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**Dress Practices as Embodied
Multimodal Rhetorics**

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Dress Practices as Embodied Multimodal Rhetorics

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Dress Practices as Embodied Multimodal Rhetoric

Special Issue of the Journal of Multimodal Rhetoric

Katie Manthey, Salem College

My name is Katie and I am in my fifth year as a tenure-track assistant professor of English and writing center director. I own no fewer than three (3) super-poufy tulle skirts. I would call my professional aesthetic “radical queer Disney princess.”



Figure 1: Special issue editor photo.

My choices to dress the way I do for my job are deeply connected to the audience, purpose, context, genre, and style of the situation. I teach at a small women’s college in the south. It is the queerest place I have ever been. Nearly half of the students are students of color, and first-generation college students.

I am queer, fat, bipolar, cisgender, and white. I revel in my femmeness because society punishes me for my fatness. For me, right now, my construction of self is mirrored through my dress practices including my body fat. I also perform hyper femme-ness as a way to signal my queerness to my students.

This special issue explores the multifaceted ways that dress practices can function as embodied multimodal rhetoric. In their intro to the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, Christina V. Cedillo and M. Melissa Elston explain that multimodality includes “all those material, spatial, embodied, aesthetic, and procedural strategies that communication engages, but especially those employed by marginalized individuals and groups with limited access to legitimized modes deemed ‘speech’” (2017, p. 7). This special issue takes up the dressed body as a site of communication, creating and holding space for marginalized folx.

To understand the dressed body as multimodal rhetoric, we need to understand how bodies do rhetoric. In their 2015 piece, “Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics,” Johnson et al. posit that “the physical body carries meaning through discourse about or by a body. But embodiment theories suggest that meaning can be articulated beyond language. *All bodies* do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function” (p. 39). This special issue takes up this notion and extends the “texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function” of the body to include body modifications that fall under the umbrella term “dress practices.” Drawing from dress studies scholars Joanne B. Eicher, Sandra Lee Evenson, and

Hazel A. Lutz, dress practices can be defined as any “actions undertaken to modify and supplement the body in order to address physical needs in order to meet social and cultural expectations about how individuals should look” (2008, p. 4).

This definition of dress extends the practices it encompasses to include *any* body modification or supplement, and grounds these practices in culture. While this definition creates a broad opening for examining dress, this special issue focuses on the academic workplace and the experiences of (often multiply) marginalized folx. Workplaces can be important spaces to think critically about bodies because most traditional workplaces have some sort of dress code. Often, the underlying values of an institution are colonial notions of what constitutes “acceptable” bodies. Carmen Rios explains that “dress codes make room to turn a lot of ‘isms’ into policies—especially since typical standards of professional dress are, at the core, racist, sexist, classist, and xenophobic.” There are many examples of how oppression manifests through dress codes in the workplace: from dreadlocks and natural hair being banned in professional settings (Nittle, 2018) to employers admitting that they judge applicants’ competence by how conventionally attractive they are (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2019).

In academia, dress practices (and the body more broadly) are often dismissed as frivolous or less important than the work of the mind. When dress practices are discussed, it is often anecdotally, such as op-ed pieces in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*. Eileen Green takes this a step further and claims that “little attention has been paid to the ways in which women academics...use clothing strategies to ‘place’ themselves within academic cultures which marginalize and exclude them” (2001, p. 98). It’s critically important to note that many of the stories that get told are those of people in relatively privileged bodies: cisgender, white, middle class, etc.

This special issue takes up dress practices in the academy as embodied multimodal rhetorical action, arguing that in order to fit in and/or be subversive, one must pay careful attention to audience, purpose, context, and genre. This special issue includes a wide range of stories and story formats: from video, to photo essay, to interactive PowerPoint. The special issue also purposefully makes and holds space for the stories of folx that are often not highlighted in the current (often anecdotal) literature: folx who are nonbinary, disabled, trans, people of color, fat (and often with other multiple intersecting identities outside of the white hetero-patriarchal norm).

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Dressed but Not Tryin' to Impress

Black Women Deconstructing “Professional” Dress

Brittany Hull, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Cecilia D. Shelton, George Washington University

Temptaous Mckoy, Bowie State University

A brief note re: language in this piece—As part of our work as Black women compositionists and scholars, we opt to utilize non-standard English in our writing as a way to reaffirm our various identities, and as a way to speak back against white supremacist standards of language in academia. We pull a page from a legacy of Black women scholars who refuse to capitulate their language for standardized language praxis. With this in mind, dis us and we cussin, reflectin, and telling it how it is—the way we see fit.

Early career scholars spend a significant portion of their doctoral study and junior careers thinking critically and deeply about how to synthesize the various aspects of academic work. Managing research, teaching, and service is difficult. These concerns are amplified for persons from historically marginalized communities, whose identities, epistemologies, and even their very bodies are called into question. Because minority bodies are always, already under scrutiny and subject to explanation and qualification, they are often conditioned to be aware of and responsive to the presumed standards of professionalism just to survive. bell hooks (1989) declares, “While assimilation is seen as an approach that ensures the successful entry of [B]lack people into the mainstream, at its very core it is dehumanizing” (p. 67). Black women embody dual identities and the pressure to conform to spaces where they were not welcome historically must be negotiated almost every day. Consequently, studies show that the varying identities Black women embody while navigating academia, can cause attention to dress to be a problematic focus resulting in sexualization and dismissal by students and colleagues alike (Moses, 1997, p. 29). Although contemporary, progressive thinking rejects respectability politics and encourages the embrace of difference, the tension between marginalization and inclusion still permeates the daily lives of scholars on the margins.

As three scholars entering new phases of our careers, we see dress practices as a critically symbolic metaphor for the challenges of thriving as Black women in academia. The difficulty of negotiating “Black”, “scholar”, “woman”, and “professional” alongside a myriad of other labels manifests in how we choose, or cannot choose, to compose our bodies for public interpretation through dress practices. Choices about not only clothes, but also hairstyles, demeanor, language, and tone allude very clearly to the “texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function” of the body, that comprise embodiment as defined by Johnson et al. We argue

that Black female bodies make themselves meaningful in response to a variety of audiences, contexts, and purposes. This article takes up an autoethnographic methodology to reflect on the ever-present task of asserting the meaningful perspectives, contributions, and critiques of black bodies. Our readers will gain insight into the way Blackness can manifest through 'professional' attire; but we will also challenge readers to rethink definitions of *professional attire* vis-a-vis Black bodies and reconsider the implications and assumptions that their pre-conceived notions have on our transfer of knowledge/instruction, both formal and informal.

The central thread in our discussion draws on the notion that the academy is a space fraught with the push and pull of teaching and learning, expert and novice, informed and ignorant. We explore this tension in three critical spaces with important audiences for academics—the classroom, where students are watching, academic and professional conferences where colleagues are watching, and the public where everybody is watching. Each section is framed by a critical reflection of an experience with dress and embodiment in that space, highlighting larger themes, insights, and critiques of the academy.

What I'm Gon' Wear Today?—Brittany Hull

Prior to startin my doctoral program, I considered it vital that I presented myself as *professional* in my workplaces. This meant wearing a pantsuit, suit separates, and some sort of relatively comfortable flats (Image 1). The unpredictable weather in my area (eastern Pennsylvania) also meant that I was sometimes lugging a bag with a change of clothes or shoes in addition to my work bag and taking the stairs up just three flights put a strain on me. I followed this routine for



Image 1: Me in St. Louis after presenting at my first CCCC. It was about 80 degrees and I was stuck in this suit and long sleeve NY & Company shirt because I thought it was "professional". I was burnin up though.

four semesters because I was once told by a tenured white woman faculty member that I "needed to wear a suit" to all my classes because I "looked like a student." I understood where this suggestion came from because I was fresh outta my masters' program, and I was strugglin' with feelin like I didn't "fit" due to my language, my identity as a Black woman, and because white faulty kept implying I didn't deserve to be there; I agreed because I didn't know *how* to disagree (yet). As a result, I wore pant suits and suit separates daily in the classroom. However, after realizing that my suits and blouses ain't prevent microaggressions from students and colleagues, I opted to dress as I was comfortable. And that meant not wearing a pant suit and blouse every damn day.

When I got ready to go into another semester, I was a combination of nervous and excited at the same damn time, but I was ready to do what I loved; teach first-year composition. I was ready as

far as logistics were concerned. Syllabi approved and printed. Check. Desire2Learn course page set up. Check. Textbook selection sent to the bookstore on time. Check. Pre-semester lunch with cohort members to kick off the semester. Check. I was prepared even, to not allow these emotions to prevent me from goin to bed on time so I could make it to campus to get a good parking spot. The only thought that consumed my mind the night before this first day back in the classroom was: *What I'm gon' wear?*

My hair was already done, as I had just recently gotten a wash and re-twist of my long locs a few days prior. The issue was the clothes. Whatever I chose to wear had to be a combination of comfy *and* cute, period. I searched my closet and found some cropped pants with a light blue diamond shaped pattern that I got from Targeè.¹ Boom, I had bottoms; now, I needed a top. I was back on the hunt; after movin various tops around, I found a white cotton scoop-neck t-shirt. Finally, I grabbed some black flats and a khaki suit jacket I got from H&M way before the bullshit where the popular retail store posted a picture of a Black lil boy² wearin a hoodie with the phrase “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle” on they website.³ Nonetheless, after deciding on each item, I strategically placed the pants, white cotton scoop-neck shirt, khaki suit jacket, and black flats on my bed like I was solvin a puzzle. I liked what I saw and it definitely fit the comfy *and* cute vibe I was goin for. I was ready for my first day back in the classroom; now I could take my ass to sleep.

The next morning, I was greeted by smiling faces and echoes of “Good morning” from colleagues when I got to “my” office space. I responded with my signature “Hey Y'all” and soaked up the positive vibes; everyone was excited to be back. As I moved through the office, I ran into a colleague, one of the other folks of color in my department. When I asked him if he was ready for the first day, he said, “Yes, but I feel under-dressed.” I was confused; he looked comfortable, so what was the problem? He explained, “Everyone looks so professional.” I looked around the room and saw my peers dressed in business casual or *professional* attire—below the knee-length dresses, blazers, blouses, jeans, button-up dress shirts, cardigans, dress shoes, traditional, cultural, and religious attire.⁴ At the same time, I saw jeans, sandals, sneakers, vintage t-shirts, stuff that wouldn't be considered *professional* for the college classroom.

¹ Target (the big retail chain). According to urbandictionary.com this pronunciation is “Fancy way of saying Target.” I ain't sure when this trend started, but this pronunciation ain't limited to the Black community. I've seen individuals from a variety of racial backgrounds who are familiar with it.

² Liam Mango is the child in the now viral H&M pic. A native of Sweden and the son of Kenyan parents, his mama, Terry, wasn't bothered by the pic; however, she felt the backlash for H&M's “mistake” (Wang, 2019). Check Connie Wang's “The Real Story Behind H&M's Racist Monkey Sweatshirt” for a more extensive run down.

³ While many Black consumers of H&M was pissed, there was just as many who wasn't surprised, as discussed in this joint by by Danielle A. Scruggs', “H&M's ‘Coolest Monkey’ Hoodie and How Racism Wastes Our Precious Time”, in which we are provided one of several responses from the Black perspective. Now, given the racist history of Black people being compared to monkeys and apes, consumers called for a boycott, to which they responded by removing the pic and allegedly hiring a diversity manager (Brennan & Feldman, 2018).

⁴ A number of my female colleagues practiced Islam; thus, they wore hijabs.

I turned back to my friend and said with a smile, “If I ain’t throw this together and it wasn’t comfortable, I wouldn’t be wearin it. If you comfortable, you good.” This topic of *professional* dress would come up again and again during my time in this department. Today, I was confused, but eventually, I would get pissed off.

On the first day of class, I always tell my students to read over the syllabus and jot down any questions they have as we get started. As the students read, I always see some confused facial expressions and some smirks, as if what they was readin was a joke. I know why they’re confused. See, I write my syllabus introduction in my own speech, my mother tongue, and students (and some of my colleagues, for that matter) ain’t used to seein that in the classroom. Students see my “what’s up y’all?!” and my talkin through my class in my own words, and while I see a lot of smiles, some of these ain’t kind.

On this particular day, as I watched their reactions, I knew someone would ask the obvious question: Why did you write the syllabus like this? As I facilitated our icebreaker, I’m walkin around and I feel my feet start to ache in pain. This was my second time wearin these flats and at this point, I couldn’t wait to take them off and switch into my sneakers. As we concluded the activity, my thoughts on my aching feet was interrupted by the inevitable question. One of my new students, a Black man with short locs, raised his hand and asked, “Why you write that part of the syllabus like that? You was usin slang and stuff, can we do that?” I was happy that someone opened the conversation about this part of the syllabus, and explained that this was the only part where I could be *me*, (everything else was required to be copy and pasted to follow the standards of the department) and that I felt it necessary to be myself and introduce myself on the page just as I had in class. Furthermore, I told him that there *would* be assignments where they would be able to write usin the language or variety they were comfortable with, depending on their intended audience and the rhetorical situation, and that we would learn all about it this semester. This response acted as an unofficial introduction to our lesson on the rhetorical situation. All in all, class was a success and I was free to go back to my desk and change outta these flats, my feet was hurtin somethin terrible; I knew this would be my last time wearin these damn shoes.

A few weeks later, we was working on literacy narratives, and except for a few who was strugglin, everyone was doing fine. On my way outta the class one day, a student stayed behind and asked me if she could discuss her literacy narrative topic, and I invited her up to my office to talk. As we waited for the elevator, I noticed my “underdressed” colleague from the first day, and I almost didn’t recognize him—he had donned a full suit, tie, and dress shoes. He looked dressed to impress, and I thought maybe he had an interview later that day. After I finished with my student, I figured I’d ask ‘bout his outfit and wish him positive vibes for a successful interview. Much to my surprise and frustration, he did *not* have an interview, but he’d been told by a white faculty member that he ain’t look *professional* enough without it. He was promised that students would “take him more seriously” if he wore a suit and tie in his classroom. *Now* I was pissed.

My experience with my colleague pissed me off, both for me and for him. Why was we tied up in all this uncomfortable shit if it ain’t *really* help us? I decided that day that I would start wearing more comfortable clothes in my classroom, and I maintained my casual attire and ain’t

wear the pant suit, suit separates, or them uncomfortable ass black flats anymore. I began to wear my favorite tees with images or quotes from Black women historical figures, such as Rosa Parks and Assata Shakur; tees that shared my love for Marvel comics or my favorite sports teams. I wore jeans, cardigans, hoodies, and sneakers. Additionally, I kept my hair pulled back in a ponytail unless I got it styled in an up-do.

Even though my attire was supposed to take away from my teaching, it often made my students feel more open to genuine and authentic conversations with me. I had many conversations with students of all colors and creeds, who could connect with Marvel and my favorite sports teams. Yet, most importantly, I believe my approach made students of color feel welcome and safe in my classroom. I constantly remember the brother with the locs asking if he could write like I talked in my syllabus and in class. My clothes opened up impromptu conversations with Black students who was in the beginning stages of their loc process. They'd asked about products I used in my locs, as well as who re-twisted them in the predominantly white area of the campus. I even held a conversation on the history of AAL after a student asked about the names on a tee I rocked to class. The shirt was worn during my participation in the Digital Black Lit/Literacies and Composition (DBLAC) panel at the 2018 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) presentation. Me and my co-presenters (Khirsten L. Scott, Sherita Roundtree, and Louis Maraj) wore custom shirts with the names of Black language and literacy scholars from various generations in the field of composition, whose work has impacted our own as Black early career scholars. Specifically, my shirt featured Lorenzo Turner, Geneva Smitherman, Richard Barksdale, and Jaqueline Jones Royster to name a few.⁵ Learning more about my students was a direct result of my shift from professional clothes to those clothes that represented me, and I was comfortable as fuck.

