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**Dress Practices as Embodied
Multimodal Rhetorics**

“But You Look So Well!”

(Un)Professionalizing Chronic Pain through Academic Dress (site “transcript”)

Vyshali Manivannan, Pace University

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[“Looking well.”](#)

What do you wear to work when pain wears and works you? When fretting over sartorial decisions makes you look like an academic dilettante? When alternative femininities reveal you are an embodied, sexual being? When revealing body modifications estranges you from the moral enterprise of the neoliberal academy where you work?

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Fibromyalgia means workplace clothing is a commitment with no room for error. My sartorial decisions balance academic identity with sporting femininities or the queer punk sensibility that boosts my self-confidence and accommodates my pain. These dress practices ensure I can modulate my pain expressions to shield others from my affects, in the department and in the classroom.

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Fibromyalgia impacted my body schema, or non-visual sense of my body, and thus my habits and self-concept. The body and the self aren't the same, but they are interconnected. Body image, the visual assemblage we convey to others, includes dress practices, which become an effective strategy for re-envisioning the self and accommodating bodily intensities.

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Dress is an embodied practice, with its own grammar, utilitarian and non-utilitarian purposes, and modes of socially, politically, and morally regulating the body. Management is the aim.

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Academic dress practices belong to a moral enterprise that normalizes palatable forms of sexism, racism, classism, and ableism. Breaching decorum singles me out as an

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If there's anything to be taken from these stories and idea about dressing with chronic pain in an institution that still views itself as conservatively, normatively professional, it's this.

Works Cited

The articles, book chapters, books, and other materials cited in this project.

Introduction: "Looking well."

2006.

I describe intolerable pain to my primary care physician and am referred to a psychiatrist, an older white woman whose boho maxi skirt, loose white blouse, and navy blazer convey a vaguely hippie aesthetic. I go to the appointment directly after a seminar I taught in a suit and tie, and she gives me a once-over and says, with a conspiratorial laugh, "But you look so well, there can't be anything wrong with you!"

2007.

After six specialists and innumerable tests, I am diagnosed with fibromyalgia by a rheumatologist who tells me, "You're a bright young woman with ambition and creativity and a conventionally desirable body. I'm sorry. No one is going to believe you." If I want to be believed, I must exaggerate signifiers of pain, and inscribe myself with disability through dress (Siebers, 2004).

2014.

I pass my oral defense of my qualifying exams in my go-to black J Brand skinny pants with ankle zippers and a green silk and cotton shirt with leather trim, a relatively painless

ensemble that buoys me with confidence. This body image sustains me through the flare-up of my pain and brain fog. I don't know it yet but my appendix has been perforating for months. As it slowly ruptures, I go on a campus visit for a tenure-track job, wearing black Corso Como pumps I could barely afford, gray cigarette pants, a short-sleeved white button-down with a silver zipper accent, and a black blazer to hide my tattoos despite it being a 75-degree day. Formal interview outfits are generally uncomfortable (Entwistle, 2000), and the pain makes me stumble through my teaching demo. I realize afterwards that my wrist and foot tattoos show. At lunch an interviewer whispers that I can talk to her about the experience of being queer on campus. I hadn't disclosed; my body image and associated affective presence must have signaled this identity. Later, back in the hospital in similar workplace attire, I'm told I "look too good" to have a ruptured appendix when I inquire about the possibility. Desperate to maintain the quality of my academic work, I start teaching in athleisure and feel my carefully constructed body image—queer punk resourcefulness meant to mitigate the realities of constant pain—deteriorate. I go to the ER in Uniqlo sweatpants and a thin holey shirt from Target and am given the emergency appendectomy I ask for, which saves my life. I don't get the job. I feel I am here because of athleisure apparel.

2016.

While teaching in the black leather and snakeskin-print shirt I wore when defending my dissertation proposal, an older male professor interrupts my class to ask me what I'm doing at the front of the room, and where the professor is. In my chosen attire, I look too young and unauthoritative to be one.

2018.

I overhear a departmental conversation about whether there's a dress code policy (there isn't), and a colleague later tells me I have a great sense of style. I wear all black, bold geometrics, leather and lace, boyfriend shirts, sweatshirts, runner tops, backless blouses, pigmented matte lipstick, statement jewelry. I can better hush the pain when my body image emulates my self-concept, but I remain acutely aware of other women professors who dress conservatively, in pantsuits, large floral prints, sensible heels, pearls, nude lipsticks. What imparts confidence to me is not professional to them (Brown, 2017).

Always.

The through-line is that my wardrobe choices are dire, encoding narratives of gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability, all of which must be socially, morally, and professionally regulated (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1992). As a fibromyalgic subject, academic dress practices are often injurious. Its smart casual neutral style, allegedly effortless, mature, approachable, and elevated (Nixon, 2017; Brown, 2017) wreaks havoc on my body but trumps outfits highlighting immoral, undisciplined corporeality. Either I exist in an industry that will always insist I hurt myself to be taken seriously, or there's something to be learned from negotiating expectations around academic dress as a scholar and professor perpetually hurt by clothes.

