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**Dress Practices as Embodied
Multimodal Rhetorics**

Dress Your Professor

Embodied Rhetoric as Pedagogy

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Fashion is not considered to be synonymous with academia. If you picture a professor in your mind, you very likely conjure up the image of a middle-aged to straight-up-old white man in glasses, a well-worn blazer (preferably in some shade of brown if not an outright tweed), khakis and loafers. I don't dislike this look. The glasses signify eyesight that has been dulled by a lifetime of intense study. The well-worn blazer and khakis combination apes the more polished suits of the business world, therefore signaling professionalism and authority to the students who expect to see someone dressed like this commanding the lecture halls in which they convene to learn about psychology, European history, or physics. But the well-worn nature of these items and their overall neutrality suggests that the body wearing them is secondary to the ideas they convey. The presence of the professor isn't meant to distract from the act of learning, and so the professor's body disappears under a sea of browns and beiges. (You might imagine such an outfit being completely camouflaged in the antique wooden lecture halls at America's oldest East Coast institutions.) This look conveys the ethos of the American academy through its semiotics. It's why we think that professors are supposed to look a certain way. We imagine them in a particular style, and the style in which they are imagined also informs us of what a professor should look like, i.e. who should *be* a professor. Ergo, anyone who does not conform to this image does not conform to our idea of academia, leaving women, people of color, persons with disabilities, queer and gender non-conforming folks out of our academic imagination.

This single image of what academic style looks like has persisted for years and dominates our thinking, which may contribute to the academy's glacial response to increasing cultural diversity. According to the Teacher's Insurance and Annuity Association of America (2016), "While underrepresented minorities held 12.7% of faculty positions in 2013, up from 8.6% in 1993, they held only 10.2% of tenured positions. Similarly, women in 2013 held 49.2% of all faculty positions, up from 38.6% in 1993, but just 37.6% of tenured positions" (Finklestein et al., p. 1). It is telling, too, that the most popular book for academic jobseekers, *The Professor Is In* by Karen Klesky (2015), also holds on to this antiquated image of what is expected in the academy. Klesky's fashion advice for jobseekers is this: "a new, stylish, well-cut, fitted gray, brown, or black suit, or skirt and jacket, or dress and jacket combo, should be acquired fresh for the interview season . . . Old timers bemoan the homogenization of the assistant professoriate, in their sea of dull gray suits. Nevertheless, own a gray suit (or again, the dress-jacket combo)" (2015, p. 301-303). In her recent article on *Stylish Academic*, Kavita Mudan Finn (2016) further

notes that contingent faculty often do not feel the freedom to “dress down,” and experience social pressure at work to always look “polished and put together” (Finn, 2016). Finn’s observations as an academic of color critically point out that the assumed professionalism of the suit is linked to the traditional view of academia as a white man’s domain. The above discussion points to a certain homogeneity in the academy in terms of its appearance, and suggests that the overly neutralized wardrobe expectations of the academy have an impact on its diversity by excluding those who can’t afford the fresh new suit, or those whose personal aesthetics and physical embodiment don’t measure up with the style in which academia has been traditionally imagined.

If we choose to interpret academic fashion differently (and sometimes if we simply embody it differently), we are perceived as anti-intellectual, frivolous, trivial, or that which doesn’t belong. My go-to example to discuss this phenomenon with my students is Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde*, whose hyperfeminine attire marks her as both visually different from and less serious than her Ivy League colleagues. Thomasin Bailey (2017) further notes in “Academic Wear: A Shakespearean Critique” that professional women have adopted stylistic cues from Shakespeare’s cross-dressing heroines in order to fit in within masculine spaces. When *Twelfth Night*’s Viola disguises herself as Cesario, she embodies what Bailey terms an “in-between gender between man and boy,” which grants her more power than she would have as a woman but prevents her from being interpreted as a threat to men’s authority. Bailey draws analogy between Shakespeare’s cross-dressed heroines and academic fashion to explain why academic style has become so normative, which by extension illuminates why those who choose to perform style differently are automatic outsiders: they threaten masculine authority by their very existence. Women in the academy are often expected to dress in a particular way that I would critique as devoid of individuality and femme expression, and this stylelessness functions much in the same way cross-dressing does for Shakespeare’s heroines. By being neither too powerfully masculine, nor too obviously feminine, a non-cisgender man can effectively belong in academia. But for queer femmes like me, to disguise ourselves in order to fit in to the professional standards of the academy further contributes to femme invisibility by erasing the way we style ourselves. I love dressing up; I channel my power femmeness through clean lines, sharp edges, metal accents, heeled boots, and pops of color. I have an asymmetrical haircut, wear lipstick, and always have my nails done. I love a good blazer, but all of mine are brightly colored or patterned. I do not own the gray suit Karen Klesky recommends. I do not fit in aesthetically with how we imagine academia, although I am white and of an average clothing size.