As a Black woman scholar and teacher of English, I know I stand out when I walk into spaces that wasn't developed with *me* in mind. When I walk into spaces where white men and women have traditionally been in the role of teacher or professor, I disrupt the status quo. My very *being* is resistance to, not only a field, but a society that privileges whiteness. These various criticisms are



Image 2: A pic in my custom tee. The shirt reads "Cook, Smitherman, Royster, Logan, Barksdale, Turner...Our past and living elders of generation 1.0."

⁵ As earlier mentioned, alongside with my panelist, we wore our own shirts to shout out our fam. Roundtree and Scott wore tees including the names of Beverly Moss, Elaine Richardson, Gwendolyn Pough, Carmen Kynard, Keith Gilyard, Adam Banks and Eric Darnell Pritchard among others. Lastly, Maraj's shirt brought it all together with "DBLAC WE GOT NEXT..." which symbolized the space for budding Black scholars of language and literacy to contribute to the field of composition.

a way to articulate a problem that students bring into the classroom with them - that I am not “white enough” to teach this class. A suit don’t shield me from racism or sexism, but it also don’t elevate the knowledge I had before I put the damn thing on. My credentials *are* my suit; they suit me to this position. What I wear don’t change what I know, as shown in Image 2. This is a conscious choice not to accommodate the sexist and racist feelings of students and faculty who are *looking for reasons to think I’m under/unqualified*, and I am perfectly comfortable filling that role.

I Am My Brand—Temptaous McKoy

The email said, “Congratulations, you’ve been accepted to present at xyz conference!” or something like that. I was in the first year of my doctoral studies and I didn’t really know what “presenting at a conference” was, but my mentor told me I should respond to the call for papers. This was one of the biggest conferences in my field and it would def work in my favor if I got accepted. I got accepted. I was provided the opportunity to give a poster talk. Very low stakes, but also very good for a newbie like myself. It would provide the opportunity for me to chat with some of the big names in my field and get to introduce some of those same people to my love for HBCUs. Showcasing my love for HBCUs was one of the various ways I planned to establish my brand within the field.

What some call their reputation, I prefer to call my brand. I say this because I am a firm believer that we are all walking talking billboards in some form or fashion. And for some, our bodies can become prime real estate to showcase and exemplify other branding initiatives, goals, and outcomes. For example, if a Predominately White Institution wishes to diversify their student body, and I am a part of the current student body, I am a part of that department’s branding initiatives as a program for diverse scholars. In addition, I’ve situated my own personal brand as a Black student, doing Black work, at a white school. Not too far-fetched or different from other Black graduate students. What I believed separated myself? At the time, I was a Black graduate student focusing on an area that was severely under researched, overlooked, and devalued—the Technical and Professional Communication (TPC) knowledge made present at HBCUs. So again, my brand became very important to me early on. Fast forward from the time I got accepted until it was time to head out, I remember looking at my suitcase and thinking, “What should I wear?” And this my friends, is where it all begins.

As previously stated, the conference I was preparing to attend was one of the biggest in my field. Now in case you ain’t know, TPC is still a pretty white male dominated field. Not to mention the field brings on some founding principles of what TPC really is. In other words, it can be chopped to professional writing—for some. Professional is typically coded for whiteness and on white folks’ terms. This goes from the writing in Standard English all the way to wearing clothing that is a representative of a professional within various fields, hell even in the National Basketball Association (McDonald & Togila, 2010). Suits, blouses, stockings, cute lil heel...all dat are some of the various pieces of clothing that are attributed to professional attire. And like most Black people, I have been socialized fairly early to understand what professional looks like on Black bodies; pressed hair or smooth fade and two steps over regular professional. Business



Image 3: So this is the actual outfit at the actual conference I'm talking 'bout.

casual?? What's that. Either we business or we casual, we ain't mixin em too much (But when we do, we slay). As in a matter of fact, my Historically Black College/University (HBCU) Elizabeth City State University was adamant to teach us how to "dress for success" or professional. Yet, I would have never guessed such molding would one day lead to my present-day resistance to professional dress.

Back to the conference. So, I sat down and looked in my closet trying to figure out what was I about to wear to this conference. I decided to go with a tan/khaki colored suit that I purchased from Lane Bryant. I then paired it with a black and white speckled shirt, and a slight pump (Image 3). I knew this was the outfit that was it. Now this is a two-day conference, however, I was only able to be there for one of the two days. So that meant I had to look good and mean it. I traveled to the conference certain that my suit would be a hit. It would show that I was serious. It would show I meant business. It would show that a sister was trying to simply match the standards of what she has been taught professional meant.

light bet, I head on to the conference. I walk into the hotel with confidence. I pull up on the registration table and I then realized I may be a lil' overdressed. However, THIS (my attire) is what I have been taught professional looks like, so I look the part—it's just that everyone else don't know the rules. I get compliments on my attire and I'm so excited to present my poster. As I prepared for all of the great people to come in the room, I began to feel like I just wasn't myself in my suit. Don't get me wrong, I looked damn good and that suit was fitting me just right. Yet, given the circumstance I simply felt overdressed, so I took off my blazer. And then, people make their way in. "Game on Temptuous," I start to think. As everyone begins to come around and I so anxiously wait to answer their questions, I still didn't feel like myself.

People came to my poster. I described my work with confidence. I smiled and was so very pleasant. Then I realized something, I was not being myself. I was putting on a front. I wanted to appear like I was supposed to be in that space, and I knew it was my job to do that through my speech and my dress. So, I untuck my shirt. I drop my hair. I get comfortable. I loosen my speech. I begin to talk to everyone like we were family. All while this embodied shift is occurring, I am still articulating my work to all those that came by and were interested in my research. I went back to my room and had an epiphany; my clothes influenced my performance. While I tried to put on that front, I was straight up exhausted. I had to switch to bein' my unapologetic self, in order to preserve my energy for the duration of the poster hour. And it wasn't until I got back to my room, took off that damn suit and realized the power it had at that conference.

From that day forward, I decided I was going to wear what made me comfortable. What made me comfortable? Tee-shirts and sneakers made me comfortable. Yet, I still had a thought in the back of my head that reminded me it was not going to fly because I didn't want to disrupt my brand as a member of my field that belonged. I didn't want to appear as if I had not received any formal training. So, I decided to meet somewhere in the middle. Tee-shirt up top, slacks down bottom. Not only would this look show me as a professional, it would also show who I was an individual and a member of my field. I mean don't get me wrong, I love a bad suit and dress like the next gal, I just know I can be flexible in my choice of dress.⁶ But even one step further, I placed a message on all of my tee-shirt so allude to what I was presenting on and so people could easily identify who I was on the program, without having to formally introduce myself. As much as I love networking, I am simply not a fan of going through the "What is your name?" motions. That's another article for another day. Any who, I found a way to establish my brand through my tee-shirts. The shirts started out as just regular tees I found online, and then I went to making custom shirts. And as time went on, I started to notice the pattern happening at other conferences by other participants.

I will not dare say I spearheaded the movement to wear tee-shirts to conferences. What I would say however is that I assisted in having other conference members rethink how our attire could be used in rhetorical ways at conferences, instead as simply our uniforms. Conferences are perfect spaces to showcase your brand. These spaces can help you get a job, publications, network for your life, and learn from fellow scholars. The attire we choose to wear in the conference/ professional space is just as important. Our attire can serve as an outward declaration of resistance and a reflection of who you are as an individual—as I exemplify in Image 4.

Even though I do not see an official dress code for the attire worn at conferences in my field, there certainly is a space where I see an assumed dress code, in addition to what that is privileged to certain bodies. As a Black woman, I don't have the option to look like who done it and why. I represent a community that is far greater than myself. Black people must always be extra aware of their Black body in professional white spaces, including conferences. These are spaces that can make or break our careers and the last thing we need is to be denied an opportunity because we were underdressed. But we can take on what it means to be



Image 4: Me pictured at CCCC 2018 with my awards and rocking my "Y'all Feel Safe?" shirt in response to the conference and its location choice (see NAACP Travel Advisory Warnings in 2018 and CCCC 2018 Conference location).

⁶ If Imma pull up in the sneakers, ain't nobody gonna check me...trust I wore them to my job talks too.

underdressed. And turn it on its head for all conference members to see, understand, and learn from. Learn to not only pick and choose your battles when it comes to dress, but be sure to actually fight your battles, and fight them strategically and unapologetically.

I Am My Hair—Cecilia Shelton

People have lots of reactions to discovering that I teach college writing for a living. Surprise is the predominant one.

“Oh, wow, really...where do you teach?” I mention a local college or university.

“Wow. That’s impressive. Gee, I’d better watch my grammar around you. Don’t judge me.”

Cue nervous laughter on both parts. This kind of exchange is somewhat universal. People expect “English teachers” to be strict grammarians out to rid the world of pronouns without antecedents and dangling modifiers.

What people do not expect, though they cannot say so, is for an “English teacher” to look like me. I don’t know this because people tell me so directly. But more than 10 years of experience with reactions to my profession has revealed a number of patterns—surprise and exaggerated compliments are common themes; another one is some kind of comment or reaction to my hair.

When I reflect on my time as an instructor of college writing and how my embodiment has most often intersected with my choice to work in the academy, my hair stands out as a point of contention. I am a Black woman and have worn my hair in its natural, kinky state for the



Image 5: Profile of C. Shelton with a braided and twisted natural hairstyle.

duration of the time I’ve been teaching. While the styles themselves have varied, they have always reflected the texture of my hair and aligned with the hair care choices that are safest and most convenient for my lifestyle. Three casual but memorable interactions illustrate the various ways for which my hair was a point of departure for people to indicate that my body was not the typical English teacher body.

There is a long-standing inside joke in the Black natural hair community—we wear our hair straightened to the interview and then when we get hired, we show up with the afro! Black women have been conditioned to do as much as possible to meet white beauty standards in professional environments; however, the natural hair renaissance of the last twenty years has encouraged a new generation of Black women to choose not to

chemically straighten their hair. Many Black women now enjoy the flexibility of naturally curly or kinky hair which can be worn in any number of styles (Image 5).

I planned to get my hair styled in preparation for my interview for my first full-time academic job just after completing my master's degree. As is common in Black hair salons, my stylist was interested in more than my hair. When she learned that the purpose for my visit was to prepare for an interview, we followed the script outlined above. She was shocked but proud of my accomplishment. After learning that I'd be working as a college writing instructor, she quickly deduced, "Oh, so we must be straightening your hair then" and she quickly set about the task of identifying which heat protectants and flat irons she planned to use. I stopped her.

"I'm not so sure" I said. "It's an HBCU, so..." my voice trailed off.

She knew what a Historically Black College or University was. But she was not convinced that I could escape the inside joke about Black women and straight hair for interviews. Because we both knew it wasn't really a joke. Black women do get judged more harshly for the presentation of our bodies in professional spaces. Everything about that presentation needed to be strategic, including my hair. But how did the cultural context of a historically Black institution impact my decision? The deciding factor in the conversation was what specifically I was being hired to do—teach students to write by leading the University Writing Center and teaching writing courses. People, even Black people, have been socialized to associate standard English with whiteness—not because Black people don't have a rich language tradition associated with our culture; and not because white people all speak without the influence of dialect and slang—because English teachers are associated with policing language correctness and that policing is a function of whiteness.

As my hair stylist quipped, "They ain't askin you to teach Black history, baby!"

Honestly, I don't remember which hairstyle I chose. But I do remember the conversation and my persistent efforts to convince my stylist that I'd studied language variation and dialect during my master's degree and that the way we speak has rules like every other language and that it was perfectly beautiful and valid and I wanted to share that with my would be students. But my stylist, positioning herself as an auntie figure, there to guide and protect me, would not yield. She strongly suggested a straightened style at least for the interview. This experience solidified the ways that professionalism not only colors the academy, but also shapes disciplinary standards in raced and gendered ways.

I got that job at the HBCU and I wore my hair in a wide variety of natural styles over the course of the 7 years I worked there. In all that time, my presence as a Black woman was affirming for many Black students. But the fact remained that my body, for them, was a symbol of whiteness because the subject I taught had been a tool of white oppression for their entire educational careers, dampening and discounting their own linguistic resources. Even with my affirmation of their right to their own language (SRTOL), and my code-meshing pedagogical stance (Shelton & Howson, 2014), my position as an authority figure in the writing classroom aligned me with whiteness and I had to hold that reality in tension with my embodiment. Though I've described

it differently here than my stylist did, she was telling me the same thing. And as she predicted, my hair would continue to be a focal point, calling me back to the significance of my embodiment for what I chose to do for work.

Changing hairstyles was interesting and fun but was also time consuming and expensive. I began to search for a hairstyle that would fit my busy lifestyle and keep my commitment to a natural hair care regimen. I chose sisterlocs. Just a year and a half before I began my PhD program, I got my sisterlocs installed and when I was accepted, I knew that they would save me time and energy. They became an instant identifier for my new colleagues. Curious white people with questions about hair are also very familiar to Black women. For the most part, my doctoral community was inquisitive out of curiosity and admiration and everyone was well informed enough to avoid the mistake of touching my hair without permission (and pulling back a nub). Even my students were interested in my hairstyle. I sometimes referred to my hair as an identity marker as I scaffolded into an assignment about critical reflection. A handful of times, I got follow-up questions asking more about my hair and complimenting its beauty. Again, a little zoo-like, but mostly harmless.

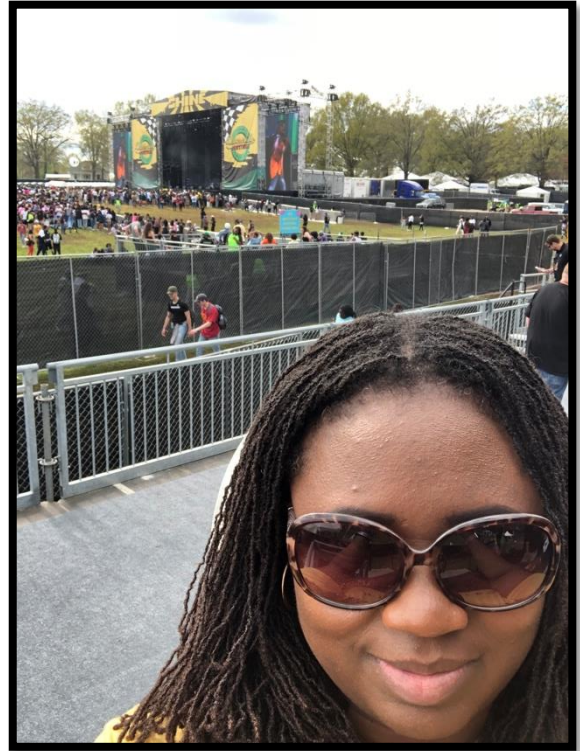


Image 6: C. Shelton enjoying the Dreamville festival & rockin sisterlocs.

One day, I was out to meet a friend for a lunch and writing date somewhere close to (but decidedly off) campus. We were in an area that students and faculty frequented, so it was not uncommon to see students who might say hello. We had lunch and wrote, and it was lovely. The next day in class, a student asked if I'd had Mexican for lunch the day before. I said I had and asked if she'd been there too. She confirmed that she had and told me that she'd seen me walk in and sit with my friend, the only other Black woman graduate student who was instructing writing in the department at the time. As she chattered on about the food and about seeing me there and wanting to speak but being unsure, she commented casually,

"I thought it was you, but I really couldn't tell even after I saw your face. It was your hair that convinced me. No other teachers have your hair."

