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**Dress Practices as Embodied
Multimodal Rhetorics**

Exposing the Seams

Professional Dress & the Disciplining of Nonbinary Trans Bodies

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"In an ideal world how you look doesn't matter. But academia is far from an ideal world, as we know all too well. You want to blend into the faculty 'identity' as seamlessly as possible."

– Karen Kelsky, "[On to the Conference Interview!](#)" *The Professor Is In*

Karen Kelsky, the writer and (tenured) ex-academic behind *The Professor Is In* has an entire blog series on "What Not To Wear" in academia. Kelsky's book on academic professionalism has become standardized training for graduate students throughout many universities, and she has built an alt-ac career on demystifying academic professionalization. In "[What Not to Wear](#)," Kelsky details the unspoken strictures of "professional dress" from graduate school, through the gauntlet of job market interviews, and into one's assistant professorship.

With few caveats, Kelsky's "clothing rules" are strictly gendered. Men, she advises, should buy a "new suit fresh for the interview season ... tailored so that the sleeves and pants hit [them] at the proper spots." Women, she adds, must also buy new suits that are "stylish, well-cut, [and] fitted," but not black, "which can be too severe." Only as an aside does Kelsky hint at gender-nonconformity, suggesting (however vaguely) that "butch dykes and transgendered [sic] candidates will have other requirements."

In an additional fashion [blog post](#), Kelsky (herself a femme) references both Ellen Degeneres and her "old school butch dyke" partner to suggest that butches not hide who they are during the interview process. She closes her blog by linking to the prohibitively expensive UK-based [Butch Clothing Company](#). A cursory perusal of the company's pricing chart (right) invites further questions about Kelsky's ability to "read the room." Few grad students can afford the price of an airline ticket (or conference fee) for a job interview—let alone a bespoke suit worth more than a month's salary.

The "other requirements" Kelsky references for transgender candidates never again surface. Ostensibly, with her caveat about butches now complete, Kelsky assumes that her sartorial advice covers all bases. Nonbinary, agender, and genderfluid candidates—many of whom

identify as neither masculine or feminine of center—are left to interpret these binaristic expectations of professional comportment on their own.

Of course, Kelsky is not individually responsible for the stuffy, elitist notion of academic professionalism that suffuses her advice. We recognize the value in codifying and thus making legible the unspoken rules that govern respectability politics in higher education. While such unspoken rules pervade the academy, we illustrate how these standards become exaggerated during three moments of academic space-time: when one is “in a PhD program,” “on the job market,” and “on the tenure-track.” When we focus on training newcomers to “fit in,” rather than examining the design and limitations of that fit, we end up reifying the very standards that undergird extant social hierarchies and, in turn, exacerbating a climate of precarity and disposability in higher ed. Advice like Kelsky’s brings into high relief the ways the academy’s imaginary amplifies ableist, racist, cissexist, classist, heterosexist, and sizeist social norms that render some bodies as unimaginable and thus incapable of embodying any form of professionalism. Because these mechanisms of exclusion often operate outside of direct verbal exchanges, we require an analytical vocabulary attuned to the rhetoricity of embodied, multimodal gatekeeping and its attendant resistance. In this essay, we take “dress” to mean all forms of professional comportment, extending beyond (though inclusive of) actual attire. Rather, the appearance of “professionalism” is produced and regulated by a vast network of behaviors that demand further scrutiny and re-evaluation.

The following essay further explores the many manifestations of professional dress and its exclusionary assumptions through a series of “loose threads.” These are individual anecdotes with which we will stitch together a broader understanding of academe’s social fabric. In writing out our own experiences and attending to one another’s, we offer a collaborative exploration of academic professionalism and its implications for nonconforming faculty and students. Of course, we could not provide an exhaustive account of marginal experiences in the academy, but we hope that by making space for one another’s stories, we invite further considerations of how unspoken standards perpetuate extant social hierarchies.

Method: Dialogic Storytelling as Sewing

In keeping with the textile themes implied in *professional dress*, we encourage readers to visualize our method of dialogic storytelling in terms of machine-sewing, in which two pieces of

Pricing

Handmade Bespoke Suits with an incredible choice of Fabrics, Linings & Detailing.

Our 2 piece suit (Jacket & Trouser or Trouser & Waistcoat) prices start at £1150 and our 3 piece suit prices start at £1400 but the average spend prices below give a great idea of what you may invest in the perfect suit for you depending on the fabric, lining and detailing you choose.

Average Spend for a two piece suit (Jacket & Trouser or Trouser & Waistcoat) is £1250 depending on fabrics chosen

Average spend for 3 piece suit is £1550 depending on fabrics chosen

Figure 1: A sample of prices from Butch Clothing Company.

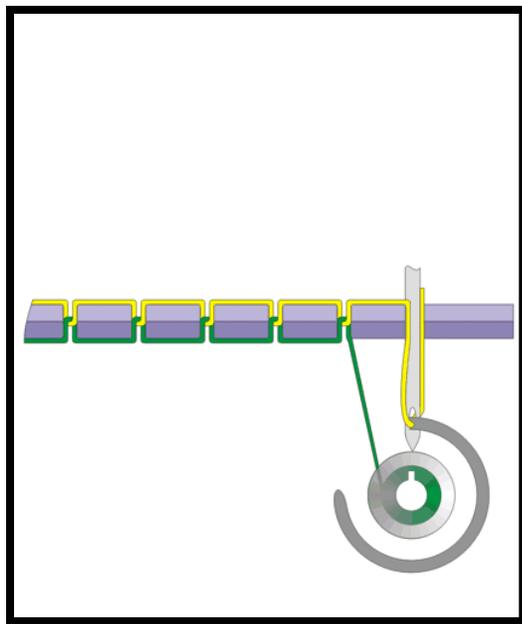


Figure 2: A model for dialogic storytelling.

cloth are brought together with a top stitch and a bottom stitch (and then finalized with a backstitch) in order to create a seam. Below, we present six woven narratives (pieces of fabric, if you will) in which we recount our experiences navigating professional comportment as multimargenbies. Engaging in what Ratcliffe (2006) and Booth (2004) describe as rhetorical listening, we identify common threads and stitch them together to create three different seams. This work of stitching enables us to “accentuate commonalities and differences” (Ratcliffe 1999, 204) among experiences while also cultivating a “broader cultural literacy” (207). Our emphasis on seams here isn’t just a heuristic for understanding our organizational strategy; it is also an important rhetorical device. In higher ed, successful professional comportment is understood to be seamless, natural. In contrast, we see

rhetorical work as exposing the seams—the ableist, racist, classist, cissexist, and heteropatriarchal expectations of professionalism (masquerading as neutral, natural, seamless—which press so painfully against our bodies). Throughout, we use footnotes to echo and emphasize such moments of tension in each other’s stories. Jo’s remarks will appear in *green times new roman font*, and GPat’s are in *purple trebuchet font*. Finally, just as in sewing, we finish with a backstitch, putting our narratives both in conversation with each other and with theorists like Sara Ahmed (2012), Dean Spade (2010), Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. (2012), and others to illustrate the ways that academe both desires and punishes difference. Throughout, we map the ostensibly neutral (or altogether unspoken) guidelines for professional comportment, illuminating their operations as one of many mechanisms through which difference is regulated and punished.