I’ve chosen to productively use the disconnect between what my students might imagine a professor to look like and my own embodied dress practices as object lessons through which students learn to see fashion and style as modes of composition that are anything but trivial.

Semiotician Roland Barthes writes in *The Language of Fashion* (2013), “Fashion utterances are entirely derived not from a style” (p. 108). For Barthes, it is the act of writing about fashion – describing it, evaluating it, discussing it – that is the very ethos of fashion itself. Dressing oneself, in the Barthesian mode, is a way of writing oneself. Since 2011, I have taught a version

of “Composition 101” that has been officially subtitled “Fashion as Rhetoric” and casually nicknamed “The Fashion Class.” In this course, I teach rhetoric as both a writing practice and a dressing practice. By linking the two, students understand writing and dressing as sites of embodied knowledge. On my syllabus, I describe the course content as follows:

In this course, we will achieve [our writing] goals by studying fashion, which has more in common with the practice of writing than you might think. Fashion is all about style. What we wear tells other people a lot about who we are, what we value in the world, and where we come from. Writing, too, is a matter of style. Both what we wear and how we write are about making conscious choices to communicate to different audiences. In this class, we will think about writing in its relationship to style, and then use writing to explore the fashion industry and its complexities. As we learn to develop our own styles as writers, we will read fashion magazines, advertisements, writing about the fashion industry, and even learn how to read outfits rhetorically. We will consider questions such as: How do we present ourselves every day through our clothing? What does our clothing say about who we are as people? How do our choices as consumers impact other people and our environment? How can studying fashion make us more conscious consumers—and better writers?”

These big picture questions, therefore, challenge students to think about how their clothing choices are situated in matrices of meaning that govern what kinds of bodies count as professional, athletic, fashionable, “classy,” etc. To pair this discussion with writing helps students understand that these embodied positions they might occupy in their dress practices are very much acts of writing, or, at the very least, acts of inscription, in which bodies are being written on, written through, or written with various cultural ideologies in mind.

An important component of my pedagogy in this class is the “Dress Your Professor project. One day a week, I allow my students to assign me a dress-based theme that I must then interpret and wear to work using only the contents of my own closet. Some of my assignments are about interpreting abstract ideas or concepts, like embodying a particular ethos or wearing clothing inspired by a popular style from the past, while others are focused on demystifying how clothes are made, where they come from, or what happens to them when we don’t want them anymore. The results of this project are sometimes silly, and sometimes force me to deliberately dress in contradiction to the ascribed professional standards of the academy, like the time my students asked me to come to class in my gym clothes. By giving my students the power to dress me up, so to speak, I offer myself as an object lesson in the rhetorical power of clothing. My Dress Your Professor experiments, which I also document and discuss on Instagram under the handle @dressyourprofessor, serve as embodied texts to discuss questions of power in the classroom, as well as ideas about gender, labor, class, race, and the environment.

Because my clothing serves as an object lesson within the context of the class, I will use this article to further that practice by documenting and reflecting on some pedagogical components of this class that demonstrate dressing oneself as a site of embodied, multimodal rhetoric. Using photographic documentation of the Dress Your Professor project and the course’s foundational writing assignment, I aim to show how the writing classroom can be a productive

space to write and edit the self within and against existing structures of power through the embodied rhetoric of dress.