She meant this as a compliment. I didn't think much of it at the time. But in retrospect, it reminds me of the ways that my hair, even when it is admired, marks me as other in my community of scholars. It reminds me that my students and even my colleagues probably, use my body to mark and distinguish me from other Black people—not my research interests, or my teaching style, or my (too) big smile, or my affinity for cardigans. Though her technique for

recognizing me worked for her, it was clearly based in a social system that doesn't require her to distinguish between multiple Black bodies in her everyday life and one that has taught her that teachers don't typically, "have hair like" mine. Funny that she'd made this conclusion likely before she'd even worked in a professional environment herself. Another hair-work related experience I had just a year ago demonstrated just how common her sense-making of the world actually is.

Keeping with the theme here, my hair is often a point of conversation when I meet new people—kids included. I am a parent, which involves all kinds of kid related activities. The first time I met one of my daughter's classmates, she was especially excited and full of questions. Some of her questions had specifically to do with my daughter's hair: Why is it always braided? How long does it take? How do you take it down? Her mom stopped her daughter's questions, sensing that they were bordering inappropriate and visibly grateful for my patience. She introduced herself to me and we had the typical, our friends are kids but do we like each other talk. Eventually my attention turned back to the girl. She had already learned all about me from her friend, my kid. She was now standing facing me, while I sat. We were at eye level. She looked at me carefully, asking:

"You're a teacher, right?"

"Yes, I am. I'll be heading to teach college students when I leave here."

Now her gaze drifted away from eye contact. She was looking around my face. She glanced at my daughter. Then back at me. Then at my daughter and back again. She was not looking at my face...she was looking at my hair. She tilted her head slightly and squinted her eyes (this is true—it is not for literary effect).

"You're nothing like I imagined".

We both stared momentarily. I realized that she was trying to make sense of what a teacher was to her and how little I fit the description. Despite my "teacher clothes" casual slacks, a simple shirt, a cardigan, and flats, she seemed to be grappling with how much my body—specifically the hair that she was fascinated with—didn't fit the description of a teacher that she'd come to expect. Her own teacher, a petite and friendly white woman (and a really great teacher, I might add) was not unlike her expectations as I was. And while I'm hopeful that her concept of a teacher expanded that day, what stands out to me is how early her concept of a teacher had solidified—these were 10 year olds.

These three experiences are small, almost insignificant recollections; they are things I might have forgotten if I hadn't been prompted to interrogate my embodiment and its relationship to my professionalism. But the truth is that these kinds of interactions remind me that I am the "other" and that my explicit commitment to my natural, racial features emphasizes and highlights that otherness. None of the people with whom I spoke likely saw themselves as microaggressors—my stylist was being "helpful"; my student was being "complimentary"; my daughter's friend was being "curious." But their ideas about who a professor can be don't

include me at first glance. Our argument is that “first glance”, the one that our students, and colleagues, and neighbors take when we reveal our professional qualification, is imbued with white, hetero-patriarchy and it harms us.

Conclusion

We understand the risks we take by sharing these experiences, connecting them to our bodies, and attributing them to race and racism. We risk not being believed. We risk our experiences being rationalized, explained away by the possibility of what the various interlocutors we recount could have meant. We risk that they will be given the benefit of the doubt and that we will be doubted. This is not uncommon for Black women.

But we also recognize that our testimony and our ability to make sense of that testimony in relationship to embodiment and professionalism has the potential to be enlightening and persuasive; not sharing and making sense of these narratives is risky too when we consider the potential to change how people think about professionalism on Black women’s bodies and the benefit of identifying with the complexity of our experiences for other Black women and women of color in the academy.

This in-between position, one where neither sharing what you know and nor withholding what you know seems like a viable option, has been described as one of the indicators of epistemic oppression by Black feminist epistemologist Kristie Dotson (podcast citation). Dotson (2014) formally defines epistemic oppression as “persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one’s contribution to knowledge production” (pg. 115). One way that this oppression can occur is through silencing, a form of epistemic violence and related concept, which happens when “members of oppressed groups are silenced with respect to giving testimony” (Dotson, 2011 p. 237). This silencing occurs in two forms—testimonial quieting, wherein “an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower” and testimonial smothering, wherein one’s own testimony is truncated “order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (Dotson, p. 244).

A white, Western, hetero-normative epistemology governs the controlling narratives in each of the environments where our reflections take place—the classroom, conferences, and public space. When the people with whom we work, interact, teach, and learn all subscribe to this epistemology, it can be difficult to disrupt the norms that determine what is and isn’t acceptable. We have each experienced silencing of the kind Dotson references; the kind that either assumes that we don’t know what we are talking about or that grows out of the hearer’s incapacity to know what we testify to based on their ignorance (for example, a three year old cannot be expected to “know” the voting rules in Michigan, as Dotson explains). We persist in giving testimony because “it is by locating the forms of epistemic violence in silencing that we can begin to delineate, with contextual detail, practices of silencing on the ground” (Dotson, 2011, p. 327). The meaning of “professional” in the academy is the ground upon which we hope to make space for bodies like ours.

Sharing accounts of the intentional ways that we compose our bodies as raced, gendered, *and* professional might help our academic colleagues, our students, our administrators, and the publics with whom we interface to understand professionalism as a construction that can be stifling for Black women and gender non-conforming people. Tracing the ways that we've been silenced and the ways that we subvert those silences offers insight to bridge the gap in knowledge that our white colleagues likely have around our clothing, adornment, hairstyling, and other presentation practices. Even if not, our testimony stands as a beacon to other Black women in the academy: wear that t-shirt, sis; rock them big door knocker earrings; let them locs cascade over your shoulders; speak in your vernacular; be you! We need you!

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Postpartum Fit

Making Space for Feminist Mothering and Mom Bodies in Academic Spaces

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Abstract

Our article discusses how our dress practices have worked to “modify” our bodies as mothers. Eicher (2000) noted how dress practices are actions individuals undertake to modify and supplement the body in order to address physical needs in social spaces. While academic spaces often proclaim “body positivity” out loud (if not in practice), as postpartum academics we sometimes find it hard to embrace body positivity and reconcile the role of mother with our other identity positions. As female Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) of a Writing Center (WC) and a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program respectively, we are keenly aware of our discipline’s “feminized” and “nurturing” identity as something that’s been actively resisted since the feminine is seen as inferior (Grutsch McKinney, 2013; Nicholas, 2004). This is particularly true in WCs where “cozy” spaces are cause for distress because “if the writing center is a home and staff is family, that makes the director the mother” (Grutsch McKinney, 2013, p. 26). In other words, presenting as mothers can undermine our identities as serious scholars and administrators. Instead, our article embraces the notion of “feminist mothering” (Miley, 2016; O’Reilly, 2008) and “reclaim our nurturing (mothering) work as empowering, vital work within the institution” (Miley, 2016, p. 2). We contend that the practice of mothering and the bodies of mothers are not impediments to professional spaces and identities. Our article explores the concept of “fit” and examines how our postpartum bodies and our embodied identities and practices as mothers can “fit” in academic spaces. We do not equate our roles as mothers as inferior parts of our identities. We share stories of how we craft our academic personas to negotiate implicit dress codes and embodied norms in academic spaces: sometimes we try to “fit” and other times we stretch the boundaries of those norms recognizing the need for a wider view of what bodies and practices belong in academia.

Rhetoric acknowledges how identities are complex; we all have varying experiences in the ways our identities intersect through race, class, gender, and sexuality. We might see ourselves inhabiting one space—that of an academic professional, for example—whereas we are also inhabiting the space of another—such as a mother to toddlers—as another part of our identity. While we are both writing this article as white, cisgendered, nondisabled, married women, we are also writing from the spaces of remediated and complex identities, such as wife, mother, scholar, professor, and colleague. The blending of identities demonstrates the complexities of

selfhoods we experience as academics, partners, and mothers. We see these complexities through the embodiment of motherhood. An example of the embodiment of motherhood exists with the imagery of the pregnant body. The pregnant body is a public, politicized space where the “bump” is viewed as an accessory or a source of social status. While the bump is glamorized, and even seen as social capital, the behaviors of pregnant bodies can be seen as embarrassing because of morning sickness and other physical discomforts. Despite the embarrassing behaviors of pregnant bodies, women have tried to reclaim the pregnant body. For example, the film *Labor Pains* (2009) demonstrates the social capital of pregnancy when Lindsay Lohan’s character continues to fake a pregnancy because she sees the social attention she receives from looking and acting pregnant. Another example of societal attempts to reclaim the pregnant body exist through how some expectant mothers have shown how pregnancy can be sexy through social media, like how Chrissy Teigen has shown through her Instagram.

Despite genuine efforts to reclaim the pregnant female body, the postpartum body does not hold the same appeal. Postpartum bodies are not viewed as sexy. Postpartum bodies are certainly not glamorized. Most importantly to note, postpartum bodies are not seen as attractive bodies. Even while academic culture capitalizes on the life of the mind, we know that bodies still matter. How we dress for our jobs is noticed by our colleagues and our students. When we faced our postpartum bodies, we discovered clothes that no longer fit and a body that does not seem to match the identities we had so carefully cultivated within our academic spaces. As academic professionals, we have worked against the narrative of the uncomfortable and unattractive postpartum body, often angrily, to create productive spaces for our postpartum bodies within our university cultures, even when we felt discomfort in doing so. The question we ask ourselves as mothers in the academy is simply what does it mean to be a mother in academia? What does it mean to have to get up each day and dress our postpartum bodies?

Postpartum bodies are messy and uncomfortable bodies. To be postpartum in a professional space requires a reframing of identity and dress practices. However, in academia, we do not always like to link issues of dress to identity. After all, bodies may be viewed as “the academy’s dirty secrets” since much of what we do is always seen as being focused on the life of the mind (Cedillo, 2018, p. 2). What is ignored in the life of the mind is that our minds are actually *part of* our bodies, and how we dress our bodies becomes a way we rhetorically perform our academic personas. After pregnancy, bodies change, and may become unrecognizable versions of the bodies we felt we used to have. The change of our physical bodies after pregnancy may become a permanent situation or at other times the changed postpartum body is a temporary space, something we later shed, like an uncomfortable arrangement. Even as our bodies change (or not) we must learn to develop new rhetorical frameworks and personas to keep on task with the constraints we work within.

Our article examines how our postpartum bodies “fit” within academic spaces. University spaces can be uncomfortable spaces, rife with rules that enforce codes that not all of us are familiar with or accepting of, but are codes we must confront in order to keep our

careers (McKinney, 2013; hooks, 1994). In this essay, each of us will share stories of academic motherhood, and how we embody academic spaces and practices on our respective campuses. Each of our stories are different, but within them we each carry thematic threads in the ways we embody academic spaces within our departments, universities, and academic positions. We understand that academic motherhood is messy—we embody multiple relationships of mother, partner, teacher, scholar—and these relationships overlap in ways that are not neat or orderly, as one expects in the role of being seen as a “good mother” (O’Reilly, 2007). Using Andrea O’Reilly, we demonstrate how each of us as writing program administrators practice feminist mothering, or “any practice of mothering that seeks to challenge and change various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limited or oppressive to women,” with a particular focus on our own dress practices during postpartum (2007, p. 796). As educators and administrators, we embody a complex, relational practice with other faculty, students, and staff. These relationships with others in and outside of our work spaces sometimes define us in limiting ways—as curators of writing programs or as “den mothers” watching over a “flock” of student employees in a writing center. In reality, our roles are varied, nuanced, and echo what Kinser calls as “relating in multiplicity,” which speaks toward the tension of a mother who has relationships with people other than her children (2008, p. 125). Faculty and students sometimes see us as “nurturers” of the writing their students produce, of the writing assignments they produce, or of the student workers within a writing center. In reality, our roles and relationships are much more complex and our article seeks to create a space of “postpartum fit” within the academic structures we work within each day as we seek to align how our dress practices fit in with the academic roles we embody.

The individual stories we share will not provide easy answers to solving the inherent challenges we encounter in our professional and personal lives as academics and mothers. What we hope to primarily illuminate on are the embodied practices we inhabit as we navigate our academic positions and spaces. In this article we will each focus on our own dress practices as we discuss individual ways we negotiate “fit” in academic culture as mothers, postpartum bodies, and pregnant bodies. Each of us will tell a series of stories that speak toward our past and present embodiments as mothers and as academics. Such stories feel uncomfortable, both for the writer and the reader, so we’d like to remind you and ourselves that “the practice of story doesn’t always feel good, and the stories produced in that practice aren’t always happy celebrations of our community’s accomplishments” (Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab, 2014, Act II, Scene 3).

Jessica

The month I became Director of Writing Across the Curriculum was the same month I gave birth to my twins, Elise and Alma, at 36 weeks gestation. The appointments were roughly one week apart. On August 10, 2017 I underwent my scheduled c-section to deliver my twins. On August 18, 2017 I was on campus for my first meeting as Director of Writing Across the Curriculum. Since I was only a week postpartum, exhausted from the needs of newborn twins, and recovering from my c-section, I did not understand how attending that meeting would be viewed by others as possibly being a little bananas. I did not have the capacity to understand

why other people around me would think that I should probably be at home experiencing my life as a new mother. Even when someone else at the meeting explained it would have been fine if I had not attended, I made a joke about my in-laws taking over my home and needing to be away for a while. This joke was true (my in-laws *had* taken over my home), but I also felt the meeting was an important one to participate in as our opening department meetings often work to set the tone for the upcoming academic year as we agree to our service commitments and discuss possible teaching assignments for a future semester. But this meeting also sticks with me because it was my first foray into academic motherhood, and the difficulties that are embodied with this practice. The difficulties in this balancing act have, at times, given me to feeling enraged; it is a rage I feel in having to constantly balance my work as a mother and my work as an academic, but this rage has fueled my scholarship. I have written about my experience breastfeeding my twins, and my ultimate failure with breastfeeding (Jorgenson-Borchert, 2019). I've presented as part of a panel titled, "Flipping the Career Script: Performing Motherhood Across and Against Traditional Academic Labor Narratives" at #4C19 where I spoke toward my role as a jWPA and mother to twins. One of my particular struggles as a new mother within academic spaces has been through dress practices. During pregnancy and postpartum my body changed, and continues to change, leaving me struggling with finding clothes that fit my body, but also in finding clothes that fits the rhetorical persona, or embodiment, that I wish to represent as an academic professional.

To illustrate my dress practices during my postpartum period, I'll use a selection of personal photos to give a feminist phenomenological approach to my narrative. These images will illustrate my dress practices as I searched to find my postpartum fit within academic spaces. To be honest, I feel somewhat exposed in showing photos of myself in this way. For one, I've never liked photos of myself since I've never been seen, or have seen myself as a "worthy" subject for photography (Bourdieu, 1990). I am not particularly beautiful, and frankly, I've never been interested in being photographed. In entering academic motherhood, photos became an undeniable part of my personal and professional life. Another reason showing these photos feels uncomfortable is because I *look* uncomfortable. Many of the photos I took represent the discomfort I was feeling about my body, as my body changed dramatically after giving birth. No longer did I represent, at least in some ways, the standards of beauty for a white woman: visibly thin with smaller, defined features. After giving birth, even two years postpartum, my stomach still bulges out as if parts of the pregnancy have never left.

The family photograph is an identifiable genre in how its purpose is to provide a compelling narrative of a happy family life. Family photos function creates and manages an appearance of what it means to be a happy family, complete with bodies that look healthy and smiling faces to signify personal happiness. Our first family photo (see Fig. 1) represents the ideal family photograph in some ways, but perhaps not in other ways. In the photo, my partner beams proudly, holding one of our twins, Alma, in his arms. I'm also looking like a new proud parent, but when I look at myself in this photo, I notice how I look pale and exhausted from giving birth via c-section where I encountered complications from blood loss. My face appears puffy. My still swollen postpartum stomach can be seen. Elise is the crying infant in my arms, and at least to me, symbolizes how unprepared I felt to be a mother. I remember as we arranged ourselves



Figure 1: First family photo, 12 August 2017.

for this photo that I could not get Elise to calm down and I kept feeling as if I wasn't holding her correctly, like I was doing something wrong.

