegemonically stood in the way of fitting my projected ideal of the professional and/or the academic. I had learned at 16 that I would be valued and authorized if I dressed in the codes of power, so I did. I intentionally paid into a system where many of us, at best, "sit on their hands, with love in their hearts, but stillness in their bodies," (Inoue, 2019, p. 7) benefiting from my unearned privilege to pass as "normal." Powered. White. And almost male.

Babies fundamentally changed my ability to do that. Between the physical changes to my body, the intellectual changes from graduate school, the mandate to do better from scholars like Inoue, Royster, and others, and the cultural conversations that have seemingly become tidal forces since 2016, I am working on interrupting myself when it comes to my own reading and performing of clothes on bodies. As Manthey advocates, "to stop trying to 'read' people just by looking at them, but instead catch ourselves before we pass judgment and acknowledge our own biases" (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 41). Because, as Carmen Rios asks, "Why can't elected officials take me seriously in my actual clothes, being my actual self? Why do I have to dress a certain way just to interact with them?" (2015). Rios goes on to declare that "Every single person in every single office should be taken seriously and treated with respect no matter what they're wearing... I keep blazers in my office and heels in my bookcase, but I'm just as down to work in jeans as I am to work in a skirt suit."

What I had believed were manifestations of genuine authority and expertise that were equitably acquired through hard work—professional suits, perfectly coiffured hair, slim body, controlled composure—were, in fact, manifestations of white, male privilege. The role models I

had looked to on television (most notably Captain Kathryn Janeway of *Star Trek: Voyager* and Agent Dana Scully, MD, of *The X-Files*) were literally fictional and often written, produced, and directed by men. I suspect that their appearances and demeanor informed much of who I expected myself to be as a woman in a role of authority, but their hair, makeup, and wardrobe were not real; it was the product of a team of specialists whose entire role was to make them look a certain way. Kate Mulgrew and Gillian Anderson, who played the respective characters, have both spoken about how they faced distinctly female challenges in these roles, including intense attention to hair styles, soon-ignored directives to always walk behind male counterparts, and seemingly ever-present pay discrimination (Framke, 2016; Trekmovie.com Staff, 2017).

Slowly, and painfully, I am trying to realize that there is nothing wrong with my postpartum body. There is nothing wrong with bodies that wear something other than professional suits, or present perfectly blown out hair, or are slim, or display emotion, or do/wear anything other than the expectations of what I internalized as “normal.” As good. As better. And, in fact, I am doing damage to myself and others when I impose these demands of myself and others. Perhaps mostly heartbreakingly, I know that these expectations make me into a complete hypocrite as a feminist parent. My young daughters occasionally model their clothes for me and ask how they look, and I’ll ask them how they *feel* in the clothes they’re wearing because that should be what matters most. But when we need to leave the house, I’ll feel like I need to look like more performative than my unaltered self, so they wait while I go put on makeup and take a few extra minutes to blow dry my hair, and I wonder why I can’t believe that about myself, too.

On a teaching day before I began writing this essay, I put my hair up and nailed it. It was polished and professional; I was proud, and I was also disappointed because no one would see it. But I realized that I had only put it up in the first place because I was going to campus, so my students, colleagues, and likely even administrators would, in fact, see it.

So if they didn’t count, who, *exactly*, was I doing this for?

Sit and Lament in [My] Discomfort

That, I think, is the kernel of my discomfort. I want to tell myself that “the best way to effect change is by working on the boundary of the patriarchal structures I already inhabit... This means that sometimes choosing to wear pants is not a resignation—it’s the most practical and subversive way to affect feminist egalitarian change” (Manthey, 2017, p. 184). If I want to change the system, support a quiet revolution, then shouldn’t I take power in whatever ways I can get it?

Like all things, embodied rhetoric is more nuanced than that. I can believe it’s not capitulating to dress in the embodied rhetorics of power as long as a) I don’t expect and require those practices from others and b) I intentionally and actively make way for others to operate in systems of power in their own ways of knowing, doing, and dressing.