Argument

As an academic with fibromyalgia, a non-apparent chronic pain disorder of unknown etiology, I dress to manage both the pain of wearing clothes and students' and colleagues' perception of my pain behaviors. My dress practices often complicate the performance of academic professionalism, as I wear sweatshirts, racerback T-shirts, gendered form-fitting clothes, and blouses accented with hardware, mesh, leather, and cutouts that reveal my tattoos, as well as conservative attire. I select my outfits for comfort, temperature regulation, and feelings of adequacy and competency, but the queer punk or sporty style associated with many of my clothes (Hebdige, 1979; Toffoletti et al., 2018) conflicts with norms of academic dress. I visibly become an unacceptable body in multiple ways: as a woman professor embodying femininity and sexuality in a field that insists on disembodied intellectual seriousness (Gill & Scharff, 2011); as a disabled academic whose athleisure apparel points to a stigmatized disability identity and a casual attitude towards research (Brown, 2017; Toffoletti et al., 2018); and as an academic embodying iconographies of alternative, fetishistic, queer body styles that mask my visible pain behaviors with signifiers of "bad girl" stoicism (Commane, 2009; Pitts, 2003).

I dress to strategically modulate my pain awareness and associated feelings of competence, toughness, and acuity, and to triage sensations so I can better perform my academic duties. Irritating at best, agonizing at worst, workplace clothing for the fibromyalgic academic is—unlike makeup, shoes, jewelry, or hairstyle, all of which can be changed or removed over the course of the day—a commitment made in the morning that can only be minimally altered while at work. That said, body modifications impinge on how many layers can be removed, and clothes that suffice in the classroom might form an inappropriate identificatory narrative in a department meeting or at an academic conference. Skin exposure and clothing style must generally respect the careful boundaries drawn by the professoriate around gender, race, sexuality, and ability, focusing attention on the mind and not the body, on Western dispositions and not international cultural meanings, on a felt presence that is sexless and defanged.

My clothing assemblages must serve as a disciplinary self-fashioning that most suitably encodes "academic identity" (Devereaux et al., 2009, p. 3), with the least amount of pain and with an aesthetic that imbues me with a sense of postfeminist empowerment (Donaghue, 2017) and that creates bodily sensations that distract me from pain. Additionally, pain being intersubjective and affectively contagious (Morris, 1998; Halttunen, 1995), my clothing doubles as your protection. My disorder may not be infectious but its affective intensities are, provoking spectatorial sympathy or mirror pain in viewers and reminding them of their own corporeality.

Ultimately, I argue that the academic performance of embodiment is detrimentally preoccupied with disappearing bodies, particularly non-normative ones. For the fibromyalgic academic, whose body can't be dismissed, campus sartorial practices must be inflected to accommodate nomadic intensities and reframe colleagues' perception of chronic pain and brain fog as trivial and surmountable, not debilitating, discrediting stigmas. My dress practices contend that the life of the mind does not erase the body, that academic dress codes are never neutral or universally applicable, that the embodiment of stigma is practically as well as aesthetically motivated, and that legibility through clothes has pedagogical value.

Fibromyalgia, body image, and body schema

Fibromyalgia is an incurable, non-progressive syndrome of chronic pain and fatigue, characterized by widespread nomadic pain in the muscles, tendons, and fascia, cognitive and affective dysfunction, sleep disturbance, and depression. It's usually diagnosed through the presence of 18 tender points, nine symmetrical pairs, places on the body where slight palpation causes intense pain (Wolfe, 2009, p. 671). While these points have specific locations, tenderness is not limited to these places and can surface unpredictably, anywhere, from any physical contact.

Scarry (1985) famously argues that physical pain is an inarticulate, private, interior state inaccessible to spectators but easily grasped by the pained subject. However, pain is also historically and culturally contingent, fundamentally intersubjective and shaped by social contexts around gender, race, and sexuality (Morris, 1998). Pain is thus a biocultural phenomenon and not solely biochemical. As it lacks objective diagnostic markers, fibromyalgia must be understood bioculturally. Morris' (1998) biocultural approach recognizes that, while acute pain signals danger, chronic pain no longer signifies an urgent need for action. Fibromyalgia is a series of sensations I have learned to notice without anger or self-judgment, and which I interpret within sociocultural, historical, and political frames of reference.

Fibromyalgia remains a contested diagnosis, despite its increasing legitimacy in Western biomedicine, and a stigmatized identity given contemporary popular representations of the expression or possession of pain as a moral failing (Dolmage, 2014; Halttunen, 1995). Pre-anesthetic as well as contemporary international cultures, such as Hinduism, acknowledge pain as inescapable and respond with acceptance and coexistence instead of a quest for cure. The discovery of effective analgesia in the eighteenth century furthered a bourgeois sensitivity to pain, and accordingly, revolutionized Western cultural meanings of pain as immoral and deviant (Halttunen, 1995, p. 304). Consequently, pain was consigned to disciplinary institutions like the penitentiary or asylum (Foucault, 1975). Halttunen (1995) relates this privatization of pain to the recasting of spectatorial sympathy—or the internalization of another's pain via witnessing—from compassion to revulsion. In short, witnessing pain from a prescribed social and physical distance is an edifying way for the viewer to appreciate their own social and bodily status, but being party to immediate pain is distasteful and endangers the viewer, rendering them vulnerable to pain's affects (p. 307-308).