That something wrong followed me beyond that first family photo in the form of breastfeeding. I had decided to try breastfeeding my twins, at least part time breastfeeding, since I continued to work even after the birth of the twins. Breastfeeding turned out to be complicated. My body did not produce much milk, and as to why this was never explained to me. My newborns also had trouble latching, which frustrated both me and the lactation consultant I worked with. I had to use nipple shields in order to get the babies to latch for any real length of time. I kept trying, mostly in vain, to get breastfeeding to work until I went to one of my follow-up appointments and was told by a nurse that babies that were never in the NICU tend to have a harder time with breastfeeding. Much like my newborns, these babies often fell asleep, mostly of exhaustion, in the middle of breastfeeding. No one, not even the lactation consultant, had told me this. I left that appointment feeling defeated, but at the same time a bit relieved as I finally had an explanation about why I felt like I was failing. And since I could finally wean the babies from breastfeeding, I felt I would not be as hungry so often and could start to work off some of the weight I had gained during my twin pregnancy, which was around 40 pounds. Not all of it was weight that left me easily and I probably still carry some of that weight now.

I was not prepared for the ways in which new motherhood and my postpartum body challenged my appearance. Logically, I knew my appearance would change post-birth, but I did not understand that these physical changes would last much longer than just a few weeks or that some changes may be permanent. The changes I noticed at first were the most immediate. My stomach swelling took what felt like months to go down. Clothes no longer fit me, leaving me to



Figure 2: Jessica, 1 month postpartum, September 2017.

continue to wear some of my maternity clothing or oversized t-shirts for over a year after giving birth. I understand that sharing this does not make me unique as a postpartum woman, but my narrative will work to elaborate how my postpartum changes forced me to reshape my dress practices and, in some ways, to reshape my identity from someone who had been seen as thin to someone who is not as thin anymore (think of a pear). Because of how my stomach muscles stretched during my twin pregnancy I have what is commonly called abdominal separation, or diastasis recti, a condition where your stomach muscles are separated leaving a noticeable bulge in my stomach area.

To share a visual representation of my postpartum body just a month after giving birth I've included a photo of me one month postpartum (see Fig. 2). I remember taking this photo on a day I did not have any scheduled meetings or teaching, but went to the office to get some course planning and administration tasks done. I remember feeling so uncomfortable in the clothes I was wearing to work and feeling so uncomfortable with my postpartum body, and my postpartum *identity* of mother-scholar, that I felt the need to document that discomfort in some way. Certainly, the image below looks awkward, and perhaps unprofessional to some viewers as I'm wearing a screen print t-shirt and a loose, dark colored skirt that I wore throughout my twin pregnancy.

Looking at myself in my one-month postpartum photo (see Fig. 2) feels embarrassing, even though I know there is a natural explanation for how my body looked at that time. Before pregnancy and birth, I had always been seen as a small, thin person. I took pride in thinness of my identity, and so much so that being thin was a large component of my identity. When I was thin, I was able to purchase and wear clothing that accented my thin body. After giving birth, I

spent over a year mourning my previous body. I still mourn that body, though I've become a little more accepting of my body than I was in the picture above. I've altered my clothing choices by choosing clothing that does not form to my shape but instead flows with my body's movements. I stress about how a shirt fits against my stomach. I'll try the same shirt with multiple skirts to see what looks better, what skirt might help to de-emphasize my stomach bulge. I've had to get rid of a few of my old shirts since many of them don't fit me well, instead working to emphasize what could possibly be a pregnant belly on my small frame. In doing all this stressful re-imagining of my body, or what I term "dresswork," I've learned that I just have the body that I have. I cannot hide this body. This body is me and mine and it is still a hard thing to reconcile, but I think I am getting better about learning this is me now.

Postpartum was also a difficult time because my body became a foreign space, a foreign thing I was forced to carry around with me because it was me. Identity became something I had to work to rediscover. In essence, I had to rehome myself through my dress practices so that my body was a space I could identify with again. Feelings of feeling foreign with my own body were not just due to body shape, but because of the added postpartum weight I was carrying. I could physically feel the extra weight with the heaviness in my stomach and the discomfort I felt when I bent over for too long (and still feel, especially after eating, thanks diastasis recti). Because of the extra pounds, and the continued swell of my stomach, I still had to wear the clothes I wore during pregnancy because nothing pre-pregnancy fit my body well and some pre-pregnancy clothes did not fit at all. I also did not have enough money to go out and buy new clothes. Growing up in poverty made the whole concept of buying new clothes when I still had a closet full of clothes seem ridiculous. Growing up in poverty made me think, and still makes me think that I only really need new clothes if my current clothing is falling apart enough that it cannot be mended. I felt instead my body was a thing that needed to be mended. Along with having very little clothing that fit my postpartum body, I knew I looked pregnant no matter what clothing I put on. For example, I had colleagues who had not realized I had given birth only weeks ago commenting on what they assumed was my pregnant body. In one instance, a white, male graduate student asked me at the start of the 2017 fall semester if I was going to give birth soon. I explained I gave birth earlier that August and in efforts to deflect my own feelings and possibly his, I happily showed a picture of my children. Further, when I showed the above photo of myself at one month postpartum to my younger brother (Fig. 2), he commented how my body "just looks awkward." Because of the awkward shape my body still had after giving birth, I often wore shapewear that would, with some minimal effect, make my stomach appear smaller as I was tired of explaining to people that I wasn't pregnant and I was also tired of *looking* pregnant. Since my pre-pregnancy identity was so strongly tied to being thin, I wanted to recreate the effect of looking thin. The results weren't always that effective even with the shapewear, however, because I still received questions from well-meaning strangers about "when I was due" even up to nine months after giving birth.

My dress practices continued to evolve as I worked throughout the first nine months after having my twins. Much of my dresswork was focused on ways to de-emphasize my stomach bulge, but considering the conversations I was having with my colleagues these efforts were not working like I had hoped. These conversations often started with something along the lines of

“are you expecting?” or “when are you due?” After leaving a meeting at the end of spring semester, a colleague I had been working with closely on an institutional concern stated empathetically to me, “I bet you are tired.” After leaving our conversation, I realized that she thought I was tired because I was pregnant, not because I had twin babies at home. I felt defeated as I left work that day because I always tried so hard to hide my body. A few weeks after the incident with a campus colleague, my university held an academic conference. At the conference I happened to visit with one of the deans who had the nerve to excitedly ask me if I was pregnant. I awkwardly replied I had twins in August, to which he responded that his daughter also had twins and commented on how wonderful it was to be a grandparent. I found the whole exchange embarrassing and isolating because again my postpartum body seemed to be controlling the conversation.

Continuing conversations and comments about my body and dress practices emphasize how when I teach and when I meet with other faculty and higher-level administrators, I’m keenly observed, even before conversation establishing my professional, academic identity begins. Thus, dress practices, or dresswork, in academic spaces matter as dress practices not only shape the body, but give away key parts of one’s professional and personal identity. Visibly looking like a mother did cause me to feel as if, at times, my mothering role was being emphasized over my professional role, such as what happened when that administrator stopped me at the conference to ask if I was pregnant. Past research on how identity is connected to dress practices argues that the “dressed body” is a “basic element of identity and dress choices help create personal narratives (Gonzalez and Bovone 2012, p 67). Eicher (2000) noted how dress practices are actions individuals undertake to modify and supplement the body in order to address physical needs in social spaces. Academic spaces are social spaces that often proclaim “body positivity” out loud (if not in practice), but as postpartum academic mother I found it difficult to embrace body positivity and reconcile the role of mother with my other identity positions as a teacher, administrator, and a colleague. My body had shifted, and with this shift I turned to remediations of my body, which led me to find ways of remixing my postpartum body to my professional practices. While my body gave comfort to my children (breastfeeding, warmth), that same body did not always feel comfortable to me. It was as if my once “comfortable body” had slipped from the former “comfortable chairs” I had previously occupied as an academic (Ahmed, 2017, p. 123). I can relate many instances of times I have stepped into a meeting, only to be greeted by questions about my children or half-jests about sleep deprivation. I understand this is done as a way to create relationships through seemingly innocuous small talk before we discuss the meeting agenda, however I still find it to be a way to stereotype me and feminize my professional identity in a field that is already feminized. When a colleague mentions the fact I’m a mother to a person I don’t know at a professional event, how then do I reclaim an identity built on my academic experience instead of my experience as a mother? These instances are frustrating to me. At this point, I’ve learned to smile, acknowledge the remark, and then mention something about what I do in the professional spaces I occupy in attempts to reposition myself.

On a day before walking into the classroom, I took a photo of myself when I was over a year postpartum (see Fig. 3). Much like how I wanted to document my discomfort only a year



Figure 3: Jessica, 1 year postpartum, September 2018.

ago, I wanted to document how I had changed and been able to change. I felt confident again. I noticed how not just my body has changed, but I also wanted to use the moment to further document my dresswork. In this photo, I am wearing clothes that I normally wear to work and not an oversized t-shirt and a skirt I had worn when I was 8 months pregnant with twins. At the time I took the photo, I still did not fit into all of my pre-pregnancy clothing (I still don't), but I was recognizing myself again. Despite looking normal, it was still off-putting to me when colleagues would tell me things like, "I can't believe you had twins! You are so tiny!" I have no idea what a woman who has a multiple pregnancy is supposed to look like. Even though I looked more like myself again in this photo it's partly due to the shapewear I was wearing after one year postpartum, and further I certainly wouldn't describe myself as tiny or incapable of carrying a multiple pregnancy to term. As a 5'4 and relatively thin-ish, my postpartum belly bulge is still visible because of my smaller frame. Even today when I catch myself in the mirror in a side view, I'm still somewhat surprised by how visible my stomach remains. I remember walking home after work one day when I was four months postpartum and having a stranger tell me I had "swallowed a pill that made my belly button poke out." This comment from a stranger as I walked past made me feel shaken and exposed. I felt so visible. I also remember feeling angry and hurt that a complete stranger to me felt like they had the right or responsibility to comment on my body. I thought about explaining to her I had just given birth a few months ago, but decided instead to keep walking. While I may have physically felt uncomfortable in my own body, the comments from others sometimes felt worse because they reminded me how others were constructing my identity in ways I could not control.

I write this now with some distance as I am no longer postpartum. My twins are two years old. I have learned to see my body as a space that has allowed me to develop a director self, despite how motherhood has also created some limitations. I can no longer always work on research

when I want to and so I cannot fulfill the dangerous and idealized stereotype of the 24/7 academic. However, encountering limitations and challenges has made me braver as a person. My mom body has made me braver. Before kids, I would often stay quiet, even in the face of injustice, which probably speaks toward my upper midwest upbringing than it does my personality. After I became pregnant during my first year on the tenure-track, I felt I could not be academically successful or tenured while also staying silent. I begin to focus on finding ways to become a better advocate, both for myself and for others around me who were navigating similar complex spaces within academia. A couple weeks after I found out I was pregnant, I was able to get all my professional and technical writing courses online for my fall semester, after the babies were born. This kindness was extended to me because of our past director of professional writing whose sister had triplets and probably knew better than I did what I was in for. Because our family leave policy mainly protected senior faculty, I worked with my university's bargaining unit in efforts to improve our family leave policies.¹ The results were less than what I had hoped for, but I was able to start conversations about parental leave, and I'm happy to say these conversations are continuing. As a pre-tenure faculty member, advocating for myself and others among upper administration and senior faculty was a scary thing to do, but these actions helped make me realize being silent was not an effective coping skill. Silence does not create change. I begin to see my new mom body as a brave space and seeing myself in that way made me do brave, challenging work. I continue to advocate for other mother-scholars (and parent-scholars more broadly) within academic spaces. As a writing program administrator overseeing a writing program, I could advocate for the time of instructors who teach our writing-intensive courses, some of whom have children themselves. My advocacy worked to grant a pay raise for all faculty who help with our university writing assessment. Looking back, my postpartum body served as a catalyst for me to become a stronger advocate for myself and others, which was a result I never expected upon entering new motherhood.

As I finish this narrative, in a final moment of reflection, I'll admit to sometimes feeling angry about motherhood coupled with academic culture. Certainly, I love my children, and I do appreciate everything pregnancy, postpartum, and raising children has taught me. I've grown as a person because of my children, but I would have grown as a person without them, too. Sometimes I feel anger over the constant puzzle I have to solve, the constant maze-like daily tasks I go through in order to be a functional academic mother as I research, teach, and care for my twins. While this balancing act is challenging, what angers me most about motherhood is how I feel I have been treated by some other academics around me, from time to time: like I'm inferior, too busy, or just preoccupied to do the work everyone else is doing. All of these assumptions I despise. Becoming a mother while a tenure-track academic did not place me in an inferior position nor did it permanently preoccupy me or keep me in a perpetual state of

¹ My university's family leave policy is connected to sick leave. All faculty accrue 2.5 hours of sick leave per two-week pay period. This system directly benefits senior faculty who have been able to accrue enough sick leave over a few years. As a new faculty member, I did not have much sick leave stored up. We do have a sick leave pool, but in order to use the sick-leave pool I would have to donate some of my sick leave. Because I had not been employed a full year, I was not yet eligible for FMLA and FMLA is unpaid. I am the sole earner for my family, so I needed paid leave. For fuck's sake, please give new parents paid family leave in the United States.

busy. At times, I may look like I am locked in a perpetual state of busy, but I do find time for me. I'm still keeping up on my Netflix binge-watching after all that has happened in the past two years. I still read books for pleasure. I still sometimes find the opportunity to do nothing. All the same, I do still find it difficult to gather enough energy to hang out with friends after the kids are put to bed, but that is likely due to my introvert nature and not just the exhaustion I feel after a long day between work and parenting. What I want y'all to know is that my mother-self has enriched my scholarship, practices, and pedagogies. Becoming a mother, and giving birth, can be seen as a story of power, not of defeat, not of weakness, and certainly not of giving into patriarchal norms. I feel as if I have created a productive set of best practices for myself as a mother-scholar, as I've found the time I need to get my work done, but also have been able to spend valuable time as a parent to my children and a partner to my husband. Part of my truth is that the academy is a patriarchal space that does not always value the risk-taking I took (and still take, as I am writing this, a narrative sharing some personal and painful information) in advocating for myself and others as a jWPA. I continue to see my mom body and all that implies as a brave space. I work to speak toward the rage I have felt—and feel—as I perform within academic spaces that are not always a natural “fit” for mother-scholars.

Marilee

When I first met my colleagues at my current institution, I was 33 weeks pregnant on a campus visit for a tenure-line position as the University Writing Center (UWC) Director. I didn't tell the search committee about my condition, as I wasn't sure if it would be used against me despite federal protections. The colleague who picked me up from the airport was unfazed, not indicating any sort of visual response, and we quickly jumped into conversation about my trip. We had a friendly visit to campus, where we were attending a sabbatical talk of another English department colleague. There I met other colleagues, including one who had a much harder time hiding his surprise. His glance went to my (rather gigantic) pregnant belly and then up to my eyes, then back to my pregnant body, and then back to my eyes. I believe this was unintentional, but I thought in that moment, “Well, this might not work out” and chose to find the whole event hilarious. The next morning, a colleague on the search committee slipped and said “congratulations” before covering her mouth with both hands, after remembering, of course, that the topic was out of bounds. My mom body has always been part of my relationships with my institutional colleagues.

I now make myself wonder: from an initial reading of my body and typical dress choices what do observers intuit or assume, consciously or not? The messages my body shares have implications for my work; as Harry Denny (2018) points out, “the politics of identity are legible, material, and felt” (p. 123). What does my body and how I dress it say, and how does that complicate my ability to do the work of academe, and how that work is valued or seen by others, including the work of writing program administration?