Seam 1: Made to Fit

This seam traces the thread of “fit” in both physical and social spaces. Prospective students and faculty are often advised to consider whether a campus feels “like a good fit.” Campuses, like clothes, though, are already designed with particular bodies in mind. For those who live and move outside the presumed norm, “fit” becomes a manner of exclusion. Institutions that expect all newcomers to fit extant patterns and expectations are operating under an inherently conservative and assimilationist framework. The following stories explore how these two ill-fitting academics have tailored, at times, ourselves to our surroundings, and at others, our surroundings to ourselves.

GPat’s 1st Thread: “Not a Good Fit”

So much of the discomfort I’ve encountered in professional spaces stems from rigid assumptions of what professional bodies ought to look like. Professional bodies are assumed to be easy

to read and easy to place. I'm not easy to read: I have been read as a woman, other times as a man, but I am neither. I have been read as gay, but I am actually pansexual. I'm often read as white, and indeed I am, but I am also multiethnic. I have been read as middle-class, but I have a working-class positionality. I've been read as neurotypical, but I'm dyslexic. And though I am a forty-year-old professor, I am still often read as a student. All this to say, because I can be difficult to read, I am also often read as out of place—as not a “good fit.”

In grad school, among my cisgender queer friends, my embodiment was frequently the subject of conversation: “What’s your thing? Are you butch or femme?” My attempts to situate myself as genderqueer (a decade before the term *nonbinary* came into popular consciousness) were repeatedly reframed in ciscentric terms as “punk queer androgyny.”

Faculty, on occasion, also fixated on my gender comportment—especially as I prepared for the job market. During a mock interview, grad faculty’s critique of my performance had little to do with my answers to their questions. First, they focused on my outfit—which, they observed, might be more fitting if I’d set the look off with a pair of heels. Then, contradicting their initial comments about my lack of femininity, their second critique highlighted my excessive femininity: my voice, they observed, seemed “too high” for my gender expression.¹

Such discomfort about my gender incongruity would later, on the job market, be echoed in micro-aggressive comments by search committee members. I watched while peers with fewer pubs and fewer teaching/research awards got snatched up by departments. Meanwhile, the only follow-up responses I received after interviews (when I was contacted at all) explained that I “just wasn’t the right fit” for their department culture.

¹ **Jo:** As an actor throughout high school and college, I was often told that my voice was “too low” for the (women) characters that I was supposed to be playing. I spent countless hours with coaches training me to use the higher register of my voice. Even now, in uncomfortable situations, I catch myself unconsciously tapping into that register as if still trying to inhabit a role not made for me.

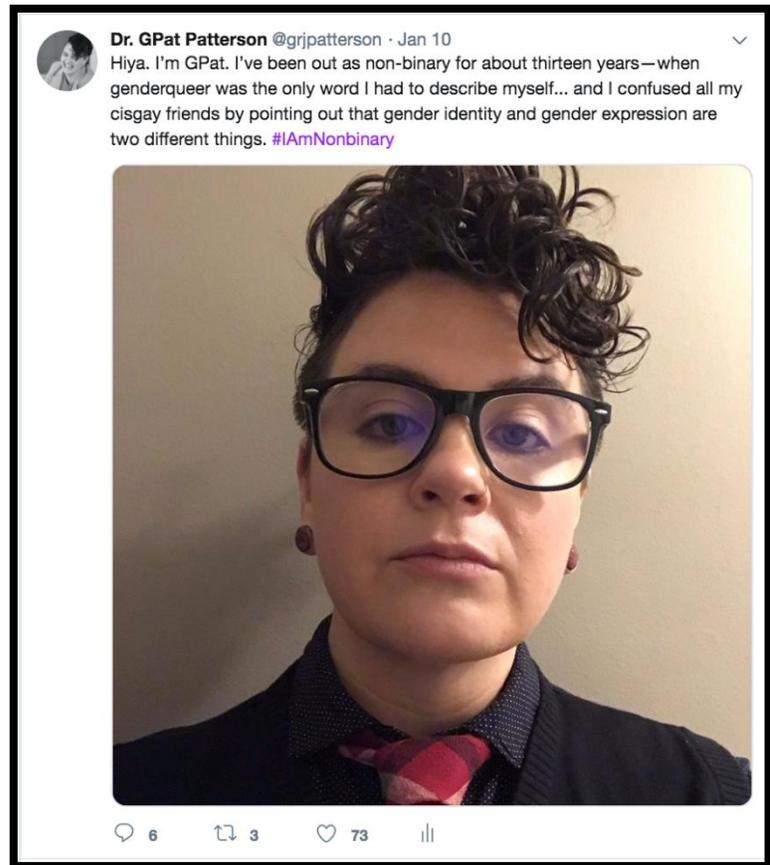


Figure 3: Image of a tweet by GPat.

Applying for non-tenure-track jobs, I learned, didn't open a person up to the same embodied scrutiny. This makes sense. Since NTT faculty exist at the bottom of departmental hierarchies, they tend to be ignored. Indeed, in the five years I spent working on the non-tenure-track, I encountered just one instance of blatant cissexism (a department chair who responded "What? Are we living in APA format now?" when I asked him to introduce me to the department as G Patterson, instead of using my legal name). Indeed, if it weren't for the job precarity non-tenure-track faculty face, I'd likely have never applied for a tenure-track job again. But I did. And, once again, my dread about professional embodiment was waiting for me.

During my second round on the market, though, I decided to do professionalism on my own terms. Having soured on oft-shared guidelines about attire, I sought out an alternative dress-clothes literacy. I followed lgbt fashion accounts, like [Qwear](#), [DapperQ](#), and [i dream of dapper](#) on Instagram.² I reached out to lgbt friends, who were kind enough to open their closets to me.

And I read just about every trans blog I could find to discern which fashion choices would work for my 5'9", 200-pound frame.

My eventual look resulted in a swishy Mixer Rogers vibe:³ short curly pompadour; gauged earrings; makeup; glasses; "women's" perfume; gray and blue (not black) men's dress pants; clearance-rack springtime floral dress shirts; coordinating floral-print ties boasting pink, yellow, and purple blooms; and tight-fitting sweater vests (in lieu of blazers).