Evoking disgust in my colleagues is less professional than teaching in sweats. While all garments are inherently painful, clothing allows me to conform to the humanitarian aversion to pain, as I can dress to modulate my daily pain experience and affect transmission to colleagues or students, reducing the chance that spectatorial sympathy occurs.

Charmaz (2002) asserts that chronic illness, like fibromyalgia, is an incursion into the sufferer's self-concept, as pre-illness predispositions, habits, and assumptions about the world become infeasible, unsustainable practices. Chronic pain demands constant adaptability, reprioritization of tasks, and re-envisioning a self that fluctuates between degrees of intensity. Modifying these habits is a monumentally difficult, ongoing process, since habits of the self "are anchored in

emotional attachments to and about the self” (p. 31) and fibromyalgia is a continual annihilation and reconfiguration of the self, through a constellation of new attitudes, lifestyle changes, interactional dynamics, and external expressions of self-concept, such as transforming body image through clothing.

Pain perception by others is highly influenced by outward appearance, or body image, in the clinic and on the university campus. Featherstone (2010) defines body image “in terms of a more visual sense of the image others have of oneself, based upon a person’s appearance: the ‘look’ one has for others” (p. 194), manifesting through makeup, adornment, clothing, stance, facial expressions, and presence, or the affective resonance created by this assemblage (p. 198-199). Consumer culture presents body image as a process of endless remodeling, particularly for women, for whom fashion and success are conflated and who are never fashionable enough. Beauty is often equated with moral goodness; those who are indifferent to their appearance possess flawed selves. Attention to body image for the fibromyalgic, then, becomes a way of repairing a self already considered flawed for its pain.

Operating in tandem with body image, body schema comprises non-visual sensing of the body, including haptics, proprioception, or spatial awareness of the body and interoception, or awareness of the body’s internal state (Featherstone, 2010, p. 194). Body schemas are disturbed when bodily integrity and the habitual body are disturbed, from loss of a limb to changes in the body’s ability to sense its internal state. This affective body lacks clear definition or articulation, a *felt* body conveying impressions to its audience. Body image and body schema “work together to produce not only our perception of the world, but the way we sense other bodies when we encounter them in everyday life” (p. 195).

Where fibromyalgia reconstituted my body schema and self-concept as weak, inadequate, and besieged by pain. Where I once viewed myself as stoic, DIY resourceful, self-reliant, my post-illness self is frequently forced to rely on anyone for daily tasks like washing dishes, opening jars, navigating stairs, and buttoning shirts. Developing a body image that projects alt femininities and queer punk style, with their hard, edgy, DIY connotations helped reconstruct my fibromyalgic self-concept as disabled but empowered while accepting the material realities of disability. As Charmaz (2002) notes, “habitual ways of thinking about one’s body shade into definitions of the self. Body and self are not the same thing, but they are intertwined and connected” (p. 36). As fibromyalgia disturbs body schema and thus habits and self-concept, the dressed body for the fibromyalgic academic becomes the vehicle for renewed agency over the biocultural construction of her pain in professional settings.

Neoliberal governance and academic dress codes

Clothing is a visual communicative artifact, a fundamental aspect of social order that inscribes discursive and phenomenological meanings on the body (Entwistle, 2000, p. 326). Barthes (1967) famously describes fashion as a language with its own grammar and communicative and utilitarian purposes that establish the dressed body in a given social collective, but this favors a structuralist account of fashion, overlooking individual, non-utilitarian motives behind outfit

selections. As Carter (2012) puts it, “the object always exceeds its instrumentality” (p. 348); the grammar of clothing is not one of strictly use-value but also of uselessness, an intensification or reduction of affective expression that contributes to felt bodily presence (Featherstone, 2010).

Entwistle (2000) defines dress as an embodied practice, “a *situated bodily practice* that is embedded within the social world and fundamental to microsocial order” (p. 325) with which individuals routinely, actively engage, (re)producing social structures and hierarchies of power in doing so. “Styles of dress are regularly employed in the workplace as part of institutional and corporate strategies of management” (p. 329). Formal occupations are more likely to have more conservative dress codes, while creative occupations are less likely to restrict what you wear (p. 328); thus, academic dress codes exist on a spectrum from the social science professor in my doctoral program who tended towards black slacks, ruffled or floral tops, blazers, and minimal makeup, to the creative writing professor in my master’s program who wore heavy makeup, black miniskirts, fishnet stockings, and four-inch stiletto heels as a rule.