Writing Assignments

Understanding classical rhetorical appeals such as logos, ethos, and pathos is foundational to the Fashion as Rhetoric class. My first assignment in this course asks students to create an editorial spread of their own style for an imaginary fashion magazine, and then produce a written analysis of how the looks they've curated convey ethos, logos, and pathos according to the rhetorical situation for which they've been chosen. To create their editorial spreads, students collect images on Pinterest of items of clothing and outfits. I choose to use Pinterest as the tool for this writing assignment primarily because it is a free, accessible, and easy-to-use piece of technology with which many students are already familiar. Rather than assuming students are well-versed in design programs, or that they have subscriptions to physical magazines that they would be willing to cut up and collage, Pinterest provides a free and accessible platform that students can use to compose themselves visually. Additionally, I choose to mirror the rhetoric of the traditional editorial spread from a fashion magazine for this assignment through technology because it provides a lower stakes way for students to express their identity. Although I am more than willing to dress up for them, as I will discuss later, I recognize that many students are not performance-oriented, so asking them to model their own closets in any way would be potentially emotionally challenging, and runs the risk of reinforcing the kinds of anxieties and insecurities we all have about how our clothing choices situate us, what our bodies look like, etc. My goal is for students to "see themselves at the center of the discourse," and learn to perform the work of rhetorical analysis by centering themselves and their clothing as embodied rhetorics – even if this embodiment is facilitated through the safety of virtual mood boards (Elbow, 1995, p. 79).

I frame the assignment for students in these terms:

"When a fashion magazine lays out an editorial spread, they have two things in mind:

1. The audience of the magazine they're designing for.
2. The purpose of the style they're showcasing.

For example, *Elle*, *GQ*, and *Teen Vogue* might all feature editorial spreads on office-appropriate clothing with the purpose of showcasing styles that are "professional," but they would all do these for different audiences and therefore the clothing featured would look different.

GQ would feature well-tailored classic men's suiting in upscale fabrics, paired with slimfit button down shirts, vintage-inspired neckties, and shoes without socks. (The no sock look is very important to *GQ*'s European style aspirations.) Their readers are younger men who aspire to wealth and elegant styling that's fashion forward.

Elle would feature high fashion work looks with clean lines in luxury fabrics, paired with bold accessories and wicked high heels. Their readers are fashion-forward women who value personal style and aesthetic boldness.

Teen Vogue would feature more traditional, affordable workwear looks sourced from thrift stores in interesting combinations, possibly including graphic tees that bear the wearers political or social values. *Teen Vogue's* readers are tuned in to social justice, are very vocal about standing up for their beliefs, and want to work to make the world a better place. But they're also young and have to be creative about how they spend their money.

In this assignment, you get to be the fashion editor of your own magazine. You will compose a “look” of your choosing by creating a public Pinterest board. You will then write a 2-3 page paper that lays out your Purpose & Audience for this look, and provides a justification for why you believe these pieces suit your intended audience and purpose by drawing on rhetorical appeals such as ethos, logos, and pathos.”

By asking students to “be the fashion editor of your own magazine,” writers center themselves in the discourse and change the staid perception of what it means to be “in fashion.” It empowers them to occupy a position of expertise – one which may be very different from the way they currently occupy their space in the world – and see themselves as the center of that expertise. My students are typically not Anna Wintour. Their style profiles do not reflect fashion as it is dictated in the pages of *Vogue*, but as it exists in their worlds. My students at minority-serving campuses have centered street styles inspired by the Hypebeast movement or K-Pop idols, while my students at Cornish College of the Arts have produced Editorial Spreads about their stage styles for imaginary music magazines, effectively writing about the connections between their clothing style and the music they write and perform.

I note in my assignment description that fashion magazines court specific audiences who seek out clothing for particularly purposes such as work, special occasions, resort vacations, and more. I detail the readership and style choices of a few popular magazines in my assignment prompt to solidify the link between visual style and audience expectations to ensure that even though students are creating editorial spreads around their own stylistic aspirations, they are also thinking about how to articulate this style to an audience of their choosing – one which can be like or unlike them. In classroom exercises leading up to this writing assignment, students discuss how clothing, much like writing, is specifically chosen to suit purposes and audiences, through which they learn to grasp the concept of rhetorical situation. We discuss the idea of expected dress codes by comparing what we might wear to the gym to what we might wear to a job interview, and draw an analogy to different writing situations, such as composing a text message and writing a cover letter for a job. Once students grasp rhetorical situation, we close read fashion magazines to understand how design choices, language, and photographs draw on logos, ethos, and pathos to convey each magazine’s purpose to its audience of readers. We specifically examine each of the magazines I list in this prompt (*Elle*, *GQ*, and *TeenVogue*) to

illustrate how each one is tailored to its specific audience, and how rhetorical choices like design and language evidence this.