But because literacy is *about process*—*not product*, it feels important for me to resist a tidy happy story and instead expose the seams (the skipped stitches, the tangled undersides) of my fashion journey. For example, it seems worth mentioning the ways in which I was read as out of place in gender-segregated spaces: the clerks in the



Figure 4: A religious tract.

² **Jo:** I love these! My gateway into genderqueer fashion was [DapperBoi](#), though mostly I "window shopped" since their items were beyond my means as a graduate student/postdoc. Your story reminds me of the anecdotes I've gathered from organizers working in community arts and writing programs for LGBTQ+ youth of color. I consistently hear from these folks how they have been denied access to knowledge—how none of the mainstream channels through which they were to learn about their pasts and their possible futures had even conceived of people like them (rather, like us). So often the genres through which marginal communities share and build knowledge are dismissed as frivolous or anti-rigor (social media, letters, zines, etc.), but these queer "ephemera" (Munoz, 1996) are the means through which other worlds are made possible.

³ **Jo:** I so admire this vibe (and your characterization of it).

men’s department who’d ignore me even when I’d ask for help—or the clerks in the women’s department whose emphasis on *help* in “How can I *help* you” indicated not only an unwillingness to help but also a warning that I’d better leave before mall security arrived. It seems worth mentioning my encounter with a recommended local tailor, who placed a witnessing tract in my hands and shoved me out of her shop. It seems worth mentioning the TSA extra pat-downs I received, every goddamn time I flew to an interview. It seems worth mentioning the scowling deans, the frequent misgendering, and the super awkward commentary about which bathrooms I’d use during campus interviews.

My wardrobe, forged like so many pieces of armor, does little to deflect the bullshit I navigate in professional and other gender-segregated spaces—but it *does* allow me to flout expectations of professional embodiment with a defiant, trans enbie, queer differánce.

Jo’s 1st Thread: Not Fitting In

GPat’s imaginative, DIY defiance through trans/queer embodiment calls up a story I had long set aside. At the end of my final year of high school, I had grand plans to sneak into my senior prom. I was grounded because my parents and I were fighting about everything *but* the queer relationship we all knew I was in but none of us could talk about. For related reasons, my only “dress clothes” were actual dresses that I never wore except after losing particularly explosive arguments. For prom, though, I had borrowed a tuxedo from the school drama closet. The vest had lost a button and, in my first-ever self-taught sewing adventure, I managed to stitch the vest to my own pants before managing to undo and redo it all in a hideous-but-functional patch job.⁴

I remember that every article of clothing held the perennial musk of the costume closet. The threads were coarse and scratchy. I had to bundle the waist of the pants with a poorly matched belt, and I rolled up the pant legs to keep them off the floor. The vest billowed off my body—as did the shirt, whose shoulders neared my elbows. This is still what I associate with “dressing up”—the sensation of smallness.

As a professor, I no longer have to borrow clothes from a costume closet. As an adult who has worked/is working to rebuild a relationship with my parents— to collaboratively rewrite the scripts around (gender)queerness in which we have all been immersed — I no longer own or force myself into dresses. Still, I am 5’2” and somewhere between 120-125lbs now that I’ve stabilized my hypopituitarism. Between my small frame, my ethnicity (Taiwanese American), and the fact that I am relatively young for a professor (30 years old), I was/am presumed-student⁵ in nearly all spaces.

⁴ **GPat:** There’s something so striking about this—the borrowed vestments from the drama closet and the experience of learning to sew in that space of tension. I can’t help but think about my own story of learning to tailor clothes (also poorly) after that tailor threw me out of her shop. Sometimes I think: to be trans is to develop a keen and embodied sense of multimodal literacy. When the world slams doors in our faces, we develop the skill-sets needed to build new ones.

⁵ **GPat:** Too often, faculty dismiss this as a good problem to have: “Oh, live it up while you can—it’s good that people read you as young.” But such responses seem to willfully misrecognize how

In my first year as university faculty, I began setting aside money for more “professional” attire. My professional wardrobe consists mostly of “men’s” dress shirts and pants found online in the smallest available sizes. After too many confrontational “can I *help* you [out of this store]”s, I buy all my clothes online. Unlike GPat, I never graduated beyond my amateurish button-replacement. However, I am fortunate enough to have found exactly one friendly tailor who helps me shorten pant legs and take in jackets and vests. I’ll never forget the sensation of cinching a vest that’s been fitted to my torso. The fabric was heavy with the density characteristic of “men’s” clothes. The sharp cut of the shoulders gave me a breadth I don’t normally have in “women’s” attire. The tailor had kept the chest wide so I could button the vest without binding, but also pulled the waist in so that the fabric followed the curve of my ribs. It was the first article of clothing that ever held the shape of my body “like armor.”⁶

Trading t-shirts and hoodies for collared shirts and ties, however, brought a new set of problems. Whereas bathroom policing was an occasional occurrence in my life before, it is now an everyday concern. Jeans and sweatshirts, as casual wear, get to traverse the gender spectrum with a little more freedom. With more “formal” attire, however, the divisions ossify. In streetwear, I appear androgynous by most people’s standards. Most strangers avoid pronouns when they meet me, and I’m frequently hailed by an apologetic “sir—ma’am.”⁷ If I put on a \$9 tie, though, I am almost always read as male. Much of learning to dress “professionally” has been learning to decode, anticipate, and recode the gendered and classed significations attached to physical appearance.

I have a general resistance to focusing on bathrooms when discussing trans experience since the topic of bathroom bills has dominated and narrowed the scope of conversations about trans justice.⁸ That said, bathroom policing is a very real way that trans and gender nonconforming people are kept out of public spaces.

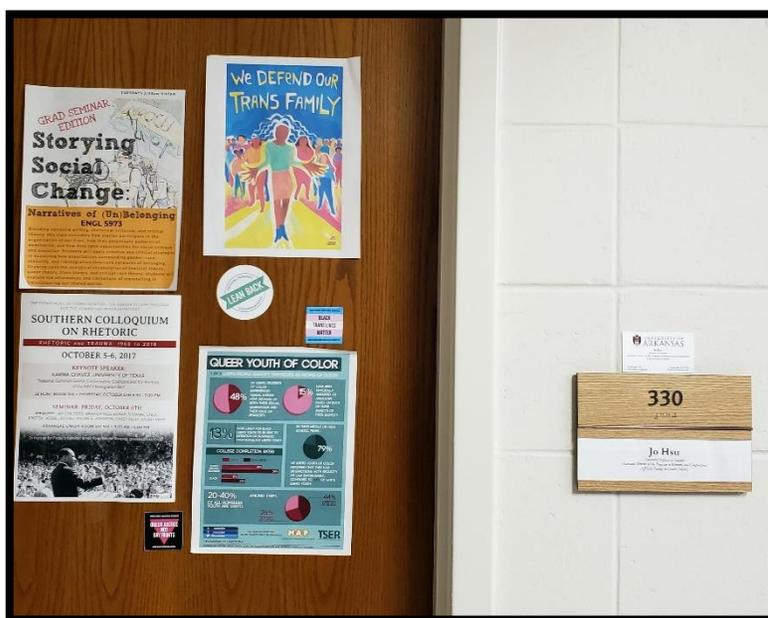


Figure 5: Image of Jo's office door.

multimarg fac being read as students is an act of conferred dominance (Johnson, 2006, pp. 23-24). It's feels like a stealthy way of communicating we don't belong--that our bodies cannot be imagined as professional.