If management is the aim, “what does one wear to work in the life of the mind?” (Donaghue, 2017, p. 231). Devereaux and O’Driscoll (2009) observe that the academy operates under a semiotics of performance, representation, and identity that is more diverse now than it has been traditionally. However, according to Zwicker (2009), academics are “positioned in a way that works against stylishness” (p. 6): socially constructed as too serious for vanity or frivolities like shopping; paid too little to indulge in even fantasies about expensive couture; too busy for anything but research. Nixon (2009) reminds us that neutrality and modesty characterize the fashion of serious thinkers, not garments that call attention to fleshly needs, which “authentic” academics aren’t bound by. In other words, “what many members of the professoriate seem to assume [is] that sartorial resplendence is suspect, mere superficial fluff distracting attention from the meaty intellect it shrouds, or that fashionable dress is a sellout” (p. 24). For these reasons, perhaps, academic fashion blogs tend to warn against “good fashion,” garments that are too youthful, formalwear that’s too corporate, colors and prints that are showier than neutral tones like black, blue, or brown, and outfits incorporating too much black, often perceived as “edgy” (Zwicker, 2009, p. 8).

Although aesthetic labor isn’t typically emphasized in academia given its privileging of mind over body, neoliberal responsabilization, or the process through which subjects of neoliberal governance internalize personal responsibility, places the onus of “appropriate” self-representation on academics (Donaghue, 2017; Pyysiäinen et al, 2017). Neoliberal responsabilization refers to a praxis of governance that endows subjects with autonomy to transform them into self-driven, personally accountable citizens (Pyysiäinen et al, 2017). Individuals assume control over and responsibility for fabricating their own existence. Signifying systems like dress are one such site of simultaneous autonomy and governance. While a strict dress code may feel like a threat to personal control, implicit, unenforced dress codes render social reality more governable. Clothes provide the context for interaction, creating expectations in others about the wearer’s identity. Outfits that clash with the identificatory narrative of an academic department misrepresent the wearer as a “too casual” or “unserious”

scholar; the wearer becomes responsible for selecting future outfits that more accurately portray academic identity.

The body in academic dress serves as a hinge between dominant norms enforced and disseminated through professional dress codes, as casual as those codes might appear to be. For instance, academic dress codes socially regulate perception of intellect, often measuring academic status, productivity, and collegiality in sartorial expressions of able-mindedness. Mental acuity finds its fashion correlate in “smart” casual dress code, which combines elements of formalwear with informal articles. Failing to conform to smart casual as a junior faculty woman of color translates into a failure of intellect or indifference to scholarly pursuits.

Pain might be construed as incommunicable (Scarry, 1985) but adornments on the pained body signify. As a visual metaphor for identity, clothing can disguise or exaggerate disability, as in Siebers’ (2004) disability masquerade, a strategic semiotic performance of passing as disabled when you possess a non-apparent disability and would otherwise pass as able-bodied. He asserts that “passing is possible not only because people have a general tendency to repress the embodiment of difference” (p. 3). Passing preserves social hierarchies, reinforcing the dominant social position—able—as normative, desirable, and moral. Bodies like mine have difficulty consistently passing or masquerading, as dress is contingent on my fluctuating pain tolerance. My dressed body creates a gestalt combining smart casual, athleisure, and fetish-inspired clothing. Even departments that permit smart casual dress pause at the latter two categories, as activewear signifies a focus on the physical body for reasons of fitness or vanity and thus excessive concern with appearance, and fetishwear textiles signal deviance, sensuousness, and prurience.

To preserve prescribed social distance and Cartesian dualism, academic culture wants fibromyalgia to pass. American academic culture still presents itself as a purveyor of bourgeois taste and decency, due to its nineteenth-century religious and cultural heritage (Marsden, 1993), and neutral style is most in keeping with this sensibility. However, clothing style, fit, and textile become incredibly significant when assembling the professional wardrobe of fibromyalgia. In professional settings, I must dress to preserve what I can of my body schema, balancing my body image with the social perception of academic culture, while accounting for my affect transmission, leaving me vulnerable to collegial and moral sanctions. “Good fashion” might boost my self-confidence on a painful day, but also suggests a narcissistic reallocation of thought from scholarly endeavor to personal style. Additionally, the presence of pain undermines the moral intellectual enterprise, since pain is popularly, socially constructed as an incapacitating flaw of the self. Hiding pain becomes imperative, and clothing comprises the props by which to do so.

Academic dress codes often enjoy an unquestioned stability, until you fail to conform. The lack of freedom in this governance praxis becomes highly apparent when pain forces me to make contentious sartorial decisions. Athleisure apparel or risqué cutouts render the fibromyalgic academic legible, but the body image that portrays apparent pain through expression or clothing is a felt body that stages spectatorial sympathy and is therefore unwelcome in

professional spaces (Halttunen, 1995; Siebers, 2004). It's disability masquerade enacted not necessarily to publicize non-apparent chronic pain, but because pain will indulge no other clothes. Where the refusal to pass should offer a kind of agency as a personal decision to step out of the closet, even though it risks marginalization, repression, or violence, pain takes even this choice away. Even so, as with patient-driven self-care, I remain responsible for how well or ill I look, and how seriously I am taken as a result.