To further reinforce writing with a specific audience in mind, my students learn to visualize the audiences they're writing for with an in-class activity that asks them to imagine and profile a person or group of people chosen from a series of stock photos (which feature people of various genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and age ranges). The stock photo exercise allows them to creatively imagine and invent a profile of their ideal audience by drawing on visual cues from the photographs. The profiles students produce in their freewrites about these photos help them hone in on age range, income level, likes and dislikes, and other demographic information when thinking about their audiences so that they can learn to more specifically tailor their rhetorical strategies to suit audience expectations. We practice writing pitches for our imaginary magazines to these audiences in class, and this in-class audience exercise then forms the basis of the students' analysis of their Pinterest board.

The Editorial Spread assignment incorporates multiple modes of rhetoric. Its methods of composition are both visual and written and incorporates both the web and the word processor. It draws inspiration from a real-world genre and hybridizes this with academic analysis. This assignment foregrounds multimodality and embodiment as central to both how we compose ourselves on the page and how we compose ourselves in the world. By embracing this multimodality, it is my aim for students to see the power they have as writers, and how they might use writing to productively write, edit, and empower themselves.

Dress Your Professor

To further enhance the class's inquiry into the rhetorical power of clothing, I include a performative element in this course that cedes my power to my students by letting them choose what I wear to work. The Dress Your Professor project has been a part of this class since I began teaching iterations of this class in 2010. The rules of Dress Your Professor are simple: once a week, my students get to determine what I wear to work based on their votes and suggestions. I am only allowed to use items I already own and cannot purchase anything new to complete my assignment. I can borrow something, although usually I don't get that opportunity due to the timing of when voting closes relative to when I need to get ready for work the next morning. Footwear and outwear do not have to remain in theme (so I don't have to wear heels if it's snowing or a tank top in the rain). I pitch the project to my students as being "zero risk" for them, with the potential "high reward" of me wearing something silly.

This practice has indeed produced some hilarious results. I begin each semester by asking my students to tell me their "celebrity style icons," which then become the basis for my first Dress Your Professor assignment. Emulating celebrity looks is, first and foremost, an exercise in understanding ethos. The idea is not to copy the outfit exactly, but to emulate the qualities of a particular celebrity's style that calls to mind their personality and authority through the way they embody personal style. The celebrities students choose vary wildly based on classroom



Figure 1: An Instagram post from my @dressyourprofessor account from January 2018 in which I am mimicking Rhianna's "normcore" style.

demographics. At the University of Washington, I once taught class dressed as Justin Bieber, and recently taught at Highline College dressed as "Normcore Rhianna" (Figure 1).

I always begin with this exercise to deliberately disrupt students understanding of what a professor should/is supposed to look like. During the first week of class, they see me wear my standard attire: pencil skirts, bold print tops, boots, blazers, and metals. When I show up emulating Rhianna, I convey a different ethos. In my Instagram reflection, I refer to Rhianna as a "risk-taker" who can "wear whatever she finds on the floor and look hella fly" (Costa, 2018). In class, my students and I discuss what they thought about me based on how I dressed on the first day of class compared to the ethos I emulate in the first Dress Your Professor assignment. In most cases, my position as the instructor automatically conveys a sense of authority, ingrained in my students from the design of their prior educational experiences, but students are quick to note that they would not necessarily assume I was qualified to teach if I dressed in sweatshirts and baseball caps all of the time. Given that I have male colleagues from graduate school who did teach in sweatshirts and baseball caps, this example clearly illustrates the assumptions we make between gender and authoritative dress practices. Students will assume a masculine figure is in charge, regardless of what he is wearing, but cast doubts on a feminine figure if she isn't correctly dressed for the job. This first Dress Your Professor assignment sets the tone for how I use embodied dress practices to spark discussion about gender norms and professional dress practices in the classroom, offering myself up as a case study for my students to close read and analyze.