⁶ GPat: What a feeling!

⁷ GPat: Ah, yes: to be “s'ma'amed.”

⁸ In the words of C. Riley Snorton, “Media focus on transgender people’s abilities to use the bathroom of their choice obscures a more urgent conversation about what modes of dispossession are possible under the ruse of state inclusion” (2017)

In the bathroom down the hall from my office—maybe twenty steps from the “We Defend Our Trans Family” poster on my door—a woman informed me I was “in the wrong bathroom.”⁹ On a regular basis, women will open the door, see me, and turn right back around. I experience inordinate gratitude when I run into a colleague who greets me with a familiar smile. In other buildings, confrontations are almost inevitable.

This past August, I was teaching a summer course in the Business building, in a classroom right beside the women’s bathroom. During the class break, I was washing my hands when a young woman entered. Predictably, she pivoted on her heel and retreated immediately.

At that point, most women prefer to wait outside until I leave. Some return to *demand* that I leave, at which point, I respond with my most-polite, feminine-pitched voice to signal that they are mistaken. At which point, the whole affair still becomes my fault. In Houston, a woman blamed it on my hair; the short crop made her assume she could gender me on sight, and that gave her the authority¹⁰ to yell at me. In Minneapolis, my blazer was to blame. In Northwest Arkansas, where I live, it’s this slowly expanding “professional” wardrobe of dress shirts and ties shifting me from one category of unbelonging to another.

Like always, I tried to leave quickly. On that particular day, though, the door burst back open just as I reached for it. The woman returned with two friends in tow—another young woman in a (“women’s”) business suit and a young man who looked prepared to confront (/assault?) some imagined offender. Everyone stopped when they saw me, drying my hands, with my strained, let’s-not-make-a-scene smile. The man’s slack jaw and speechlessness made it apparent that I was not what he had pictured. Before his surprise wore off, I darted past the trio and back into the hall. The door shut on their uproarious laughter,¹¹ but it barely dampened the sound.

In another place, in another memory, this *is* a confrontation. In England, it is a bouncer who grabs me from behind and pulls me out the door. In North Carolina, it’s a near-hysterical woman who accuses me of following her into the bathroom. In the Minneapolis airport, it’s

⁹ **GPat:** A million times yes. And, while I totally understand why you’d be reticent to talk about bathrooms, your sharing this story feels so important—because it emphasizes the need for all-gender bathrooms. For the first time in fifteen years, I’m teaching at a campus that has about 3-5 all-gender bathrooms per building. It’s amazing. And ya know, for all the bathroom panic about the Big Bad Trans, I’m heartened by how many students (of all genders) use these bathrooms without issue. It’s almost as if people go in there... to pee.

¹⁰ **GPat:** This is so real. Julia Serano (2007) refers to this phenomenon as *gendering*, the compulsive way people rely on superficial visual and audio cues to clock people in order to read them as men or women (p. 163). Your story highlights the entitlement some cis people feel to assess others based on their gendered standards—and the way enbies are set up to fail in such bigender systems.

¹¹ **GPat:** While most of our footnotes emphasize the connections in our stories, this is an important way in which our stories don’t overlap. My white-skin privilege insulates me from (even the threat of) such physical altercations. I say this to emphasize the failures of whitewashed neoliberal visions of inclusion, which might say, “Well, maybe TSA needs trans competency training.” Nope! Any vision of trans justice that doesn’t center racial justice is flat-out bullshit.

three TSA agents debating quietly about who gets to search me because they're too embarrassed to ask about my gender. In this story, though, in this place where I work, where I am supposed to be the poised professional, it is none of those things. In this story, I inhale the surge of my heartbeat, exhale the tide of memory, and I reenter my classroom.

Seam 2: Accessories as Self-Assertion

Whereas the first seam explored traditional notions of clothing and dress, we wish to make clear the ways that sartorial politics are socially and situationally dependent. In many ways, the profession *dresses us*. Most of us are employed by institutions with much longer histories than our own. Those histories have accrued into social and structural patterns suited for particular individuals. In this sense, all of us put on this institutional memory when we become a member of its community—however marginal. To examine this aspect of professionalism, we turn from professional dress to professional comportment. Much like Susan Stryker's concept of gender comportment, we understand professional comportment as the ways we mark ourselves (and are marked) in the workplace beyond matters of attire, as well as how we are disciplined by institutions for our failures to conform to the roles expected of us (Stryker 2008, p. 12). Our narratives below illustrate how failures to adhere to such patterns can render a person unrecognizable—and how certain attempts to alter these social/structural patterns (so as to become recognizable) have the deleterious effect of rendering a person as unprofessional.

Jo's 2nd Thread: Binary Code(s)

In the first week of my first semester as an assistant professor, I couldn't access my email, the Blackboard pages for any of my courses, or my own office. Though my job contract and all my correspondence with the university identified me as "Jo," the web management system generated all my university accounts under my legal name.¹² This meant that my students and anyone who interacted with me over email would see my deadname first—a name I no longer use; a name that has never felt like mine, but rather, like the name for someone I failed to become.

I contacted the IT department immediately to request a change. Unfortunately, it would take over a week for my new account to be up and running. In the interim, I couldn't access anything that required a digital ID. Without a digital personhood, I couldn't use university email or even check out library books. While the university had issued me an ID card with the name "Jo," the office in charge of distributing keys refused to release the ones to my office due to the mismatch between the name on file and the one on my ID—nevermind that my employee

¹² **GPat:** Gods yes! I've had to deal with this at every single institution. And you're right: sometimes the process takes weeks and months--and the entire burden of this process is placed on new faculty members. Some folks might say (as they have to me): "Well, why don't you change your name?" But that misses the point that (1) we shouldn't have to and (2) HR seems to have zero problem allowing cis faculty/staff use shortened versions of their names, their middle names, or even a gd nickname--but with trans people, they act like they're making an unbearable accommodation.

number remained the same, or that I had a driver's license and credit cards that confirmed my identity.