Self-responsibilization, pain, and dress

To avoid the appearance of brain fog and unfitness for academic work, I tracked my daily outfits and pain levels. These trackers epitomize my complicity in techniques of the self and institutional management and reinforcement of traditional femininities and dominant norms around race, sexuality, and ability. By subscribing to the notion of academia as a vocation sustained through personal responsibility and internalization of hierarchical judgment (Foucault, 1975), I'm supposed to see how the pain or judging eyes are my fault and police my behavior accordingly.

Instead, I ended up seeing opportunities to harness the transformative potential of non-normative professional dress practices, such as athleisure or fetish-inspired garments, to highlight the fluctuating visibility of pain and endurance. Neutral, timeless academic style is not fashioned for all bodies, and by dressing in ways that reflect my post-illness self-concept and heighten my sense of my competency, thus distracting me from my own pain, I can better perform my academic duties. Additionally, I can teach my students and remind my peers that academic dress is a series of often ableist, sexist, and colonialist norms reproducing themselves through fashion (Crawford, 2009; Zwicker, 2009; Toffoletti et al., 2018), and that pain is only interior because of the academy's (moral) mandate against spectatorial sympathy, which would expose viewers as corporeal and titillated by voyeurism of suffering (Halttunen, 1995).

The blank lines on the outfit trackers indicate that I forgot what I was wearing the moment I took it off; on the pain trackers, blankness signals that the pain that day was unbearable, beyond language. In the two trackers that line up in September 2016, during my usual autumnal flare-up, I record outfits with low levels of pain and feelings of adequacy, or high pain levels and a strong sense of competency, such as Splendid, J Brand pants, loose slacks; athleisure-style cotton colorblock T-shirts, leather and silk textiles, cutouts that show off my tattoos and insist that I can take the pain. These records make me self-responsibilized, but they don't help me internalize the discourses of academic culture and appearance any more than fibromyalgia already permits.

Neutralizing embodiment and techniques of the self

Academic dress codes regulate the appearance and social perception of the profession by disciplining the bodily appearance of its members, attempting to place them into predetermined and fixed social, moral, and economic categories, using mainstream criteria of "appropriate" femininity, whiteness, ability, and bourgeois class consciousness. Neoliberal

responsibilization invests the aesthetic labor expected of nonwhite women academics in particular, who are tacitly expected to expend a considerable amount of unacknowledged, unpaid time and energy on techniques of the self, which constitute the intersection between technologies of domination, the subject's recourse to acting upon herself, and the integration of techniques of the self into structures of coercion (Foucault, 1993, p. 203).

Academic departments often possess an institutionalized white, male, middle-class ethos that impacts the interactional dynamics of junior faculty who are nonwhite, female or non-binary, paid less than their tenured senior colleagues (Archer, 2008, p. 394). Women academics might be perceived as too intellectual for mainstream consumer culture but are still interpellated as normatively feminine. Unpacking consumer culture's "look good, feel good" transformational logic, Featherstone (2010) notes that beauty and morality are tightly coupled, and that techniques of the self that repair body image will also repair the self, but that "this entails a particular view of the body, as bounded and compartmentalized into separate domains, each of which can be renovated or upgraded: a view which encourages people to judge their bodies in terms of social norms" (p. 205).

Academic norms colonize, neuter, and sterilize faculty bodies, privileging those that respect "the niceties of etiquette relating to what is considered proper and improper to wear and display as well as severe sanctions against breaking strongly held beliefs about covering the body" (p. 6). Beliefs about propriety and modesty are culturally situated, however, and so are prohibitions deriving from those beliefs. For instance, crop-tops, low-back or backless blouses, and necklines that accentuate the breasts are seen as streetwear or clubwear that signal immorality and promiscuity and don't belong in the academic workplace; in Sri Lanka, the sari often exposes the midriff and upper back but is traditionally worn even in professional settings. Similarly, the staple of the academic wardrobe, the white button-down shirt, is marketed to women as inspired by menswear, encoding the male ethos into the wearer despite pretensions of gender neutrality. A conservative short-sleeved crewneck silk blouse is made improper with the addition of leather, suede, or lace, as such accents are haptically perceived through visual-tactile activation that indecorously invites touch and reminds viewers that the life of the mind lives in flesh.

Western academic dress codes for women, as a signifying system invested by governance, disciplines decolonial dress practices as it disciplines alternative femininities: with normalizing judgment (Foucault, 1975). The only time I wore an airy salwar-style blouse to work, a colleague gasped, "You look so *different*," suggesting I was responsible for Othering myself in a predominantly white department. When I moved into my office in the hottest weeks of August in a racerback runner top with red short shorts, I felt colleagues' eyes on my back tattoos and thigh scarifications, although nothing was said.