Unlike Jessica, I've always been outspoken. I speak my mind at most opportunities. My attire, in many ways, matches my outspokenness in that I veer toward the bold and bright when it comes to patterns and colors. Also unlike Jessica, I've never been thin. Conventionally attractive

female bodies are thin with large breasts. I'm a tall-ish, fat, white, heterosexual, cisgender, nondisabled, middle-aged woman with fine, flat, jaw-length, dishwater blonde hair, small, deep-set green eyes, and a flat chest. I wear glasses but no makeup and almost no jewelry, dress primarily in comfortable, casual dresses, and am known for my collection of colorful flats. I'm quick to emotion, smiling, laughing, blushing, and angering easily. While I attempt to be body positive, my foundational training to believe that fat bodies are not as valuable as other bodies runs deep. I've always considered myself heavy, even while wearing the higher-end of regular sizes before gaining seventy pounds during the course of graduate school and two pregnancies which took me into the lower-range of the plus sizes. I sometimes wonder how my conventionally attractive, slim husband finds my body attractive, and until my pregnancies I tried not to think about my physical form in relation to my work often, although I was and am certain it makes an impact on how I am understood and read by my colleagues. That said, my several privileged identity markers make my path through life easier and the readings of my body less dangerous than those without privileged identities.

While I hold several privileged identities, I also have identities that have been historically marginalized. I am a woman, I am a mother, I am fat, I work in the discipline of writing studies, and I am from a working class background. People who inhabit marginalized identities are often pressured to progress beyond them. Some examples: women are asked to perform in ways that are more typically identified with men; mothers are simultaneously told to work full time and aspire to having rewarding careers and encouraged to spend as much time as possible with their children; fat people are told to exercise and eat healthier with the ultimate goal of losing weight; writing studies has worked to legitimate itself in higher education through securing more tenure-track positions; working-class individuals are prompted to go to college and seek middle or professional class jobs. Besides adding a new marginalized identity, motherhood didn't change any of these realities for me. Motherhood, instead, made me more reflective and thoughtful about my dress choices and reinforced what I already knew—it can be difficult to perform well (i.e. in expected ways) as a woman in academe, to be professional but approachable, to proudly claim my marginalized positionality while trying to pull it out of the margins. Below I share a few stories about how becoming a mother has made me reflect upon my dress practices in ways that have implications for my professional life.

Dressing a Pregnant Body: Adorable and Powerful

Dressing while pregnant was easy and lovely. I was less self-conscious about my flat chest because my baby bump took center stage, and people often remarked about how cute I was. Since pregnancy is temporary, I didn't overthink my wardrobe. Knowing I'd only wear them a few months, I purchased my maternity clothes secondhand and from affordable retailers, like Old Navy. These clothes often accentuated the notion of being adorable by including a sash to tie around my middle resulting in a bow resting atop my bump. Pregnancy hormones provided my fine hair with a boost, as pregnant women tend to grow hair more quickly and lose less of it. My morning sickness was limited primarily to the first-trimester and mild. My body didn't really ache much during my first pregnancy, and I was fairly comfortable until the third trimester of



Figure 4: Marilee at 38 weeks pregnant and her son, December 2017.

my second pregnancy. During my first pregnancy, I was able to take lots of post-work naps, a rare luxury in my previous life. This meant I was pretty comfortable for a pregnant lady (minus the truly awful and persistent heartburn) and even a little pampered. I looked forward to getting pregnant a second time not just because I wanted another baby but also because I missed wearing my maternity clothes, since nothing seemed to fit my postpartum body. In the picture above (see Fig. 4), I am twelve days away from delivering my daughter, a 9 pound, 3.5 ounce baby. I weigh 265 pounds. I am wearing a maternity sweater and skirt. The outfit isn't terribly remarkable, but I look adorable anyway because of my baby bump. My 2-year-old son pointing to baby sister in my belly amps up the adorable factor even more. I'm still fat and flat chested but being pregnant meant almost effortless recognition for being cute in a way that is largely understood to be feminine. My dress practices were easy and rewarded.

I didn't realize how being pregnant and dressing my pregnant body would enable me to reap the benefits of performing as quintessentially feminine and how much I would like it. It wasn't something I had really even seen as available to me in the past because I always felt my flat chest and fat body made such expressions difficult. Prior to my pregnancies, I didn't consider



Figure 5: Marilee, 39 weeks pregnant, April 2015.

dressing in a feminine way a primary factor in my dress choices. Like Scotty Secrist, I needed to reflect on questions like “What do I assume my identity should be because of my body?” (Smith et al., 2017, p. 50). I had placed limitations on the extent to which I could perform as feminine. While pregnant, I began to think about how powerful the female body is. While I was socially and externally rewarded pretty much for just having a pregnant body, I also found internal gratification in my pregnant body and confidence in dressing it and moving in it. Once again my usual frustrations with my flat chest and fat body and the difficulty I had dressing them were less important because I could carry a baby in this body anyway. I could perform as quintessentially female despite those features. *I could grow a person inside my body*, and that’s amazing. It was an empowering feeling, and it provided me with confidence. I went on the job market and secured a tenure-track job, I went on long hikes, I created zany programming at the writing center I directed at the time. I was capable and in charge. The picture above (see Fig. 5) was taken during my first pregnancy, 5 days before my due date (but 15 days before my son was born). In it, I am standing on the precipice of a butte wearing a jersey knit maternity dress with a bump bow and running shoes. I hiked frequently during my first pregnancy, usually on 3-5 mile trails in mountainous terrain. I hiked in my maternity dresses because I could, and I

wanted to. Pregnancy made me confident and even a bit brazen. I felt this most fully during labor with my firstborn. My body was made to do powerful, strong things.

Dressing a Postpartum Body: Insufficient Glandular Tissue, Time, and Money

In the postpartum, everything about my body felt wrong, and it was impossible to dress it. I had a sweet, snuggly baby, but I was tired and felt like I had very little control about how I presented myself. I felt much less confident. The day after my son was born, I learned that I have a condition known as insufficient glandular tissue, which means that my breasts do not have enough of the kind of tissue that produces breast milk. This has nothing to do with their size, but it was another way my breasts have failed me. They don't even do what they were designed to do. My small breasts and my inability to breastfeed make me feel less feminine, not even just less feminine but less female. Throughout my pregnancy, I wasn't completely certain I wanted to breastfeed, so I was surprised at how devastated I was when I learned I could not breastfeed my son. This revelation negated many of the positive feelings I had about my body during pregnancy as did advertisements in my social media newsfeeds for nursing garments. I wore the nursing bras I'd purchased while still pregnant anyway (in fact, I've contemplated buying more of them because they are the most comfortable bras I've ever owned). I second-guessed my everyday decisions, my abilities, my career path, my motherly aptitude. Everything felt harder postpartum, particularly after my second child was born. These feelings persist, even though my daughter is almost two years old.

My body and the difficulty I've had deciding how to dress it and frustration I've felt in not fitting into my pre-pregnancy clothing despite significant weight-loss, in a sense, represents my larger aimlessness about who I am and what I am here—in this world—to do. Since the birth of my son, my body has been difficult to dress, and I've felt like I've been in an amplified period of flux—starting new job while two months postpartum and trying to get the hang of being a mom, a resident of Indianapolis, and a tenure-line professor at the same time. Several significant parts of my identity changed in the span of just a few weeks, and I was trying to grapple with that in a body that didn't feel like mine while trying to make a good impression on new colleagues. My hair was falling out, my stomach was blown out and resembled a flat tire (honestly, it still does), my belly also extended beyond my flat chest (and still does) but not in a cute way like the baby bump. Wearing maternity clothes, which were the most comfortable in the immediate postpartum period, made my no-longer pregnant body look pregnant, since they were made to accentuate round bellies. Most of my pre-pregnancy clothes were too tight. My chronic insomnia combined with an infant made for long nights and even longer days.

I began to regain a more coherent sense of self and then got pregnant again, which led me back into a cycle of self-questioning. I thought becoming a mother a second time would be easier, but it turns out almost all of it was harder. Since I was 35 at the time of my second pregnancy, I was considered geriatric, which required more screening, including weekly ultrasounds during the third trimester. The intensified monitoring of my blood pressure and blood sugar led me to question whether I was as good at being pregnant as I thought, whether I was as strong as I

thought. Having a two-year-old child while pregnant with another child also meant that I got less rest during the second pregnancy. Most importantly, adding an entirely new person to a family is a lot of work. It takes a lot of time and energy, and the household dynamics, which had finally begun to take on a somewhat predictable rhythm, were completely shaken when my daughter arrived. Once again, my clothes didn't fit and neither did I.

In the postpartum, I feel like I do not fit anywhere and everything—at work and at home—is harder than it used to be. I'll illustrate this feeling with an example. Last spring one of my graduate students—formerly an undergraduate writing consultant at the UWC—was selected as part of our Elite 50, which is a celebration of our top fifty graduate students. As the student's letter writer, I was invited to attend the award ceremony, which included a dinner. I had lost thirty-five pounds in the previous six months. On the day of the awards ceremony, a warm spring day, I selected a dress that hadn't fit since before my first pregnancy. I was excited to be able to wear something that had been unavailable to me for a few (at least 4) years. In the mirror that morning, I thought I looked cute and professional in the light brown cotton dress with white polka dots without being stuffy or overly formal. I paired it with kitten-heeled yellow sandals and left for work.

Unfortunately, the weight across my body is distributed differently than it was when I last wore the dress, and—unbeknownst to me—when I sat down the dress gapped terribly at my bosom and showed my pink lace bra on my flat, flat chest. I noticed this issue a little during dinner but thought that I was handling it well through holding my shoulders just-so and avoiding any leaning. I learned the next day, however, that I had failed miserably. The student posted a picture of us from the event on her Facebook wall. In the photo (see Fig. 6 below; I cropped out the student), my bra is obviously showing. I hid the picture from my timeline, but I know several of my professional colleagues saw it. I thought about contacting the student and asking her to take it down, but I didn't really want to write her a message about my boobs, so I didn't.

At the time this photo was taken, my son was almost 4 and my daughter was 16 months old, well after the conventionally understood postpartum period of 6 months. Even so, I'm still adjusting to motherhood and a self and body that is in flux. Motherhood has, more than anything, highlighted for me that time and money are finite resources. Everything takes time and/or money, and it is a lot harder to come by both of those resources as a parent. That, in part, explains my poor choice of dress this spring. I hadn't worn the dress in years, which means I probably should have worn it at a less high-stakes event first. I often need to wear camisoles with dresses in a faux-wrap style like this one, so I should have worn one that night, but I hadn't been wearing dresses of this style as frequently and had, in fact, thrown out most of my pre-pregnancy camisoles while I was pregnant with my daughter because they were old and stained and then tossed the rest of them into a box out of frustration around a year after my daughter was born because very few of my pre-pregnancy clothes were fitting at that time. The box is in an odd corner of the basement behind boxes of baby and toddler clothes that my children have rapidly outgrown.



Figure 6: Marilee, 16 months postpartum, April 2019.

What I am saying is it takes time and/or money to lose weight, excavate old clothing from the depths of my basement, consider new styles of dress for a body that is shaped differently than it used to be, and purchase new better-fitting clothing. I do not have enough discretionary income to easily replace my clothing, and I also cannot easily find the time to go shopping in stores where I can try on the clothing. I often dress for comfort and my wardrobe does not accommodate occasions where formal attire is preferred. The slow speed at which I am “losing the baby weight” and my strained salary also makes me hesitant to replace my clothing quickly meaning I may choose to wear clothes from a different time, before my body carried children, meaning that my body has changed because it held babies but also that I was younger when I purchased the clothing and perhaps these clothes now shout “grad student” to my peers. I do have an abundance of self-loathing, which was felt keenly after this event. In this experience, I felt neither at home or professional. I didn’t even feel at home in my body.

Mom Accessories for the WCA: Vacuum Cleaners and Performances of Class and Gender



Figure 7: Vacuum cleaner at the University Writing Center, August 2019.

In mid-August, I brought a vacuum cleaner to work. I thought that bringing it in before the semester started would mean that I wouldn't run into other professors who might not be coming to campus regularly yet. Instead, I ran into two colleagues from my own department while walking to my building. Both of them asked me why I was carrying a vacuum cleaner through the campus center; you might be wondering as well. I direct a writing center, which is a physical space that, like our bodies, needs care and maintenance and is styled in a particular way. The UWC holds a unique role in the school and doesn't conform neatly to typically understood definitions of office or classroom. It doesn't get vacuumed often, and there are times when a small spill occurs and a vacuum of our own would be handy. We are not allowed to purchase janitorial equipment with our money since the purpose of our unit is not janitorial, but I happened to have a small vacuum cleaner I wasn't using at home, so I brought it in to make it easier to tidy up

the UWC without having to put in a work order with facilities. In a sense the vacuum cleaner and things like it are accessories I wear across campus, accessories that contribute to perceptions about me and the UWC. Accessories like the vacuum cleaner (see Fig. 7), the printer I once carried from one UWC location to another, and the trays of cucumber sandwiches I bring to UWC staff meetings are part of my sartorial performance as writing center director. These accessories point to a professional identity that is classed and overtly gendered in ways that is not the goal for most tenure-track professors.

These particular accessories aren't worn by most in academic workspaces, and they reinforce the notion of WCA as "mom" and the writing center as "home," in that they are associated with domestic labor. The idea of writing centers as home-like places is a topic of much debate and concern. Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013) writes, "Female directors who insist on cozy, inviting spaces may be unwittingly narrating their work as non-intellectual in the eyes of some. Fact is, if the writing center is home and the staff is family, that makes the director the mother" (p. 26). She sees the home-like connotations of writing centers as problematic for female directors, asking us to distance ourselves from the "feminine" associations of "cozy" writing centers. In addition, her critique and others also point out that the "cozy" and familial associations of writing centers reinforces the mainstream notions of family and home, therefore "mirror[ing]"

the creepy, capitalist, white, cis family structure” (Dixon in Baldwin et al., 2018). Elise Dixon posits that this association of the writing center as family has

meant that I’ve done a lot more labor as a woman in the writing center than my male counterparts. It’s meant that I’ve seen trans, non-binary, and gender deviant friends get misgendered, ignored, and avoided in writing center spaces. It’s meant that I’ve seen my friends of color get mistaken for other people of color by clients and consultants in common micro- and macro-aggressive behaviors. (Baldwin et al., 2018)

Many of my experiences as a graduate writing consultant were similar, and I see these same concerns and interactions as a WCA. I worry more now, as I am more responsible for what happens in the writing center. That responsibility does have similarities to my performance as a mother at home.

At work or at home, I’m “mom”—washing dishes, soothing hurt feelings, listening to the concerns of our home/office community, keeping the household/office organized, scheduling doctor’s appointments/committee meetings, reminding our partners/staff of upcoming commitments, vacuuming the house/writing center. This is necessary work, but professors often see themselves as focused primarily on teaching and scholarship, which seems removed from the kind of management and service-focused tasks of running a writing program. I feel caught in between identities—those that I’ve come from and those that I aspire to. My entry into motherhood has me reflecting more and more on my past experiences and identities and the process of “re-knowing my story, revisiting where I had come from and examining how that story lives within—and influences—me even today” (John Gagnon in Smith et al., 2017, p. 54). I feel conflicted and frustrated about wanting to progress beyond my working-class roots but also irritated when I am asked or expected to participate in service-based (nurturing and mentoring) labor that other colleagues of similar status and rank are not.

Class identity is one of those things that can be visible, as seen through wearing clothes until they almost literally fall apart, not knowing how to dress for formal events, but can also be an invisible status, particularly if you have a tenure-track job at a university. Writing of the literature on writing pedagogy, Julie Lindquist (2004) says that class is “simultaneously everywhere and nowhere” (p. 189). Of writing center scholarship, Harry Denny and John Nordlof (2018) similarly share that “working-class students are everywhere and nowhere” (p. 71). This might be, in part, because “working-class culture differs from other categories of difference. It is marked neither as an identifiable category, like gender, nor as a unified set of historical practices. It names, rather, a set of shared experiences fraught with structural tensions and contradictions” (Lindquist, 2004, p. 192). Students often come to college for opportunities that will move them from the working class to the middle class. It’s part of the progress narrative that colleges tap into to recruit students.