At no point during this series of events did any one person have to think anti-trans thoughts. In fact, it is perhaps the distinct *absence* of human engagement and imagination that resulted in my exclusion from both virtual and physical university spaces. In this instance, there was already a set of policies and procedures in place, almost entirely automated by computers that input and output in binary code. Without human intervention, it runs independently as a form of trans exclusion.

Within that same computer system, the students at this university—at many universities—cannot input a “chosen name” or “pronoun” on their class rosters. When instructors do not ask students for self-introductions on the first day of class, they are more likely to misgender or deadname trans or nonbinary students. Those students must then decide whether or not to out themselves in front of a room of strangers. They must risk the discomfort of their peers and their instructor. They must guess at whether or not the professional in the front of the room will be sympathetic or hostile. Often, they decide that it is not worth the risk—that they are unwilling to be the problem on that first day. So it goes that even the most well-intentioned members of university faculty might have no idea that they are reinforcing a violence with every utterance of a name.

The imaginative forms of “accessorizing” that GPat describes below emerge in response to such passive (yet effective) forms of exclusion. So often, people whose experiences fall beyond dominant social grammars need to find ways to (re)mark upon (and thus augment) those rules of engagement. For example: email signatures. Trans and nonbinary folks and allies will include

their pronouns in email signatures or other text-based profiles as an attempt to center conversations about gender. Signature pronouns are an acknowledgment that people can never assume someone's gender based on appearance, vocal tone, or names. They respond to social and institutional norms that do not regularly facilitate conversations about gender identity. It is *because* strangers



Figure 6: Image from Jo's Instagram profile.

will go to great lengths to *guess* my gender identity rather than ask directly that I must invent (or, some might say, impose) rhetorical situations¹³ in which I pre-empt or revise assumptions made about me.

GPat's 2nd Thread: "Too Many Accommodations"

Recently, while teaching a unit on bisexual erasure in my LGBT Studies course, my students and I read an article by Gonzalez, Ramirez, and Galupo (2016) in which they forward the concept of "bisexual marking." This term, the authors argue, calls attention to the strategies bisexual and pansexual people employ to combat erasure and other forms of microaggressions in a world that can only imagine people as either gay or straight (p. 510). While the term was new to me, the concept itself seemed familiar, given how often my pansexual orientation has caused discomfort for monosexual folks. But that wasn't the only reason the term stuck with me.

As a person who has been "sirred" and "ma'amed" far more often than I've been "mixtered," I constantly find myself engaged in supplemental forms of communication—textual, digital, and symbolic—in order to be recognized (both interpersonally and institutionally) as a nonbinary trans person. To highlight the additional labor of fighting to be acknowledged in a settler-colonialist culture that insists people are only ever men or women, I forward the concept of **nonbinary marking**. Lest this concept be understood in the rosy terms of "visibility," it feels important to emphasize that there are, sometimes, steep consequences to (insisting on) being recognized. Indeed, not all forms of nonbinary marking are equal, and some trans rhetorical tactics are tolerated more than others.

The subtle commonplace ways nonbinary people assert their gender, through **implicit nonbinary marking**, seems to be preferred in the workplace. Such tactics tend to be preferred because (1) they can be ignored, (2) the labor of communicating one's gender identity falls squarely on the shoulders of nonbinary



Figure 7: Image from GPat's Twitter profile.

¹³ For more on such rhetorical situations, I appreciate Dean Spade's (2018) thoughtful consideration of "Pronoun Go-Rounds" and their risks, limitations, and affordances. More so than insisting upon any single "correct" way to go about shifting cultural norms and conversations, trans scholars and advocates urge us to more thoughtful engagement with the terms we use, how we arrive at them, and how they shape our access to shared spaces.

people, and (3) most importantly, they compel no real response from individuals or institutions.¹⁴

In my professional life, I engage in implicit nonbinary marking in a number of ways: I include my pronouns in the signature of my university email, along with a [helpful hyperlink](#) to FAQs about nonbinary genders. I include my pronouns in every publication and professional bio. On my social media accounts, where I frequently interact with colleagues and former students, I not only include pronouns in all of my bios but I also frequently share (and sometimes create) content meant to educate people about nonbinary identities and the institutional barriers enbies sometimes face. Finally, in conversations with new colleagues and students, I find a way (early on) to refer to myself in the third person in order to communicate the pronouns I use (e.g. *You might be thinking: “What in the heck are they talking about in Assignment 2?”*).

I also engage in implicit nonbinary marking through “accessorizing” in professional spaces: Like Jo, I decorate my office door with nonbinary insignia—including a very obvious they/them pronoun sticker right under my office name placard. My office decor similarly boasts nonbinary stickers, posters, and pop culture artifacts. In recent years—because people tend to encounter me with such professional accessories on hand—I have also begun to decorate my laptop, planner, and gradebook with stickers that include: they/them pronouns, trans flags, and popular nonbinary animated characters from pop culture (like Stevonnie and Smoky Quartz from Cartoon Network’s *Steven Universe*).

This latter strategy of nonbinary marking seems to be particularly effective for Gen Z students,



Figure 8: Stickers!

who tend to notice my laptop/gradebook stickers with far greater frequency than they notice how I gender myself in class or in my email signature. In fact, I receive about a baker’s dozen of communications per semester (in hallways, in emails, or before/after class) in which students cite one of my enbie-marked accessories as a prompt for seeking clarity on my pronouns, coming out to me as nonbinary, identifying their connection to nonbinary friends, or asking lingering questions about the nuances of gender identity.¹⁵ Alas,

¹⁴Jo: Bingo. They don’t have to listen—or even acknowledge that they heard anything at all.

¹⁵Jo: Similar experience here, and these responses give me back a little of that energy—all it takes to come out over and over again. I want to emphasize the connection you’re making here: These accessories are not so much personal as social. Though the labor falls on you (over and over again), you are in fact adding to/augmenting the discursive architecture of gender in these spaces. Your “accessories” provide

these attempts at nonbinary marking are rarely as impactful for my colleagues as they are for my students.

In contrast to implicit nonbinary marking, *explicit nonbinary marking* is a far more risky endeavor, namely because (1) it's harder to ignore nonbinary people when they're taking up space but also because (2) it tends to make a direct claim one's audience, and (3) it often requires actual labor in the form of accountability or solidarity. Whereas implicit nonbinary marking may be disregarded as one colleague's eccentric whims, explicit nonbinary marking—no matter the circumstances which call for it—tends to be interpreted as unprofessional and uncollegial. Because explicit nonbinary marking tends to surface as a redress to cissexist discrimination or structural inequity, nonbinary people who engage in such tactics—as I will illustrate in my anecdote below—are often understood as line-jumpers who seek “too many accommodations” or as ungrateful supplicants who “take advantage” of their employer's “generosity.”