In Archer's (2008) study of how younger academics construct their professional identity, women reported being positioned as novices based on embodied femininities. As such, they felt pressured to dress in ways signifying age, maturity, and wisdom: that is, in formal, unflattering, bookish, "bad fashion" in neutral colors. They also felt that proving their academic credentials

rested on sacrificing personal comfort and self-concept (p. 392-393). Similarly, Brown (2017) discusses her own experiences of being told she was “not professional enough” in appearance, saying that “treating professionalism as something achieved simply by wearing the right clothes established emotional distance between my identity as a feminist researcher and the demand that I focus on my appearance” (p. 155). She describes being surprised at “how often professionalism meant concealing or suppressing my sense of self and identity and/or disciplining my body” (p. 157). When body image fails to express self-concept, feelings of disjunction and dysphoria result. When I choose clothes that are painless and better align with my post-illness body image, I cease looking like the life of the mind and start resembling the life of libido.

This starkly opposes the disembodied professorial look nonwhite women should cultivate, dressing to look “neither head-turningly feminine nor inattentively androgynous” (Zwicker, 2009, p. 6-8), asexual but not unsexed, emotionally approachable but authoritatively expert, independent but cooperative, cool but not subversive, sartorially colonized. Certain of my physical traits, such as slimness, the appearance of muscle tone, and my South Asian heritage, mark me as appropriately feminine, conventionally attractive, and an intelligent model minority. At the same time, being a woman of color Otherizes me as a potentially aggressive, meritless diversity hire, and appearing physically feminine, toned, and (re)productive masks my fibromyalgia almost too well. These norms ask me to whitewash, to conform to mainstream femininity, and to inflict pain on myself to be taken seriously as a researcher, which also aligns with the biopolitical imperative to domesticate chronic pain, an epidemic of the postmodern era with high social and economic costs in the U.S. (Morris, 1998, p. 109).

Foucault (1975) tells us that bodily practices belong to the operations of power that strive to discipline citizens into docile obedience. Academic dress practices, as part of a moral institution, normalize palatable forms of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism through clothing. Dress practices that breach decorum—that make difference visible—in disciplinary institutions like school, where occupational dress tend to be conservative, isolate the wearer as a problematic element in the system. Fibromyalgia already singles me out as a potentially unproductive cog in the neoliberal capitalist machine. When pain leaves me with no other recourse, I challenge the construction of academic identity through garments that expose my tattoos and connote alternative femininities, or that signify physical rehabilitation more than professorial aplomb, implicitly revaluing the body and bodily style as transformative sites for discovery and knowledge.

Embodying casual as an academic

Insofar as “the ‘look good, feel good’ transformational logic of consumer culture” (Featherstone, 2010, p. 202) applies to academic culture, women’s professional dress is supposed to *impress* more than *express*. By contrast, despite luxury brands like Lululemon or Sweaty Betty, athleisure apparel seems designed to express while it is the wearer’s body that impresses, and only if normatively feminine—that is, thin, symmetrical, able-bodied, unmarked

by deviant signifiers like tattoos that contradict the health and fitness connotations of activewear.

Athleisure clothes are often made from stretchy or drapery breathable materials and range from skintight to loose-fitting, with utilitarian elements such as moisture wicking, quick drying, or muscle compression. Such garments afford the fibromyalgic high levels of comfort, particularly with looser articles, and control over affective dysfunction, as with muscle-compressing yoga leggings that can help stabilize and increase circulation in fatigued muscles. That said, activewear and athleisure constitute “lazy dressing,” conveying the kind of inattentiveness to body image that women academics are supposed to ward against (Brown, 2017; Zwicker, 2009).

Fitness regimes are visually signaled, whether one works out or not, through the clothes themselves, and selecting such clothes for professional settings suggests that the wearer sees them as professional; this is especially problematic in a field that views the mind as preeminent, since activewear is professional in fields dominated by physical exertion or recreation. “Academic femininities,” or modes of aesthetic self-presentation required to demonstrate intellectual prowess without relinquishing the conventional markers of femininity that academic culture (Donaghue, 2017, p. 232) are further complicated by “sporting femininities,” or plural expressions of gendered, raced, and queered subjectivities in sport, fitness, and physical activity settings as well as wider society (Toffoletti et al., 2018, p. 2).

Sporting femininities are suffused with fashion sensibility and class consciousness, circulating images of health and wellness embedded in white, middle-class, heteronormative female sex appeal. While I own secondhand luxury brands of professional clothes, from Theory to Tory Burch, my athleisure comes primarily from Uniqlo and consists of black sweatpants, muscle compression leggings, and moisture wicking shirts, more casual than trendy, and difficult to disguise as formal or smart casual attire. Looking “appropriate” in athleisure also necessitates a normatively attractive body type. Loose-fitting garments might dematerialize the physical body, but looser workout tops reveal sports bra, back, ribs. Form-fitting yoga pants accentuate the parts of the female body that professional academic clothes strive to hide.