As a person raised in a working-class family, I have a hard time knowing how to be both working-class and middle class, how (not) to perform. I am privileged in this institution and the profession of WCA; I have a tenure-track appointment, an office with a window, and a fairly balanced assignment across teaching, administration, and research with significant autonomy over how I spend my time. Even so, I feel like I am like part of the almost-middle class of the

institution. I am the first tenure-track writing center director on this campus, and my position often gets conflated with that of staff members due to the significant amount of administrative labor and the rare academic assignment that places me in charge of a physical space. I am frustrated with myself by wanting more consistent recognition of my status as tenure-track faculty, but see it as potentially productive in gaining respect for the UWC and the discipline of writing studies from institutional colleagues. At the same time, I recognize the importance of the administrative labor of staff and the heavier teaching loads of my non-tenure-track colleagues and see a need for the institution to value that work through better working conditions, pay, and benefits. In other words, I want to maintain the class privilege I've "achieved" while realizing it is not accessible to everyone and is a problem. These contradictions are evident in my dress practices, through accessories like the vacuum and through complications in dressing my postpartum body, which makes my identity as a mom visible and accessible for commentary to my professional colleagues.

Should I be frustrated that vacuuming the writing center is sometimes part of my job? What does the vacuum and other workplace accessories I'm found carrying through the halls say about me and my ability to be seen as a tenure-track professor? Lindquist considers "how teachers might position themselves to gather data from students in order to learn *who they must become* in order to enable a fuller range of experiential and affective responses" (p. 202). I'd argue this is true of all our work in the academy. For writing program administrators, this includes engaging in impression management across interactions with various groups of stakeholders to secure funding, persuade writers to make writing center appointments or enroll in our classes, and convince colleagues across the disciplines to adapt their writing pedagogies. These interactions, of course, include face-to-face meetings, emails, word-of-mouth messages from colleagues and students, but the medium is the message, and that medium includes our bodies. Interactions, then, also include how we hold our bodies, how we move our bodies, how we dress our bodies, what kind of bodies we inhabit, and the experiences, feelings, and attitudes that our audiences associate with bodies like ours and how they should(n't) move, speak, write, or look.

The vacuum cleaner, then, can reinforce notions of the writing center as home and me as mom, while it can also be a display of my willingness to perform outside the typical class structure of the academy. Practices like this make me wonder, like Michelle Miley, "what doors we close if we abandon 'writing center as home,' and our work as 'nurturing work'" (p.18). My dress practices indicate many embodied identities at all times; even though I can set the vacuum cleaner down or change my dress I am still performing as mom, WCA, fat, female, and more all at the same time. The work of mothering and the work of writing program administration are messy and hard. There is no true "fit," and that can be scary, empowering, and/or just a relief.

Conclusion: More Demands, Fewer Rewards

We are expected to be tenure-line faculty members who publish as well as take on significant administrative labor typically assigned to staff or tenured faculty. We are not just talking about how our discipline hasn't been valued as highly as other academic disciplines, or how our work

as WPAs is seen as “service” and therefore the least valuable of the academic labor triad (consistently valued in this order: research, teaching, service), but also how those concerns are mingled with gendered, physical realities. Female bodies are expected to perform nurturing, service-focused labor in academic spaces, even though that labor—while important and expected—is not valued through increased compensation or promotion. Dress practices are expected to emphasize our female labor; we are expected to wear clothing that identifies us as a nurturing body, whether that be through wearing clothing that accentuates our female body to “dressing like a mother” with mom jeans, flowy tops, or comfortable fabrics. In this way, identity comes through in our body work of dress practices: “All bodies do rhetoric through texture, shape, color, consistency, movement, and function. Embodiment encourages a methodological approach that addresses the reflexive acknowledgment of the researcher from feminist traditions and conveys an awareness of consciousness about how bodies—our own and others’—figure in our work” (Johnson et al, 2015, p. 39). Our narratives focusing on dressing our pregnant and postpartum bodies demonstrate the embodied approach of identity creation. Like Johnson et al. (2015) we recognize that “embodied methodologies and embodied rhetorics encourage complex relationships among past, present, and future, as well as across multiple identifications” and see our work contributing to conversations about how “bodies both inscribe and are inscribed upon” (p. 42).

In the classroom, women are also held to standards that require us to be seen as nurturing, and we are told that we must demonstrate this nurture through our cultivated identities, which sometimes may be seen through our dress practices. In the past we have read comments about our dress practices in our end of semester student evaluations. Comments will share thoughts about our bodies and how we dress our bodies, but will not comment about our expertise or teaching effectiveness. For example, a comment may share that we do not dress like we are a professor because we may not wear items that make us *look* like a professor. Alongside the expectations of dress, we are also expected to act nurturing, and if we act nurturing enough, we will be told in our evaluations that we are nice and caring and other students should take our classes specifically because we are nurturing. El-Alayli, Hansen-Brown, and Ceynar (2018) summarize these expectations,

In expecting and perceiving female professors to be more nurturing, students are essentially expecting them to function like academic mothers. Increased nurturance demands on women in academia may cause them to perform more emotional labor with their students. Female professors may find that they must take on extra burdens, such as helping students cope with stress or insecurities, having to set personal boundaries with them, or providing gentler feedback to them to avoid being perceived as excessively harsh. (p. 137)

Their study indicates that students hold female professors to different and higher standards than male professors, requiring female professors to spend considerable time and energy negotiating and addressing the demands placed upon them. They find that “the same academic job may require more time, personal, and emotional demands from female faculty than from male faculty” (140). Further, as women academics we are expected to dress our role, meaning crafting dress practices that emphasize our femaleness so that we can be seen as nurturing, caring bodies. As mothers, our bodies give ourselves away, as shown through recollected

conversations with our colleagues who have asked about a pregnancy when we were not pregnant. Our bodies carry the burdens of our previous pregnancies. Sometimes we wear clothing in efforts to hide our postpartum bodies. At other times our dress practices give comfort to our postpartum bodies in how we choose stretchy clothing or soft fabrics. Our dress practices have thusly been influenced by how our bodies have changed and will continue to change.

Finally, composition and writing centers are frequently constructed as a place of continued nurturing to our students. Our students arrive without their parents, and some students are living far away from home for the first time, and so our academic spaces are areas where it is at least possible to be motherly. Just as our mom bodies are commonly seen as spaces of nurture for our children and our families, the academic spaces of the writing center and the composition classroom all hold a historical narrative toward being viewed as cozy, comfortable spaces (Grutsch McKinney, 2013; Ballif, et. al, 2010). Narratives focusing on nurturing may limit our professions, our academic spaces, and ourselves. If what we do in a writing center or with a writing program is a pedagogy of care, we wish to illustrate that creating an ethics of care needs to be a concern for all humans, not solely the work of women or mothers.

[H]elping writers doesn't involve just supporting the formation of that identity in isolation from all the others that make up who we are and the communities with which we identify or that we aspire to join. All of who we are commingles and spurs each of our identities in parallel and divergent ways. For faculty, administration, or tutors in writing centers, we too are growing and being shaped by multiple forces within, outside, and across us. Who we are is an amalgam of past, present, and future. These forces are critical, yet we rarely have the language or occasion to speak into and interrogate them. (Denny, 2018, p. 120)

The passage above from Denny is apropos to our narratives shared above: both of us have written of the ways we support our families, ourselves, students, and colleagues, but we have also written of the ways we feel a lack of support. We each have described how we have modified our dress practices and our academic spaces to cultivate new systems of support for ourselves. None of this work has been, or ever is, easy work. The balancing act inherent within what we do is tricky, leaving ourselves to question if the time we are devoting to one facet of our lives is enough. Denny notes that we "rarely have the language or occasion to speak up and interrogate" the forces that surround us, but in the narratives we have shared, we created a space to do just that: speak up and interrogate our institutional and bodily borders.

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Thanks, I Made It

Handmade Clothing as an Embodied Rhetoric of Possibility

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[Craft] is a training camp for empowered autonomy. It is fearlessness toward the decrees of consumerism and peer pressure and, in its most expressive form, the violence of fashion. Craft can be a tool for overcoming fear. It is a way to be free.
-Otto von Busch (2014), "Crafting Resistance"

For most people in the United States, making their own clothes through any combination of knitting, crocheting, weaving, or sewing is very much a niche hobby—something pursued less out of necessity or economy and more out of a desire to create and connect with other makers. But with the revived interest in traditional crafts holding strong since the early 2000s, more people have the means and the desire to handcraft garments that are made to measure and designed to reflect personal style, personal values, and diverse identities. Makers are increasingly recognizing the value of craft as a way to throw off the restrictive, normative identity options made available in stores and instead present to the world a bespoke version of the self. As Jessica Bain (2016) notes in her article analyzing the writing of contemporary sewing bloggers, many sewists enjoy their craft in no small part because it “offer[s] a way of transcending fashion and gender norms” (p. 64).

Other researchers have situated the craft revival as a response to the disjuncting pressures that emerge, particularly in professional life, as a result of late capitalism (Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush, 2011; Maureen Daly Goggin, 2015). In a recent *Washington Post* article, immigration attorney Sumaiya Ahmed (2019) described how she turned to sewing—a craft she had grown up watching her mother and other women in her family engage in on a near-daily basis—to help her deal with the debilitating internal conflict, anxiety, and depression she experienced as she struggled to square the intense pressures of her nascent law career with her own sense of identity. Crediting the creative process of sewing with steering her away from corporate law firms that offered little space for the expression of her creativity and putting her on the path to fulfilling non-profit work, Ahmed wrote, “I have accessed a craft that reminds me of my capacity for trial and error. As I checked off projects, sewing confirmed that if I tackle something a little bit each day, I can progress toward my goal. In a way, my sewing practice offered an analogue to moving forward in my career.”

This essay explores garment making as one way to respond to the restrictive pressures of normative dress practices and the institutional pressures they often represent. Like Ahmed, my craft practice has grown alongside my academic career, the two becoming increasingly

enmeshed as I moved from undergraduate to graduate student to junior professor. The process of sewing and knitting my own clothes has allowed me to carve out a professional identity in a field where, at times, my body and my identity have not seemed to easily fit. Drawing on material rhetorics of craft, I theorize my personal experience as a fat, queer woman who began to sew and knit my own clothing as a response to both significantly limited professional dress options and the overwhelming pressure I felt as a Ph.D. candidate in a competitive program. Responding to the call from Maureen Johnson, Daisy Levy, Katie Manthey, and Maria Novotny (2015) to consider “how our bodies inform our ways of knowing,” I reflect on how the tactile process of creating and then wearing bespoke garments helped me see new possibilities for myself as an emerging professional.

By theorizing my own experience as an academic and maker, I hope to demonstrate that the rhetorical power of self-stitched clothing extends beyond the material object. While the message signified through the unique, slowly produced, and often imperfect handmade garment is certainly important, the process of craft and the embodied experience of wearing handmade garments can have equally transformative effects for the maker. As Otto von Busch argued in “Crafting Resistance” (2014), craft as a process can help us cultivate fearlessness in the face of limits by allowing us to draw on the histories that precede us and the communities that support us as we create and embody new possibilities. Ultimately, I argue that wearing handmade clothes in the workplace is an embodied rhetoric of possibility that sends a powerful message to ourselves and to our colleagues, clients, and students about our collective power to critically transform the spaces where we live and work.

The Material Rhetoric and Transformative Power of Craft

Understanding the embodied rhetoric of handmade clothes builds on feminist work that asks us to consider how the rhetorical power of the material extends beyond the way that the object is read and interpreted. Rather than treating the material as inert and passive, feminist scholars of material rhetorics call for critical attention to the way that material forms and processes of material production function as sites of rhetorical agency where meaning is negotiated. For instance, in their work on embodiment, Johnson et al (2015) build on the move away from understanding the body within the subject/object binary and instead urge scholars to “experience the body as an entity with its own rhetorical agency” and to seriously consider how “our bodies inform our ways of knowing” (p. 39).

Work on the material rhetorics of craft has likewise argued that the rhetoricity of traditional craft exceeds the interpretation of the object produced. In her study of the practices of the Gee’s Bend quiltmakers, Vanessa Kraemer Sohan (2015) argues that “women’s quiltmaking practices blur the lines between the verbal and the visual,” such that the quilters in her study “demonstrate[d] the power of the needle as pen” (p. 296). In Sohan’s analysis, quiltmaking is significant not just because of the production of artifacts that signify the culture, identity, and context of the makers, but because the aesthetic and material process of creating the quilt is itself an epistemic, discursive process that shapes and influences the identities of the makers and the larger community in which they situate themselves. In the introduction to *Women and*

the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750-1950, Maureen Goggin Daly (2009) similarly argues for an understanding of traditional needlecrafts as an important site of discursive meaning making for many women in history, despite the fact that these activities have often been overlooked or uncritically dismissed.

Feminist scholars have built on this understanding of craft as discursive work in order to better understand how women use craft as a means to negotiate meaning and as an entry point into larger conversations. Challenging the vision of traditional craft as the work of women relegated to the depoliticized private sphere, Heather Pritash, Inez Schaechterle, and Sue Carter Wood (2009) instead contend that needlework has traditionally functioned as a “vehicle through which women have constructed discourses of their own, ones offering a broader range of positions from which to engage dominant culture” (p. 27). Of course, the meaning of traditional craft is not static. While needlework may have historically allowed women a broader means of engaging the dominant culture, women’s relationship with craft as a form of cultural engagement necessarily changed as changing social, political, and economic circumstances altered understandings of gender. In the United States, women’s participation in traditional crafts decreased significantly in the 1980s and 1990s as more women began to work outside the home (motivated by either choice or economic necessity) and as the globalization of textile manufacturing made clothing cheap and readily available. When young women in the United States began taking up knitting and other needlework in significant numbers in the early 2000s, scholars like Ricia A. Chansky (2010) noted that participants in this craft revival were still engaging craft as a form of meaning making, but also redefining the meaning of craft in the process. Writing about the trend of women in their twenties and thirties taking up new craft hobbies, Chansky argued, “These women are returning to domestic arts such as knitting and quilting with a sense of strength, not servitude, viewing the needle as a means of creative outlet that communicates their individual strength” (p. 681).

While the meaning of craft has changed for many women in industrialized nations where their participation in craft is determined less by necessity or expectation, it would be overly simplistic to imagine that contemporary engagement with craft is motivated by women’s desires to see themselves as free and empowered in opposition to their foremothers. In a study of how contemporary knitters understand both their craft and their own identities as crafters, Stella Minahan and Julie Wolfram Cox (2010) found that many of their participants understood their knitting as a way to connect to previous generations of women, finding strength and connection (even if those connections were based on nostalgic and romanticized images of the past) to help them cope with the pressures and struggles of life in late capitalism. Faith Kurtyka (2016) found that members of a newly formed sorority used craft as a way to negotiate both their identity as a group and their position to long-standing sorority traditions. Kurtyka argued,

While it would be a stretch to say that the ideologies of crafting allow for radical or disruptive gender roles, the creation and implementation of a vision for an artistic project—a practice of crafting—frees the women from some of the stigmas and expectations attached to sororities. This crafting practice also challenges them to collectively generate and implement an alternative vision for what a sorority might be like and who sorority members might be. Through the material and discursive practice

of crafting, the women are able to imagine other modes of existence for themselves and the sorority. (p. 34)

Thus, even as the cultural meaning of craft has shifted and will continue to shift, it seems that the process of engaging craft still functions as a meaningful site for participants to carve out individual and collective understandings of identity that are less bound by the dominant culture.