One of the more notable times I've engaged in explicit nonbinary marking began quite on accident, while I was on the job market. I'd been invited for an on-campus interview by a research-heavy Catholic university. Beyond a momentary experience of surprised delight, I hadn't given a second thought when the search chair asked for my pronouns along with a phonetic spelling of my name and the title of my job talk.

Then, on the eve of my interview, I received two calls in succession: The first was from a Wisconsin-based trans group, who wanted to warn me that a well-known conservative professor had published a screed about me on his blog. The second call was from the search committee chair, who offered me vague apologies without ever mentioning the blog in question. Harried, he assured me everything would be fine and to come to campus as scheduled.

After our phone call, I read the blog. What I'd initially assumed to be outrage over the content of my job talk (on the intersection of lgbtq issues, pedagogy, and Christianity) had actually turned out to be outrage over my pronouns. Not only had the professor in question ridiculed my gender identity as political correctness run amuck in the English department but he also published the day, time, and location of my job talk—which (unbeknownst to me) had been advertised as a public “diversity” event.¹⁶

Recalling a past experience where an office-hours meeting with a phobic student nearly resulted in physical violence, I placed a follow-up call to the chair, expressed concern for my safety, and asked if it would be possible to limit the audience of my job-talk to department members only. Whatever sympathy the chair had previously communicated had evaporated.

avenues for your students to initiate conversations about gender—to pose questions that they may not have been comfortable asking in other spaces.

¹⁶ **Jo:** Well isn't that just icing on this whole, absurd, bigotry cake.

mu-warrior.blogspot.com/2016/01/marquettes-english-department-gender.h

8	Patterson, G G (“gee”) or GPat (“gee- pat”) Pronouns: They/Them or Ze/Zir (RhetComp)	M 2/8 3:30- 4:50 MH 105	“Negotiating Difficult Dialogues at the LGBTQ-Religious Junction.”
9	[REDACTED] [REDACTED] Pronoun: Her/she (RhetComp)	W 2/10 3:30- 4:50 MH 105	“Counterstory: The Writing and Rhetoric of Critical Race Theory”

Of course, almost all the people on the program are happy with the traditional pronouns. But a certain “G Patterson” wants to be “They/Them” even though he or she (or whatever) is just one person. Or even worse “Ze/Zir.”

Why Not?

So why not simply call people what they want to be called? Isn't that just polite?

In the first place, it puts a huge burden on everybody in society to learn how each and every person wants to be addressed. Referring to a female-looking person as “she” can become a social gaffe. Using “Ze” sounds downright bizarre.

Figure 9: Scenes from a transphobe's blog.

(and, in GPat's story, bone), the structures designed to yield conforming bodies will also damage us in those places where we exceed their boundaries. In the narratives below, we consider the physical and emotional impact of nonbinary unbelonging, exposing the ways cissexist cultures act upon and almost inevitably damage trans and gender nonconforming bodyminds. These stories, however, are not just about taking damage, but also about pushing forward—about imagining and working towards more inclusive worlds.

¹⁷ **Jo:** This is all so infuriating. Worse still that you are the one positioned as violating professional decorum, whereas internet tantrums about gender diversity and calls for public outrage about it are regarded as natural adversity for a nonbinary candidate to “deal with.” If I may tie this back to my thread, I'm thinking about how TGNC exclusion is enforced through the threat of violence without any need for explicit declarations or policies. Again, how inaction is enough in a transphobic system.

¹⁸ **Jo:** Looking ahead to the next thread, I'm thinking about the ways that ableist systems construct particular individuals as burdensome through the language of accommodation. That is, the individualist emphasis of neoliberal discourse makes it the responsibility of each individual to seek small accommodations rather than tasking the overall institution with conceptualizing and implementing more broadly accessible social and physical architectures.

Not only was my request “unfair to other candidates”¹⁷ but, the chair observed, my request for such an “accommodation”¹⁸ reflected my “inability to deal with adversity.”

As you might have guessed, I did not receive a job offer. But, as I'm frequently advised by well-meaning colleagues concerned about my web footprint: the transphobic blog continues to show up as a top result when someone googles (as folks sometimes do) “GPat Patterson pronouns.” As you can imagine, this is one accessory I'd sure as hell return for store credit—if only I could.

Seam 3: Marked Bodies

This seam tracks the ways our bodies take on the imprint of our mis-fitting. As constrictive clothing will impress on flesh

Jo's 3rd Thread: "You Look Fine"

In January, a week before the new semester, I was scheduled to interview a job candidate over Skype. Two days before the interview, I was in the emergency room, texting requests and apologies with my left hand while trying to hold my right elbow still for the IV: Can someone please check on my dog? I will send feedback for these documents tomorrow. I'll respond to your email when I can type with both hands. I might not make the panel on Thursday, but I'll try to find a substitute, and I'll still come if I can drive.

I couldn't drive on Thursday. The pain had been escalating for months while the new insurance company buried me in appeals paperwork for medication that had been covered under my last insurer. I was behind on finding a new care provider after starting my new job because the first doctor I saw subjected me to an interrogation about my name, gender presentation, and identity. In the two minutes he spent with me, he asked more questions about why I "needed to be different"¹⁹ than about my physical symptoms. For reasons I can't explain, he then clasped my (unoffered) hand between both of his and told me, "I can tell you are very uncomfortable." (No shit, dude). When I decided I wouldn't return to his office, I discovered that the only other gastroenterology clinic in town refused to take any patients who had seen other doctors for the same condition. Despite my repeated pleas, they refused to admit me because they "don't do second opinions."²⁰

So, by the start of the new year, I had razor wire for intestines and drove myself to the emergency room where a CT scan confirmed small bowel inflammation. The morning of the interview, I was on two antibiotics and anti-nausea pills for the side effects of the antibiotics. I showered the fevered sweat from my face and hair, pulled on a collared shirt, and shut myself in my home office for a three-way Skype call.

After the interview, I debriefed with my colleagues. "If you hadn't told us you were sick, I would've had no idea," one remarked,²¹ "You look so well put together." It was probably intended as a compliment, but all I could hear were seven years of doctors insisting, "you look fine." It took seven years for a doctor to finally stop recommending more sleep and less stress,

¹⁹ **GPat:** I'm just so fucking furious thinking about how this doctor's transphobia landed you in the ER. Most of the time when people think about trans folks and healthcare, they fixate on gender-affirming care. I don't think it dawns on people how the simple fact of being trans can be a barrier to receiving health care that has NOTHING to do with a person's gender identity. In medical settings, cissexism can be deadly (Grant et al., 2011).