The core problem of embodying sporting femininities in the academic profession is that it doesn’t pair well with the complex business of embodying academic femininities, not least because of its corporeal emphasis. Dressing somberly and professionally imbues an air of formality and decorum to the wearer, signaling leadership and approachability, which is especially important for younger women professors. Yoga pants and sneakers can’t compare with pantsuits and sensible shoes. However, academic femininities should mean that “women in the professoriate be recognized as women, in the full variety of aesthetic presentations that they may choose” (Donaghue, 2017, p. 239), opening critical space for looks that combine normative feminine markers with alternative femininities.

Being the academic “bad girl”

Cultural norms around fitness valorize cisgendered heterosexuality and able, athletic bodies that are not so muscular they appear masculine (p. 8-9). I might be thin and toned, but multiple

tattoos, scars, and scarifications reorganize the surface of my body as a spectacle of deviance with implications of masochism, queer, kinky, underclass or anarchic (Hebdige, 1979; Commane, 2009). Even when presenting sporting femininities, I often find myself conveying alt femininities, particularly those associated with punk subcultural style and modern body art movements. Mostly, the wardrobe I've collected for fibromyalgia communicates a middle-class ethos through brand names, whiteness through Western styles, and gender-neutral status through menswear-inspired clothes. However, several articles also convey alternative, "bad girl" femininities, embodying iconographies associated with punk-leather BDSM, youth rebellion or militancy, and body hacktivism (Pitts, 2003). These subcultures, through disposition and dress, typically challenge how femininities and sexualities can be performed, employing techniques of the self to disturb the identificatory categories set in place by biopolitical and institutional systems.

"Invoking the power of clothes to enhance confidence thus pre-emptively defends an interest in personal aesthetics against potential critique" (Donaghue, 2017, p. 236), but confidence is an indecorous bottom line argument with fetish- or anti-establishment inspired garments. Leather, vinyl, and hardware accents are popularly constructed as subcultural or deviant, connotations that are reflected in dystopian and cyberpunk film and pornography as well as in fetish club performances, and punk subcultures are associated with the underclass (Commane, 2009). Contradictorily, textiles like silk and leather connote luxury, as these fabrics are typically expensive. On an adjunct's salary I hardly made enough to shop for such clothes anywhere but thrift stores, where the markdown could be as steep as 70%. This is not evident in the quality of the clothes, however, which still communicate the bourgeois class sensibility institutionalized in academic departments (Archer, 2008).

Practices like piercing, tattooing, scarring, and branding negotiate cultural, gender, and sexual identities (Pitts, 2003). Even though piercings and tattoos have become more mainstream, tattoos considered tastefully feminine tend to be delicate, small, easily concealed, and themed around art that is itself gender-marked, such as hearts or butterflies. By contrast, nonmainstream or heavy body modifications reject normative femininities and gender and sexual binaries, carry working-class connotations, and/or are associated with stigmatized groups like bikers, gangs, or prison inmates. Thus, body modifications exposed on the dressed body lend themselves to alternative femininities comprising lower socioeconomic status, criminality, sexual deviance, or gender fluidity. These subcultures and groups are also associated with aggression, toughness, bravado, and DIY resourcefulness, all qualities I sought out for myself as I revised my habits and narrative of self after my diagnosis. In rejecting vulnerability and passivity, reminders of the daily violence done to me by chronic pain, I also abandoned traditional feminine markers. I have a gold nose ring but no other culturally-marked modifications, like peacock feather or mandala tattoos. Including a magnetic implant and large scarifications on both thighs, I have fourteen body modifications, eight of which are difficult to hide. Most are coded masculine, black-and-white designs including circuitry, serpents, and a medical diagram of the female body.

I got my first tattoo the year I was diagnosed. After that, body modifications became an essential part of my post-illness reconstruction of self that literalized that refashioning through bodily inscription (Charmaz, 2002), not just as an aesthetics of self but as an aesthetics of existence. Expressions of pain simultaneously repel and encourage spectatorial sympathy for the sufferer (Scarry, 1985; Halttunen, 1995), but body modifications—conveying past pain that was undergone by choice—indicate the ability to endure and emerge anew, qualities that fibromyalgia had wrested from my post-illness self-concept. By visually signaling that I've voluntarily endured the acute pains of body modification, I might leave myself open to skepticism about the authenticity of my fibromyalgia. However, these modifications bolstered my self-confidence and contribute significantly towards the post-illness body image I needed to cope with chronic pain. Intervening into my skin and flesh rearranged my body schema, changing my experience of my body's edges through raised scars, or the number and weight of multiple earrings which also change the shape of the ear and thus how the brain grasps sound.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) posits the body as a being interfacing with the world through embodiment, arguing that our perception of sensation is determined by how we understand external stimuli, which itself derives from how we organize experience, and not from the stimuli themselves. The body is the envelope through which we sense the world, but clothes impinge on this experience. Dress makes us aware of the body's edges by covering the body with haptic sensations, such as pressure, texture, temperature, and weight. Body modifications similarly alter the body's contours, rearranging my body schema when it was permanently disrupted by fibromyalgia, permitting me agency over it once more. Body modifications exposed through dressed create a prurient gestalt, arousing visual-tactile response in the viewer in addition to awe ("How did you endure it?"), disgust ("Why would you endure it?"), or concern ("You know that's permanent, right?"). Moreover, some of my heavier, more subcultural modifications are located in intimate places, such as my thigh scarifications or my rib tattoo, bringing alternative sensuality, sexuality, and femininity into academic life, where embodiment isn't welcome.