For myself as a site of study, however, I believe I should spend more time unpacking what it is about the blazer that gives me a sense of confidence and authority. I have years of experience, a PhD, and substantial evidence that I'm good at my job; why do I need a piece of clothing to embody the ethos that I have already earned? And why do I think that would anyone think any less of me if I started showing up without the blazer or my equivalent of Captain Janeway's "bun of steel" hairstyle?



Figure 1: Massachusetts Maritime Academy cadets at the 2019 Change of Command ceremony. Courtesy of Massachusetts Maritime

The issue is still further complicated for me because I am an assistant professor at Massachusetts Maritime Academy, the only fully regimented—and uniformed—student body in the United States. Our undergraduates are called cadets and hold civilian ranks that are visually signified on their uniforms. Every day, they embody their commitment to the Regiment of Cadets with their uniforms and hairstyles (see Fig. 1). Though the academy is a full B.S. and M.S.-granting civilian institution, the Humanities is a service department, and I am a female who does not wear a (formal) uniform and does not come from this uniformed culture.

While I imagine I would wear the blazer even if I didn't have to, I feel justified because professional dress is a rhetorically-appropriate response to a formal dress code environment that signifies my rank as a professional and an expert (see Fig. 2). I engage intentionally with that dynamic in particular rhetorical moves, wearing colorful blazers with black slacks and dangly earrings to signal that I am a body of authority in this community even though I know that I am not the same.

Conclusion

Throughout the writing of this article, I have wondered if publication of this personal essay so far outside traditional topics was worth the risk. But following the conversations I've had with women both in and outside of academia about this

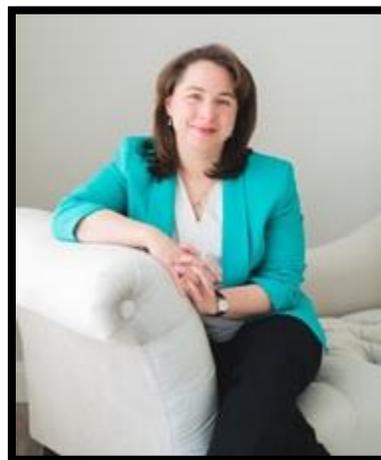


Figure 2: The author in her blazer. Courtesy of Bethany O Photography.

article specifically, and in the reading of scholarship to support my approach, I determined that the answer is yes. On an intellectual and professional level, I think it's important to codify these experiences as part of academia, to normalize conversations about Othered bodies so that, someday, these types of essays are no longer required in peer-reviewed publications or any other. On a personal-professional level, I was gratified to hear so many peers say they wanted to read this when it was published, and I was grateful and humbled to see the risks of other scholars, hear the stories of other women, and realize that I was not alone.

As an educator and administrator who supports others, I strive to facilitate multiple pathways to success for my students and my colleagues. I know that I still have work to do, that I need to spend time in my discomfort with so many of the privileges from which I benefit, and to make sure I am intentionally challenging my biases and ingrained behaviors, and more intentionally still, creating environments, policies, and spaces that are inclusive, diverse, and welcoming. I believe it also means that I need to take this risk, to create this pathway, because these narratives do important work too.

I begin this essay with the lofty goal of using my experiences as a site of interrogation so that bodies who have been pregnant are seen and heard, and bodies who had not been pregnant might understand. After all,

We must think seriously about the identities we bring with us into the classroom, remain conscious of the way those identities interact with the identities our students bring, and insert ourselves fully into the shifting relationships between ourselves and our students at the same time that we resist the impulse to control those relationships... We must instead make ourselves acutely aware of and constantly responsive to the interplay of identities—both our own and those of our students... possibilities for complicating the experience of Otherness in the academy (Gibson, Marinara, & Meem, 2003, p. 487).

I need to do that work for myself as well. To read bodies, my own and others, with Ratcliffe's rhetorical listening and Manthey's radical self-love. Manthey writes, "I'm telling you these stories as a way to take ownership of the experiences I have had—the experiences of trying to help other people read my body in a certain way" (2017, p. 180).

I'm telling you these stories so that you will remember to read all blazers and bodies with empathy, with grace, and with courage. I'm telling you these stories so that you know are not alone, and so you have a place to root your growth and understanding. And I'm telling you these stories because I am a mother-academic still wearing a blazer on a body that doesn't quite fit.

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