²⁰ **Jo:** In the interest of "exposing the seams" and overall self-reflexivity, I note that I left the doctor's transphobia out of my initial draft of this story. I began the story too late—with pain rather than the racialized and gendered presumptions that have enabled that pain to go unacknowledged and undertreated. I was so concerned with detailing my experiences of illness that I neglected to trace those experiences to the social forces that contour my access to care. As I remarked to GPat, the doctor's behavior was so commonplace that I hardly registered as noteworthy. I keep this note as a reminder of how easy it is to forget or dismiss the connective threads among marginal experiences—as a reminder that intersectional vocabularies and relationalities are difficult by design, and as a reminder to continue the work of finding those words—however imperfect.

²¹ **GPat:** Seems like a "how are you feeling" would have been appropriate here. Sheesh.

to order the right tests that gave proof to my claims of discomfort. Those same seven years, I learned to read, write, and teach through crushing fatigue, abdominal pain, and dizziness. I learned to distrust my body—to plan as though at any moment I could lose hours or days to nausea or brain fog. I learned to accept these things as normal. Meanwhile, I tried to cloak myself in “productivity.” If I could churn out words and pages, then no one could see my illness as a limitation.

No wonder, though, doctors thought I “looked fine.” I spent so much time and energy performing together-ness that I had no strength for self-advocacy. Before the diagnoses, before the rounds of medication-roulette, before the food diaries and before arriving at a permutation of prescriptions and lifestyle adjustments that gave me a measure of stability, I learned to scaffold a life around pain. By now, my personal calendar exists in a time zone of its own.²² All my deadlines are plotted at least seven days in advance, providing a buffer for unplanned medical care. Between a digestive disorder and a pituitary disorder, balancing my blood sugar is a delicate science. I have pills that must be taken with food and pills that can’t be taken within an hour of food, so my eating schedule is scattered erratically among meetings, teaching, and commutes. I am also getting better at recognizing early signs of inflammation, giving me enough time to manage or reschedule more demanding tasks before the flare worsens.

I am fortunate in that academic life affords such flexibility. That same flexibility has also fostered an unyielding environment that demands mechanistic performance.²³ The expectation of constant productivity is damaging not just for folks with disabilities and illnesses; not just for faculty and students responsible for others’ care; and not just for our individual abilities to have fully-rounded, human lives; but also for the shape of our collective profession. The primary genres used to evaluate faculty productivity make no space for the sorts of time and creativity required to build (and expand) community, to connect the deep knowledges of marginalized peoples to the extant grammars of academic institutions, to translate intricate research into public knowledge, and to channel that knowledge into systemic change – the sorts of undervalued labor²⁴ that faculty of color, trans and queer faculty, and disabled and first-generation faculty have always done.

When my students tell me about their own medical negotiations, I wonder if they—as I did, as I do—struggle with the calculus of disclosure.²⁵ If I didn’t tell my professors, they might interpret

²² Here, I am particularly indebted to Price (in Kerschbaum et al., 2013), Kafer (2013), and Samuels (2017), for their explorations of crip time.

²³ **GPat:** Yes! For at least a decade, I think, newly minted academics have had to contend with what working class people would call the “speedup,” doing more for less. But in addition to that, there’s this way that we’re also not insulated from expectations of the gig economy either (Friedman, 2014).

²⁴ **GPat:** Yes!

²⁵ **GPat:** Jo, I love this phrase: the calculus of exposure. The first four times I was on the job market (twice on the NTT market, twice on the TT market), I was very careful not to disclose that I’m dyslexic. And there always seemed to be a natural place to disclose: when a candidate is asked how they’d work with students with learning disabilities. I only said something the last time because I already had a tenure-track job and figured I’d have little to lose.

my high-pain/low-energy days as disinterest or even disrespect. If I did, I risked being seen as incompetent—a presumption already too often imposed on people of color and trans and queer folks (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012). Even now, as someone who writes and teaches about the impact of personal stories on shared cultures, social structures, and public policy, I have difficulty telling *this* story. More so than with race, sexuality, and gender, I struggle to write about my illness—in part because the invisibility of my conditions gives me a “passing privilege” that I do not have with other aspects of my identity—so I have not had to develop as elaborate a vocabulary for it.

I write this, though, in a country where an estimated 1 in 5 people have an autoimmune condition, and 65% of people have at least one chronic illness. Despite those overwhelming statistics, higher education is structured around the fantasy of an always-well bodymind that might *study* disability, but could never experience it (Dolmage, 2017; Kerschbaum, Eisenman, & Jones, 2017; Kerschbaum et al., 2013; Price, 2011). Among the 65% of U.S. Americans with chronic illness, a smaller percentage identifies as disabled. This is in part because some conditions are more readily accepted/accommodated by the normative world than others, creating artificial medical, legal, and social boundaries that define where “ableness” ends and “impairment” begins.²⁶ In other words, one’s ability to attend to everyday tasks and participate in public life depends heavily on access to adequate care. Our social and professional practices are structured such that particular folks have more ready access to care than others.

GPat’s 3rd Thread: “You’re One of Those People”

Not long after being hired on at my first tenure-track job, I found myself (once again) re/considering my wardrobe. While I had, at that point, mastered interview-wear and (more recently, though not without struggle) even casual-wear for a “new faculty garden cocktail party,” it occurred to me that I had yet to master the art of layering street clothes. Several colleagues had invited me to an outdoor showing of *Labyrinth*, at what they advertised as East Central Indiana’s most accepting townie bar, The Peach. Unsettled by the cacophony of white bearded dudebros inside, I opted to wait outside while my wife, Mandy, ordered us beers. My discomfort on the bar’s makeshift patio was of a different sort: an hour after sundown, it was still a balmy 85 degrees in Muncie, Indiana. I’d worn jeans (because mosquitoes), flip flops (because summer), a tank top (because I needed to cover my binder), and a long-sleeve plaid shirt with the cuffs rolled (to cover the unflattering way the fabric of my binder poked outside my tank). This, I knew, was a common struggle for dfab trans people who bind. In addition to acquiring the medical literacy to diagnose (and then ignore) an occasional bruised rib, many of the dfab trans people I know have also acquired a literacy for layering—an implicit plea to onlookers: “look here, not there”—and a keen self-consciousness that comes from being (quite

²⁶ Scholars have advanced crip theory as a means of scrutinizing “the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations” (Minich, 2016). See also (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Kafer, 2013; Patsavas, 2014; McRuer, 2006; Schalk, 2017).

literally) overdressed for every situation.²⁷ As I waited for Mandy—who had also worn jeans, in a sweet expression of solidarity—I tried not to think about how my chest had threatened a gradual descent beneath the seam of my now soaked binder or how the weight of my sweat-drenched jeans tugged at the underwear. I tried (and failed) to conjure an out of body experience.