In academic culture, those obsessed with body projects signal that they undervalue the life of the mind. Endurance is an embodied phenomenon; in academic culture, it must be the consequence of nurturing the life of the mind: for example, pulling an all-nighter to grade or write, or skipping breakfast and lunch to teach back-to-back. By contrast, with roots in fetish and youth rebellion subcultures, fashion and body art nurture "irrational" carnality.

Chronic pain "is not a sensation but a perception dependent upon the mind's active ongoing power to make sense of experience" (Morris, 1998, p. 118). I expose my skin not to reveal my tattoos but to relieve my body's edges of the haptic sensations created by clothes and exert control over my sensory experience of the world. Entwistle (2000) describes dress as a second skin or shield that impacts how we perceive the world through non-visual senses, but for me, clothing, professional attire especially, asks me to willingly shut myself in an iron maiden. Projecting my desired body image, one that reflects my self-concept and buoys my self-confidence, eases the distress that accompanies this daily decision. Through fetishistic textiles and body modifications that are unfeminine and untrendy, my affective presence, my felt body, projects the self-concept that buoys me enough to competently enact and survive my academic

duties. Additionally, the fabrics associated with these so-called “lowbrow” subcultures best accommodate my fibromyalgic intensities. Non-utilitarian elements of dress like cutouts or metal or leather accents have use-value for fibromyalgic bodies and also open extra-linguistic spaces for more productive intersubjective constructions and understandings of pain in the workplace.

Academic dress practices seem intended to discipline women’s femininity, sexuality, and affective body where it threatens the identificatory narrative of the professoriate. According to Carter (2012), “Human dress, because of its physical independence from the body of its wearer, can play a surrogacy role as a field across which the ripples and convulsions of the non-utilitarian are able to play” (p. 351). Tailoring my dress practices to include non-utilitarian accents and signs accommodate my body schema and body image upsets this narrative with alternative femininities, which can’t be explained through mainstream fashion trends, which are highly corporeal, and thus anathema to the life of the mind.

Closeted Identities

My closet contains good and bad clothes, outdoor and home clothes, flare-up and normal pain clothes, smart and stupid clothes. The designations often overlap. It’s significant that I spend more time fretting over looking stupid, meaning visibly pained, foggy, failing at smart casual dress codes, than I do over my comfort in professional settings. Looking smart is more essential, if I want to look worthy of and committed to my job.

Conclusion

To reframe Donaghue’s (2017) question, what does one wear to work in the life of chronic pain? What signals pain, sartorially? And if it must by nature render viewers complicit in bodily response, should it be signaled in the academy at all? Conforming to academic dress practices might endow me with social and cultural capital in the university, but at the price of erasure and self-inflicted pain on a spectrum from discomfort to agony.

Even when unstable or ambivalent, meanings about the self are conveyed in everyday dress (Entwistle, 2000, p. 338). Bodies are processual, multiple, and always in flux, and this should translate into sartorial indeterminacy and hybridity, but academic dress codes embrace Cartesian dualism, deem masculinity and bourgeois ideology as neutral, and reject traces of the body and bodily sensations such as pain, which I can’t deny. Concealing stigmatized identities and performing professional ones—and thereby internalizing mainstream norms—is exhausting unpaid labor and carries grave consequences for the fibromyalgic academic, given that women’s professional attire is usually restrictive, form-fitting, and woven from fabrics that don’t breathe, stretch, or slide easily on the skin. Fabrics that do—like leather, silk, lace, cutouts with cutouts—are simply textiles that the mind is housed in a body, whether or not the body is neutrally dressed. These gestalts grant me agency over my body’s edges and non-visual sensory interfacing, and help me modulate my felt body as well, letting me control for variable somatic sensations and vocally express pain within the bounds of academic propriety.

Dress is a situated bodily practice (Entwistle, 2000), and working with/in/through chronic pain is a situated bodily practice as well. By dressing in ways that embody sporting and alt femininities instead of academic ones, connotes fleshier forms of endurance replete with sweat, blood, plasma, ink, tears and renders the fibromyalgic academic legible while simultaneously reducing her pain. This mode of dress doubles as a challenge to the ideologies underlying academic dress codes, the linkage between feminine styles and seriousness as a scholar, and the legibility of the fibromyalgic subject in the moral enterprise of academic culture. In a sense, dress practices aid the fibromyalgic academic in reconstructing herself as an entity who isn't defined by or erased due to an allegedly moral failing.

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