From this point on, our Dress Your Professor themes follow the scaffolding of our writing assignments, allowing students a fun, visual, and performative enhancement to the content. The course is broken up into three units, each scaffolded toward the production of a major essay. In Unit 1, students learn about rhetorical analysis while reading both popular and academic fashion writing. They read and analyze Tim Gunn's *Guide to Style* (2006) and Malcolm Barnard's *Fashion as Communication* (2002). They apply what they learn about how style communicates ideas about class, social status, personal identity, and more to the rhetorical concepts of ethos, logos, and pathos, and explore this in writing during their first assignment, which I have previously discussed. My Dress Your Professor assignments in this portion of the class are all explorations of ethos and situational rhetoric. Much like the "celebrity style icon" experiment with which I open the project, subsequent assignments ask me to embody the ethos of Tim Gunn's "style mentors," resulting in my coming to work with the added edge of "the rockers" or the free-spirited ethos of "the Bohemians" (2006, p. 68-88). I have also explored the social function of clothing as a communicative tool by dressing to convey political power or piety, as Malcolm Barnard's book suggests.

Unit 2 encourages students to learn argumentative strategies in the form a persuasive letter. Drawing on what they learn about developing different styles of writing and dressing for different rhetorical situations and different audiences, students are primed to "try on" new voices in this more formal assignment where they write directly to the CEO of a "fast fashion" company and persuade them to change their business practices. In this unit, they read Elizabeth Cline's *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion* (2013) and watch John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* (2015) segment on the same topic. Through long-form and short-form journalism, they learn about working with sources, and analyzing the structure of argumentation, as well as how arguments are structured differently to suit different audiences and formats.

As they learn about the fast fashion industry and prepare to write their persuasive letter, my Dress Your Professor assignments become an object lesson in the life cycle of garments. Following the structure of Cline's book, I trace the clothing I own through the supply chain from point of purchase, to the location of its production, and to the processes by which the very fibers of the garment were initially created. Cline argues, broadly speaking, that the fast fashion industry has had deleterious and nearly irreversible effects on global labor practices and on the environment due to US consumer demand for cheap, trendy clothing. This is always a real eye-opener for the students and for me as I investigate my own closet for three weeks and document my findings with my students.

Most of my students buy fast fashion, and I can't blame them because I, too, participate in this particular part of the fashion economy. Fast fashion, as Cline notes, appeals to our need for novelty, and is engineered specifically to appeal to our wallets and sense of thrift. No longer do we see clothing as an investment that is meant to last for years, but as disposable. It makes looking stylish accessible to more sectors of the economy, and is therefore somewhat democratizing, but also comes with high cost to the environment and, ultimately, to our own wallets as we overproduce and overconsume in this arena. For the first part of this unit, my



Figure 2: An Instagram post from my @dressyourprofessor account from April 2018 in which I am wearing a vintage jumpsuit.

students assign me the task of wearing only items sourced from one part of the retail supply chain: fast fashion, handmade, vintage/thrift, or couture.

Very rarely do students choose to outfit me in fast fashion, instead choosing to see thrifted and handmade looks, which allows us to discuss the material differences in production and manufacturing that Cline outlines in her book (*Figure 2*). Clothing manufactured before the 1970s has wider, thicker seams. It was intended to be let out, taken in, or otherwise mended to grow with the body of the wearer. It was also usually made in the United States by union garment manufacturers, which is another reason for its quality and longevity. By wearing vintage clothing found in thrift stores or at resellers as a material practice, my students can more clearly visualize the difference between how things once were, and how they are now.