But the rhetorical power of craft is not contained in the process of making alone. The material aspects of craft remain a vital part of its discursive and epistemic constructions, which are made tangible in the objects produced and are enabled by the bodies that produce them. Indeed, as Goggin (2009) noted, “[B]odily knowledge is as important, if not more so, than vision and cognitive knowledge in embroidery—the feel of the fabric, thread, and needle, as well as the movement of the hand, require a kinetic familiarity” (p. 4). Whatever knowledge and meaning is produced or negotiated through craft, then, only emerges through the interaction of body and mind, and through the context of the crafter engaged in domestic work but also necessarily immersed in the wider world. Indeed, scholars like Bratich and Brush (2011) have noted that one of the things that is significant about the current craft revival is the way that it collapses so many of the binaries that have traditionally structured understanding. In her work on yarn bombing, Goggin (2015) echoed this sentiment as she explained, “For many crafters, hand work is a dynamic response against the separation of labor and domestic skills, the split between public and private, the disconnection between producers and consumers, and the other binaries rendered by modernity and the industrial age” (p. 145).

While many feminist scholars have explored the way that craft has allowed women to expand both the meaning of their material productions and their understanding of their situated identities, scholars like Maura Kelly (2014) have warned against assuming that contemporary craft communities are necessarily informed by feminist politics, having found in her ethnographic research of contemporary knitters that the meanings ascribed to knitting were contested and sometimes even deployed towards explicitly anti-feminist ends. In her study of handmade clothing, which she termed “folk fashion,” Amy Twigger Holroyd (2017) reaffirmed the call to avoid overinvesting in the transformative potential of craft as she wrote, “[I]t is important to acknowledge that the experience of wearing handmade clothes is often less positive than we would hope. There are anxieties associated with contemporary fashion, and because handmade clothes carry conflicting meanings—being seen as creative and desirable in some contexts, old-fashioned and unappealing in others—there is a danger that folk fashion could exacerbate these anxieties” (p. 187-188).

These calls for caution are apt given that the meanings around craft, both in terms of the process and the artifacts created through those processes, are shifting, contextual, and contested. But the fact that these meanings are in a continual state of negotiation is itself rhetorically interesting, frequently prompting reflection on the part of the maker throughout the process of making and through the use of the artifacts created. Comparing her research on contemporary sewists to Kelly’s ethnographic study of contemporary knitters, Bain (2016) argued, “Unlike Kelly’s knitters, in the case of sewists there is a great deal of evidence that

sewing [...] encourages participants to critically consider their craft in a range of ways, including (though not limited to) its relationship to feminism” (p. 64). As we consider the transformative potential and rhetorical power of handmade clothing, it is important to bear the contested meanings of craft in mind while also clearly situating the individual experience of the maker, which is what I aim to do with my own experience in the following section.

A Struggling Academic Makes Clothes

I have been a regular crafter since I learned counted cross stitch at the age of five or six, but I did not start actively making my own clothes until I was well into my doctoral program. My graduate school experience was one of intense conflict. Like many who go to graduate school with the aim of becoming an academic, I was a high-achieving student who was intellectually curious and had largely enjoyed the research work I had done up until that point. During my Master’s program, I found myself energized by and deeply invested in teaching. But a PhD program is a process of being disciplined (not just in the sense of exhibiting discipline, but of being brought in line with the norms, values, and expectations of the discipline) and of professionalizing, and I struggled with both.

I was in a competitive program that was training me to be a researcher first and foremost, but was realizing more and more that I cared primarily about my teaching. Faced with a choice between two distinctive tracks in my program, I pursued an emphasis in rhetoric based on work I had done during my MA program, which kept me out of composition theory courses that might have fed my interest in pedagogy. Because I was seen as a promising student, I was awarded a fellowship releasing me from teaching responsibilities for two years. I felt proud of the achievement but also found myself struggling as I was disconnected from the teaching work that had become my primary point of motivation to earn my doctorate in the first place. I had taught myself to knit during my first year of college using Debbie Stoller’s now-iconic *Stitch n’ Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook* (2003) and had relied on knitting as a way to process stress and overwhelm throughout my BA and MA. But now the ceaseless pressure to work made me feel guilty about my knitting and turned what had previously been an important source of comfort and release into a fraught enterprise.

I wanted desperately to do well, but found myself faced with expectations and demands I didn’t know how to satisfy. My sense of self and my sense of purpose quickly started to erode, leaving me in a state of debilitating depression and anxiety. I worked hard to manage my mental health issues to the best of my ability and kept advancing, however tenuously, through my program. But the pressure and sense of unease only grew the farther I progressed, as I received increasingly specific advice about how I needed to present myself as an academic and the kind of profile I needed to develop as a researcher. It felt as though I was being given a hard set of rules to follow—a kind of pre-packaged identity that reflected the kind of person who could succeed in the academy. And that rigid definition of success seemed to leave little room for my own desires, goals, and creative ambitions.

Alongside this sense of groundlessness and anxiety, I became increasingly aware of how my body was being interpreted and how it figured into the disjunct I felt between who I was and the academic mold I thought I was supposed to fit. I felt intense pressure to present a professional version of myself but struggled just as intensely to figure out what this meant and what it would look like. I identify as female but think of my femininity as distinctly queer and androgynous. I have always gravitated towards casual, utilitarian clothing because its gendered distinctions seem less marked. Despite the fact that so much of what is considered professional clothing plays off of masculine ideals of what it means to be “professional,” it rarely achieves the understated androgyny of casual clothing and instead tends to clearly mark and distinguish masculinity and femininity.

My struggle to find clothing to help me present a professional version of myself was only exacerbated by my size. At the time, plus-size clothing options—especially workwear—were incredibly limited. The selection available in stores was scant, overpriced, and targeted towards middle-aged employees working in conservative office environments. More youthful professional styles were becoming increasingly available through online retailers, but I found these options almost all privileged a traditionally feminine aesthetic that I could not embrace. While basic styles like dark pants and solid button-down shirts were often available, I battled ill-fitting cuts that were uncomfortable, required constant adjustment, or simply made me feel sloppy.

As a graduate student, I was not handed a clear dress code to follow, and I saw the faculty in my program and across the rest of the university construct their professional identities through their clothes in a variety of ways. But it was still clear to me that there were risks to mimicking the “jeans and sweater” uniform I’d seen so many of my male professors embrace. As Katie Manthey (2017) notes, “In academia, dress codes and dress practices are often talked about anecdotally. Although many institutions of higher education may not have formalized dress codes for faculty, this does not mean that bodies are not normed based on appearance” (p. 202-3). As a fat, queer woman with very little institutional power I worried constantly about how to dress myself in ways that projected authority in the classroom, within my department, at conferences, and during interviews. But how was I supposed to do that when, on a practical level, the available options rarely fit my body or my identity? And on a more abstract level, how was I supposed to dress in ways that represented who I was when I was struggling to keep hold of my sense of self? How do you build a professional wardrobe when you don’t have a clear sense of how you can or should fit yourself within your profession?

It was against this back drop of anxiety (over my body, over my identity, over where I fit within my field) that I got serious about learning to sew. I had actually been sewing on and off since I was a kid, picking a project up and sometimes finishing it, sometimes leaving it for my mom to finish, sometimes trashing it because it simply didn’t work out. I’d owned a sewing machine since my dad gave me one for my 17th birthday, but I had used it infrequently and found it more a source of frustration than joy. I’d had every intention of getting serious about sewing since high school, harboring great dreams of building a unique, personalized wardrobe. In the margins of my class notes, I doodled designs of the garments I wanted to make myself once I



Figure 1: Modeling one of my first fully handmade outfits.

mastered the sewing machine. In college, when I was bored and avoiding homework, I'd scan through sewing pattern offerings online. And, in the end, I sewed very little and most of the things I did make turned out badly.

But while I was studying for my comprehensive exams, I found myself standing in the middle of Target, mortified and angry because I needed new underwear and couldn't find any. All of the available styles topped out at a 42" hip measurement, which was ten inches shy of my measurement at the time. This was not the first time that I'd been disappointed at not finding my size in the store, but it was the first time that I'd found myself unable to purchase a very basic—literally, foundational—garment

in person. My only option was to order something online from a plus-size retailer, at four to five times the cost of what I had hoped to purchase in the store. Not being able to buy jeans from Target was inconvenient but hadn't bothered me during the handful of years when that had been the case. Not being able to buy basic, no-frills underwear felt personal and degrading.

In my anger, I resolved to sew my own underwear. I knew this was possible and achievable because throughout my many years of wanting to sew, I had followed a handful of sewing bloggers, at least one of whom had sewn her own underwear from recycled t-shirts, released a free pattern for basic low-cut briefs, and had published a clear photo tutorial outlining each step for constructing a durable, well-made pair of undies. The free pattern, of course, also topped out at a 42" hip measurement, but I found another independently-published pattern in my size that I was able to purchase for \$12—roughly the cost of a single pair of underwear from a plus-size retailer. I pulled out some old t-shirts my partner and I had set aside for various reasons, cut out my pattern pieces, fought to master fold-over elastic, and within a few months, I'd outfitted myself with a drawerful of handmade underwear.

When I passed my exams, I celebrated by upgrading my finicky bottom-of-the-line sewing machine with a mid-grade workhorse machine that could handle upholstery weight denim as easily as a thin and slippery silk fabric. I dove into making new garments with abandon, sewing everything from t-shirts to jeans to jackets. I even found myself reinvigorated by my knitting,

and threw myself into an intensive effort to learn to knit perfectly fitted and professionally finished sweaters. I was hooked on making clothes.

Of course, this didn't immediately solve all my problems. I didn't learn to sew and then suddenly have an entirely new wardrobe. I was limited by time, by the shoe-string budget that comes from living on a graduate stipend, and by my novice skill set. Many of my early projects were technically flawed, poorly fitted, or made with fabric that didn't stand the test of time. Adding handmade garments to my wardrobe was a slow and tenuous process, and my desire to make the professional wardrobe of my dreams far outpaced what my hands were able to accomplish. But I found that I didn't actually need to achieve a closet full of bespoke, unique garments that perfectly represented who I was to find myself feeling more grounded and whole.

As a graduate student studying feminist rhetorics of the body, I was working with theories critiquing the Cartesian tradition and the way that it rejects, ignores, and even abuses the body. And yet, the pressure to achieve and to discipline myself into being a model researcher left me depressed, anxious, and disconnected from my body. At the same time that I was a writing teacher professing the value of the writing process, I was also trapped in the mindset of privileging the end product of professionalism. I saw myself as a CV—a list of achievements to detail in an application letter—and I compared myself to the products of other's professional achievements. Just as the privileging of mind over body decontextualizes thought from the materiality that shapes it, the privileging of product over process erases everything that is valuable about how things come to be. As an embodied multimodal rhetoric, the act of making my own clothes helped collapse these binaries in a way that transformed the way that I saw myself and the professional life I could imagine.

As I knitted and sewed, every project created space for a small transformation in which the movement of my hands and the tactile knowledge I was cultivating helped me learn, deeply, the lessons that I could not internalize through theory alone. Wherever I sat sewing or knitting became a meditative space in which my mind was fully focused on the act of creating, or where I was able to quietly process the feelings I was struggling with and define what I wanted from my work on my own terms. Every project was also a small step forward in my goal to create a wardrobe that felt reflective of my identity and, as such, a reminder of how progress is made slowly. Every shirt gets constructed step-by-step. Each technique is refined slowly, over time, with practice. With each mistake—every seam that needed to be picked out, every fit adjustment that didn't quite work, every inch of knitting that needed to be unraveled and redone—I appreciated more deeply the vital role that failure plays in learning.

These are things I told my students as a writing teacher, and things I should have already learned through my own writing. However, they were lessons I could only internalize in a deep and meaningful way outside of the pressures of academic work and through the movement of my hands as they pieced together fabric and looped stitches through my knitting needles. The slow, physical process of garment-making helped me cultivate a tolerance for failure and helped me learn to respond, instinctively, with reflection and an eagerness to try again rather



Figure 2: The first version of this sweater, knit according to the pattern instructions, didn't turn out the way I had hoped. But I ripped the sleeves and hem back and reknit them, making adjustments that resulted in a sweater I wore constantly.

than with despair. But garment-making also changed the way that I looked at the world, shifting my perspective from seeing end-products to wondering how things were made. A rack of clothes that had previously represented the limited range of available options became but a set of artifacts to investigate for new construction techniques or an interesting set of design choices to draw inspiration from. For me, this was the most radical lesson of garment making. Sewing and knitting my own clothing became a lived, embodied rhetoric of possibility—a way of seeing and interacting with the world as crafted and constructed, as shifting and changeable, as made and remade through our interactions.

As I slowly built up my handmade wardrobe, the clothing that I produced wasn't earth-shatteringly unique—my style has always been basic and reserved. But it fit my body and it didn't feel like wearing a mask. And more than that, it was a tangible reminder of the important lessons I was learning about work and growth through the process of craft. At some point, while I was struggling to make progress on my dissertation, I looked over at my sewing machine and the half-finished project lying beside it and realized that what I most wanted was to be able to approach my academic work the same way I approached making clothes. In my career, as in my craft, I wanted to approach a challenge with the energizing feeling that if I could simply break it down into clear steps and practice the right techniques, then there was really nothing I couldn't do. I wanted to feel confident that if I came up against a set of unsatisfactory options, I could simply make something that would fit my life better. The calmer headspace that came from knitting and sewing helped me clarify what I wanted my professional life to look like, and I worked deliberately on applying my "craft mindset" to slowly but continuously making progress towards those goals.



Figure 3: I made this simple black cardigan when I had been sewing for about a year, and ended up wearing it to a job interview.

By the time I went on the job market, I was feeling much less conflicted and more confident about my future in the academy. But I had only been sewing seriously for two years and was not feeling confident enough in my skill level to rely on handmade clothing for interviews. I went to the plus-size section of Macy's, hidden in a far corner of the basement level, and sifted through racks of what my partner described as "sad clown clothes." I eventually found a shirt I could live with and a waterfall-front blazer that I hated but would at least match a pair of pants I already owned. My first interview went well enough, although I felt awkward and uncomfortable in my jacket all day. While I had been encouraged to present myself in a way that made a statement about who I was as a professional, my interview outfit that day was really just a question mark. I felt as though I were playing dress up, miming what I thought a professor

was supposed to be and anxious that I was getting it all wrong. But the significance of dress practices exceeds the question of whether or not we fulfill a dress code. I may have been appropriately dressed on paper, but I could not see myself working in the department where I was interviewing. Part of that might have been that it was simply not the right job for me, but part of it was feeling like the way that I was presenting myself was promising a version of a self that I could never deliver.

On the morning of my second interview, the anxiety of the months-long job search combined with poor sleep and interstate travel finally broke down my lingering concerns about interviewing in handmade clothes. I desperately wanted the job, but I also desperately needed to feel comfortable and at home in my body. On a whim, I swapped out the professional but deeply-loathed jacket for a simple cardigan I'd sewn for myself a few months earlier. The fabric was soft and light but warm. The lines were clean and simple but modern. I worried that I would look unprofessional and like I wasn't taking the interview seriously, but the cardigan made me feel steady, at ease. As I moved through various campus buildings, shook hands with one person after another, ate with strangers, and demonstrated how I worked as a teacher, I

was neither conscious of my body nor disconnected from it. I did not feel like I was wearing someone else's clothes, performing someone else's version of the role of professor. I felt confident in the way that I was presenting myself, but that confidence did not simply come from the fact that I was wearing a garment tailored to my body and my style. That confidence came from feeling firmly rooted in all of the lessons about failure and possibility that I have learned from making my clothes by hand. I got the job.