In the midst of my attempt at astral projection, it seems, I had also failed to notice that one of my new colleagues had approached for a chat. During my campus interview, this particular colleague had outed himself to me as trans—no doubt in an attempt to laud the department’s trans inclusivity. Now unburdened by such recruiting responsibilities and, apparently, outside the watchful gaze of image-conscious senior faculty, my new colleague seized upon a different opportunity. As if continuing a conversation he’d been having with himself, this faculty member—ten years my junior and hired fresh out of grad school—made a show of looking me up and down, and taking a sip of beer, before commenting: “I get it. You’re one of those people who wears men’s clothes and makeup.”²⁸ Returning his gaze, I assessed his weather-appropriate shorts, his thin t-shirt (unencumbered by a binder), and his smug expression coupled with the jovial quality of his tone—evoking, as it did, the presumed authority of every other straight, white, monied man through time immemorial.

Tactlessness aside, my colleague had (at the very least) accomplished turning my attention away from the heat and toward questions of how I might respond. Given that my colleague had launched his creative writing career around his own coming out story, I was certain he knew that there was a vast difference between a person’s *gender expression* (what you wear, how you style yourself) and a person’s *gender identity* (whether or not, and how, you identify or disidentify with the sex/gender combo at birth). No, I decided, my colleague wasn’t confused about the nuances of gender. Rather, his implication was that *I was confused* about my own gender identity. He meant to communicate that I was an interloper—not “really” trans.

Such gender policing is, sadly, more common within trans communities than you’d imagine (Catalano, 2015); such contests of trans authenticity tend to be initiated by more privileged

²⁷ **Jo:** As GPat acknowledged the divergences in our experiences earlier, I note here that I benefit from inhabiting a body that aligns with the shape most folks associate with nonbinary gender identities. Nonbinary folks can and do dress in any combination of masculine/feminine. I, however, occupy the zone of androgyny that begets more ready acceptance of my nonbinary identity. My slight build means that I don’t have to bind to be read as nonbinary or genderqueer (in spaces where that’s a possibility), and it also means that binding is a less punishing (albeit still bruise-inducing) experience for me.

²⁸ **Jo:** I can’t help but hear this in concert with the remarks about how you weren’t “the right fit.” I hear how normativity compels one to fit into extant categories. Eli Clare puts it better than I can: “Inside their queries live unchecked curiosity, a barrage of stereotypes, and their need to locate us on diagnostic maps, racial and ethnic maps, gender maps” (2017, p. 151). I think about the ways medical and social categories have been used to contain PoC, TGNC folks, queer and disabled folks. The (awful, tactless) questions thrown at you in these stories sound like people working through their own discomfort—their need to shove you into some box that will “fit” their worldview. Without being able to assign you a fixed label, a set narrative, a gentrified corner of their world, they’re left with a cognitive dissonance that destabilizes their worldview. It is not you; it was never you. It is the ways your unapologetic queerness tore through the seams of their own perspectival constraints.

binary-gendered folks who confuse their gender conformity and access to gender-affirming technologies for virtue. And while, no doubt, patrolling the borders of transness manifests in different ways, as a dfab enbie, I have almost exclusively experienced such policing as an indictment of my femme attributes. In the case I've recounted above, it was my makeup. But I can recall just as clearly the trans woman enrolled in my class who "helpfully" recommended a speech pathologist to "take care of" my ostensibly too-high voice. And I've genuinely lost count of the trans guys who've made snide remarks about my femme attire, who've suggested I'd be taken more seriously with a masculine name, or who've cocked a knowing eyebrow at me to suggest they've "caught me" in public with an unbound chest. Surely, some of this is about the need to put nonbinary people in a box, but it is just as much a question of femmephobia—an assertion that any femininity expressed outside the bounds of womanhood must be understood as a demerit (Blair & Hoskin, 2015). Fuck that shit.

Backstitching

In stitching together our stories, we hope to have traced a broader pattern of academic professionalism and the ways it encodes particular bodyminds as inherently unprofessional. Further, by situating academic professionalism within surrounding cultural logics, we emphasize that many of these exclusionary practices are not unique to the academy. Rather, as Iris Marion Young argues, these embedded assumptions about professionalism are the result of an intentional centuries-long moral, scientific, and philosophical campaign to construct marginalized groups as ugly, unruly bodies "in contrast to the purity and respectability of neutral, rational subjects" (2002, p. 125). While surely it might be easier to profess that we academics have passively inherited these assumptions from an already unequal world, this framing dodges what Ratcliffe calls "responsibility logic," which asks us to listen for and respond to the historically situated discourses that condition experiences of un-belonging. Our dialogic exchange above models one possible avenue towards such response-ability. We not only make space for and respond to one another's stories,²⁹ but we trace these narratives³⁰ to the social structures that enable them.

Our examination of professional dress might also be seen as a form of *undressing*. We have stripped away the language of decorum and respectability in which discriminatory patterns are

²⁹ **Jo:** This is my first attempt at a collaborative and dialogic essay. Thank you, GPat, for inviting me to this conversation. The experience of sharing our stories and fitting them together has been more healing than I could have anticipated. So often, marginal academics are isolated (again, by design)—we are the *only* [fill in the blank] in any given space. To hear how someone else encounters similar institutional and social constraints, to have the company and reassurance of your stories, to speak *with* someone rather than "at" those who refuse to listen—this has been a gift. Thank you.

³⁰ **GPat:** Same! Thank you, friend. I've so enjoyed writing this with you and learning/listening alongside you. You're right: there is something super powerful about being able to speak with each other as we write this. So much of multimarg critical theorizing seems to be responding to Reviewer 2, who invariably asks you to soften an already tactful critique or to clarify that your first-person authority is only anecdotal and not representative of a systemic problem. This kind of dialogic essay is not only healing but is also (I think) a radical refusal to genuflect at the citational altar—ya know?

often enshrouded. As Shahidha Bari (2017) [observes](#) in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, higher education retains a “niggling suspicion about scholars who spare a thought for matters of their own dress.” Sartorial concerns are signs of vanity at the expense of deeper intellectual engagement. As Bari goes on to explain, however, paying no mind to one’s professional appearance is a privilege in and of itself. Folks who deviate from the center must tailor *themselves* to fit the norms—or take calculated risks to defy them.

By expanding notions of “dress” to definitions beyond actual attire, we stress that “professionalism” is surveilled across a wide range of behaviors, policies, and everyday interactions. The emotionally-tasking, time-intensive labor of DIY-tailoring extends to these larger professional apparatuses. For many trans and gender nonconforming folks, that means having to engineer ways to have their gender identities acknowledged in each setting. For folks with disabilities, it means forging their own access into an ableist system that regards them as inherently lacking. For students and scholars whose cultural backgrounds and/or academic interests do not align with the canon, it means translating their knowledge into the language of white Euroamerican theorists—having to hew their truths into a shape the colonizers will recognize. All around us—in everyday exchanges, in blog posts, in articles and books—scholars and students are sharing stories that expose the exclusionary oversights of our profession. It is well past time we listen.

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