This point is further emphasized in the following week's assignment that traces a clothing item's country of origin. Cline notes that only 2% of clothing sold in the US is actually made here, as of 2013 (2013, p. 5). Given the rise of sustainable fashion movements, I'm sure this statistic has changed a little bit since that time. But the fact that 90% of the clothing we buy in the US is made in China likely hasn't changed at all. For the second week of this unit, my students assign me to take my closet to task and wear an outfit that comes only from the US, China, or a cluster of other countries that represent common manufacturing sites such as Southeast Asia (including Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and India) or Central Europe (including Turkey and the Ukraine). Most of the time, students will assign me the task of wearing clothing

made only in the United States because they know from reading Cline's book that it will be difficult. However, over the years, this assignment has changed my practices as a consumer.

Each time I complete this assignment, I follow Cline's cue and tally not only how many garments I own, but where they come from. I do not include accessories like scarves, gloves, and hats in this assessment, nor do I include undergarments or gym clothes. Out of the nearly 280 pieces of clothing I owned when I did this assignment in February 2018, I had fewer than 10 pieces of clothing in my closet that were made in the United States. Between that time and the time of this writing, I've increased that to more than 30 pieces. As a result of my Dress Your Professor experiments, more than 10% of my wardrobe is now made in the United States. I always invite my students to consider doing this to their own closets, but I have yet to have one tell me they've actively started to change their consumer habits as a result of this class.

I know that my consumer habits have changed because of this class, but also because I have the privilege to do so, as our final week of this unit often proves to students. Cline's book ends with an investigation into how clothing textiles are made, arguing that the industry must reduce its carbon footprint by shifting to more sustainable methods of production. Cline traces the environmental impact of the production of synthetic fibers and natural fibers, pollutants from dyes, and the effectiveness of textile recycling. Perhaps because they assume it will be the most challenging, students like to assign me one of two options here: wearing only natural fibers or wearing only clothing made from recycled materials. While most of our clothing is made from synthetic materials or blends, it isn't terribly hard to find at least a tee shirt and a skirt in one's closet that's 100% cotton, but paying enough attention to how one's clothing is made to know it's recycled or otherwise sustainably produced is a much larger challenge that opens up conversations with my students about the intersections of class and sustainability.

As a result of Dress Your Professor, I have not only increased the amount of clothing in my closet that's made in the United States, but I have also begun to consciously purchase clothing made from recycled or otherwise sustainably produced materials. I currently own three items that fall under this rubric, primarily because sustainable fashion is often much more expensive than equivalent styles sold at fast fashion chains. When I discuss this fact with my students in class, this opens up conversations about privilege, whiteness, and environmentalism. To an 18-year-old relying on scholarships and student loans, spending \$218 on a dress from sustainable retailer Reformation, like the one I'm wearing in the below Instagram post made from recycled vintage deadstock, seems astronomical. The Rothy's flats, made from recycled water bottles, also subject my students to sticker shock with their \$145 price tag. As a professional in my mid-30s, I have more disposable income to invest in clothing that matches my ethical stance, but that is also afforded to me by my whiteness, my able body, and my cisgender femininity. With my wardrobe and my physical embodiment as an object lesson, students can quickly recognize and discuss how ethical fashion is created and sustained only by a particular type of consumer: a consumer who looks like me.



Figure 3: An Instagram post from my @dressyourprofessor account from May 2019 in which I am wearing clothing made from recycled materials.

Conclusions

By centering style as a pedagogical practice and academic inquiry through my writing assignments and the Dress Your Professor project, I hope to expand the style through which students (and my colleagues) can imagine their place in the academy. My pedagogical practices for this course center my queer femme identity, which I hope serves as a model for students to renegotiate the boundaries of various rhetorical situations for which they may have to compose themselves. Further, when my students draw on their material experiences as the basis for their writing projects, they center themselves in academic discourse, which broadens the scope of academic inquiry. Likewise, by offering myself as an object lesson, I aim for my students to experience how relationships to power shift and change as I negotiate various forms of dress alongside our study of the fashion industry. Sometimes, that means literally divesting myself of the clothes I would usually wear that convey any sense of academic credibility and authority through my particular lens. Sometimes, this means inhabiting the world from my students' point of view, as evidenced by the final Dress Your Professor prompt from the Fall 2018 iteration of this course, where my assigned look made me "indistinguishable from any student in the music department" (Figure 4).



Figure 4: An Instagram post from my @dressyourprofessor account from December 2018 in which I am wearing a grunge-inspired look at the request of my music students.)

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