Handmade Clothing and an Embodied Rhetoric of Possibility

As discussed earlier, the various meanings ascribed to craft and the various ways that identity is negotiated through the process of craft shifts in relationship to different economic and cultural contexts. Like many garment makers in the United States, my own experience of sewing and knitting my own clothes is understood in relationship to what is (and perhaps more importantly, what is not) made available through mainstream clothing retailers, as well as in relationship to the highly exploitive and environmentally unsustainable manufacturing processes through which most clothing on the market is produced. In her book *Folk Fashion: Understanding Handmade Clothes*, Holroyd (2017) elaborated a theoretical framework for understanding handmade clothing that focuses on fashion as a form of identity construction and as a vehicle for connecting with others. Holroyd's framework described fashion as a commons—incorporating all forms of dress across time and context, and ideally open to all as a wide and shifting field of options from which we can pick and choose as we work to present whatever version of ourselves we want.

But Holroyd quickly and insistently pointed out how constrained the ideal of the commons becomes as it is shaped by the economic and normative interests of the fashion industry. As she wrote, "I believe that it is important for us to have an open and accessible fashion commons in order to construct our identities and connect with others most effectively. However, I am concerned that mass production and industrialization have 'enclosed' this commons, restricting access to styles and knowledge and limiting our ability to act independently" (12). In other words, despite the frequent insistence that we have more clothing options at our fingertips than ever, the influence of the fashion industry and the normative power of late capitalism have actually restricted the available options, resulting in a sea of sameness and stylistic homogeneity. The enclosing of the fashion commons is significant not just because it limits our ability to select personal styles that feel representative of our unique identities, but also because in doing so, it limits how we are able to present ourselves to others and reinforces the privileging of normative identities (which are made intelligible through the enclosed commons) and marks non-normative identities as such (by heightening their divergence from the expected norm).

As was my experience when I struggled to define what professional dress meant to me in my own context, cultural and disciplinary expectations of what constitutes professional dress and professional identities are almost always presented as finished products—as models, as sample outfits, as packaged examples of the kinds of looks and goals we should aspire to. Even if those examples might be achievable for us, only seeing the end product obscures the process of

getting there. And in many other cases, the example doesn't seem achievable at all or seems to completely ignore the very real barriers or obstacles people might face in meeting those expectations. This product-focused approach pays little attention to how those models or examples might be broadened or adapted for different identities or circumstances. The models, whether in the form of suggestions for interview outfits, professional wardrobe capsules, or models of professionalism in our field, can start to feel like rigid monoliths—ideal routes to success that can only be easily accessed by certain people. Like the enclosed fashion commons, the message created by these rigid monoliths is that the field itself is enclosed. Ongoing discussion of the value of diversity and the importance of creating inclusive spaces makes it seem like the possibilities are endless, but the repetition of and reliance on a limited version of what it means to look professional continue to discredit and delegitimize non-normative bodies. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that these ideal models—ideal versions of what it means to be professional—are constructed, that they are artifices that heavily shape our experience but which can still be interrogated, shifted, remodeled, rebuilt. The question now is how to cultivate an embodied multimodal rhetoric that can begin to open the enclosed commons and shift focus to the process of construction. Certainly, this cannot and should not be accomplished through a single means, but I would argue that wearing handmade clothing can contribute to the project by creating a visible of what is possible—by reminding us that we can make and remake our professional fields and our places within them.

Jenny Rushmore (2015), a sewing blogger and co-founder of an online community for plus-size sewists called *The Curvy Sewing Collective*, spoke to the way that making her own clothes completely reframed her body image precisely by helping her see the greater range of possibilities available. Giving her access to well-fitting, beautifully made clothes that fit her style for the first time, sewing helped Rushmore disentangle her sense of worth from her dress size and to see her style as within her control. As she explained, “It turns out that in many ways sewing your own clothes is a radical act; a chance to escape the constraints of the fashion industry, whether in style or size, and an opportunity to express yourself exactly, rather than choosing from someone else’s expressions. Your physical dimensions become simply a numerical input and not a value judgment.” In Rushmore’s story, having access to the material alternatives to limited mass-produced clothing options is important, but much of the empowerment and sense of possibility that comes with making your own clothes is accessed through a deep engagement with the process. It wasn’t just having a closet of stylish, well-fitting dresses that mattered to Rushmore—it was that she exercised agency through each step of the process, from selecting patterns and fabric, to choosing construction and finishing techniques while gradually building her skill set as she did so. Von Busch (2014) argued that this agency in the process of making is vital to the transformative potential of handmade clothing. In “Crafting Resistance,” he wrote, “Obeying fashion without conscience is the same as obeying laws we have not set ourselves. By putting our conscience back into the equation, we can remind ourselves of our autonomy. Taking on fashion through craft is more than an issue of expressing identity; it is a way to tackle our relationship to our compliance to being governed. It is a way to be free” (p. 77-78).



Figure 4: Modeling a shirt I made and wore during my most recent Me-Made May experience.

Certainly, my own experience of making clothing became a way to address my own “compliance to being governed,” both in terms of how I oriented myself towards the disciplinary expectations of my field and the normative standards of “professional” dress. Anchored through my own bodily movements in the process of making, the seemingly monolithic models of what it meant to be professional and successful in my field started to break down in my own mind as the work and rhythm of my hands helped me internalize the fact that everything is built through process, and that every process can be broken down into manageable steps. My failures in my sewing and knitting made me more resilient in the places in my professional life where I experienced more pressure because I had repeatedly practiced the process of failure, reflection, and revision in a tangible, low-stakes way. I stopped fixating on the discrete achievements and rigid

expectations idealized by others—I stopped accepting without conscience the options being presented to me and instead, through the model of my craft work, figured out how to bring my conscience and agency back into the process of defining what I wanted my professional life to look like, both in terms of the work I did and the way I presented myself through dress. The intellectual and emotional work of redefining my relationship to my discipline and the ideals of my graduate program did not happen in the classroom or in my research or in meetings with my advisors. It happened while I was cutting out patterns, threading needles, manipulating fabric, and knitting through rows of stitches.

But to only focus on the way that engagement with the process of making reframes the maker’s relationship to power and identity would be to oversimplify the transformative potential of handmade clothing. Indeed, handmade clothing dramatizes the circular, symbiotic rhetorical relationship between process and product. What is gained in the process of making is remembered, relearned, and paid forward in the act of wearing the clothes. The process of making the garment might start to reframe our individual identities or our relationship to power, but wearing and displaying what we make integrates those changes into the way that

we connect with others and the way that we interact with the spaces and spheres of influence in our lives. In 2010, British sewing blogger Zoe Edwards (2019) started an online challenge called Me-Made-May with the goal of encouraging “those who make their own clothes to develop a better relationship with their handmade wardrobe.” Motivated by an internalized anxiety about how her handmade clothes might be stigmatized for their imperfections, Edwards set out to wear handmade clothing every day during the month of May, documenting her effort on her blog, and inviting others to set their own pledges for wearing and reflecting on their experience of wearing their handmade clothes. The challenge has continued every year since, expanding widely in terms of its participants and the online audience those participants reach.

Over the years, as participants document how they wear their handmade clothes and how they feel about wearing the garments they have made, they reflect on and engage in critical conversations about a range of topics including body image, mental health, the fast fashion industry, sustainability, professional dress codes, motherhood, aging, personal style, the lack of visibility of plus-size sewists, and the influence of consumer culture in craft communities. The act of wearing handmade clothing is not simply a vehicle for these conversations; it is a material reminder of the fact that we are always embedded within these conversations. The act of wearing handmade clothing provides new pathways to rhetorical agency within these conversations where we can collectively negotiate meaning and our relationship to power. Shortly after the first Me-Made-May challenge in 2010, Edwards revisited her anxiety over the imperfections in her handmade clothes. Explaining her changed relationship to imperfection, she wrote, “I am far more forgiving of the homemade-y elements of my clothes because they exhibit the truth that it is possible to avoid mass-manufactured clothing. That badly applied bias binding or concealed zip reminds me that I am contributing, in some small way, to the debate about our culture’s sustainability.” In other words, handmade clothes function as an embodied rhetoric, signaling to ourselves and others that other paths are possible.

Handmade clothes are not just a visual representation of the alternatives we can construct; the very makeup of these garments speaks to the fact that we can claim agency in the processes that shape and create the spaces through which we move. In her article about how sewing her own clothes helped her find her footing in her legal career, Ahmed (2019) wrote, “My pencil skirts buoy me before judges. My knit dresses keep me cozy in the office. The clothes I make support my body as I discuss forms of relief with clients. When I am trying to finesse a legal argument, looking down at my stitches assures me of my ability.” Both by making her feel at ease in her body and by offering a tangible reminder of her competence and ability, Ahmed’s handmade clothes allow her to do meaningful work as an immigration attorney.

Like Ahmed, making my own clothes gives me greater breadth in how I choose to present myself as a teacher and researcher. I am not limited by the fashion industry’s narrow ideal of what a plus-size professional woman looks like, and I do not have to compromise my own embodied interpretation of femininity in the process. I can experiment with color, print, fabrication, and style lines in ways that are less constrained by the dictates of trends and traditional gender ideals. Making the clothes I wear to work each day helps me integrate equally vital parts of my life and keeps my work grounded in a fuller, less compartmentalized



Figure 5: Getting ready to teach a class in a fully handmade outfit.

understanding of myself. My clothes and the process of their construction teach my students and my colleagues important things about me and where I come from, and open up important conversations about fashion, identity, creativity, and making as a form of self-care. The embodied rhetoric of handmade clothing collapses important binaries—process and product, private and professional, practical and aesthetic, domestic and public—making way for new possibilities. It anchors us in the fundamentals of process by providing a visible, tangible reminder that everything is made and can be remade, one step at a time.

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“But You Look So Well!”

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

Vyshali Manivannan, Pace University

Table of Contents

“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?

Argument

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.

Fibromyalgia, body image, and body schema

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.

Neoliberal governance and academic dress codes

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.

Self-responsibilization, pain, and dress

Bullet journal trackers of pain and dress, indicating that body image often trumped body schema unless the pain was so unspeakable it was self-annihilating, at which point self-concept ceased, briefly, to matter.

Neutralizing embodiment and techniques of the self

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

"inappropriate," and therefore inauthentic or incompetent, queer disabled woman of color in academic life.

Embodying casual as an academic

It's not just that the clothes are casual, but that they belong in the category of athleisure, signaling that I'm more interested in the appearance of fitness, sexual attractiveness, and the imperative to endlessly discipline the (female) body than I am in the life of the mind.

Being the academic "bad girl"

To balance attire that isn't "lazy dressing" with the demands of chronic pain, I find myself embodying alt femininities, drawing on iconographies of toughness to boost my sense of confidence in a world made of threat, and wearing textiles and materials often associated with fetish clubs, like leather, silk, zippers, and buckles, for their painlessness.

Closeted Identities

Into the wardrobe.

Conclusion

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-bodiedminded. 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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Weaponizing Wardrobes

Reckoning with History, Blackness, and Embodiment

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In August of 2014 I pulled my trusty ten-year old Toyota Corolla into a parking lot in Lexington, Virginia. As I stepped out of my car and into the bright, humid central Virginia summer sunshine, my eyes first took in the bone white columns and blood red antebellum brickwork of Washington and Lee University, my new place of employment as a tenure-track professor fresh out of a history doctoral program in Illinois. While I had visited the campus as part of my interview in February, it suddenly felt very real. As a queer, fat, black man from Los Angeles, I was the rural Southern university's new assistant professor of African history; one of three full-time African-American faculty on a campus founded in 1749 and named after two prominent slaveowners, one of whom had commanded the forces of the Confederacy during the Civil War. "Oh, shit," was all I muttered that first day, squinting across manicured green lawns and grand architecture that had been built and maintained for generations by people who looked rather like me. "What have I gotten myself into?"

That anxious summer realization began my academic sartorial journey. As I blinked in the mid-afternoon heat, sweat running down my face: all of the old familiar feelings came rushing back—I *don't belong here, They're all going to find out that you don't fit, How could you presume to take up space at such an institution*—and I felt my blood run cold with both new job anxiety and the weight of two and a half centuries of elite Southern privilege surrounding my unwieldy body. As I struggled with this onrush of feeling, I thought of the theorist Sara Ahmed's analysis of bodies, belonging, and inhabiting. "What I remember, what takes my breath away, are not so much the giddy experiences of moving and the disorientation of being out of place, but the ways we have of settling," asserts Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed speaks of "inhabiting spaces that, in the first instance, are unfamiliar but that we can imagine—sometimes with fear, other times with desire—might come to feel like home. Such becoming is not inevitable" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 10). As I stood and contemplated what it meant to find a new home in this space, to make my body welcome, I thought further about how I covered this body and how I moved through the world. This thinking offered a form of embodied rhetoric as I contemplated my own physical form existing across the contemplated spatial, visual, and cultural modes of my new Southern location. As a result, I began to think about the power of fashion in moving through a new and potentially threatening landscape.

How can fashion create a quotidian escape, a knowing performance in the midst of oppressive structures explicitly designed to exclude your body? In my four years at Washington and Lee University in Virginia, I cultivated a particular form of fashion aware of the multiple identities I inhabit: I'm an able-bodied, cisgender black queer male in the academy, who teaches on the

intersections on race, gender, and sexuality in a colonial context. What has it meant to do this in an exclusive Southern university, named after slaveholding leaders and built with the unfree labor of fellow black peoples? Further, what does it mean to do this in a place with a high degree of sartorial conformity and highly gendered policing of appearance?

This essay will explore what I mean by ‘weaponizing’ fashion both at Washington and Lee University and now at the University of San Diego. As a queer, black, fat professor, weaponized fashion is a way of wearing clothing that makes me even more aware of the way my body takes up space than usual. While I am both able-bodied and a cisgender male, factors that make clothing more ‘accessible’ in certain ways, I purposefully deploy fashion as a way of calling attention to the spaces that are not designed to receive my body easily. Weaponizing fashion, repurposing history, and redirecting narratives are ways of reclaiming spaces denied queer, black, and fat bodies. Secondly, I will examine the interlocking histories of structural oppression and resistance at play in crafting a daily practice of weaponization. I draw from black feminist and queer theory primarily in order to discuss why and how my clothing practices are personal and quotidian series of challenges to dehumanization and erasure, an attempt to claim spaces not traditionally viewed as belonging to a body like mine. Finally, working with my fashion blog, *Clockwork Black* (<http://clockworkblackblog.wordpress.com>), I argue that my sartorial statements gesture to a form of praxis within the dehumanizing spaces of the university and imagine a playful, combative alternative. My body, thus costumed, offers an embodied multimodal rhetoric that challenges existing cultural and historic processes.

Weaponized Fashion

I draw from a wide range of influences for thinking of how I create this idea of weaponized fashion. This idea of fashion as a daily praxis, both in and outside the classroom, was first modeled for me by an undergraduate professor of mine at the University of California, San Diego, Nancy Caciola. Caciola deploys a sense of history and playfulness in her sartorial choices that not only underlines her mastery of the subject, but also casually challenges the experience of working at a university that was never planned with queer, women, or non-white professors in mind. I fondly remember classes where Caciola, a medieval historian focusing on gender, the spirit world, and sainthood, would wear mock chainmail dresses or hand-embroidered pieces that invoked armor plate. I was astounded at this daily display of authority and playful self-confidence. I wrote in my notebook after one lecture, “This is the kind of professor I want to be.”

It is this casual, daily lived challenge to structures of exclusion by Caciola that highlights the destabilizing power of weaponized fashion in a university that historic never made space for a body like yours. As a queer, black, fat professor, weaponized fashion signifies a way of wearing clothing that makes me even more aware of the way my body takes up space than usual. This theorization is entirely indebted to the insights of the Dr. Crystal Boson and her “weaponized cuteness.” Boson recognized that her look is

born of choices I make when I put together my appearance. My cuteness is one aspect of the armor I put on every day to navigate my Black body in a particularly white

landscape. When I say that my looks are cute, I am not grounding this in the juvenile or frivolous. My cuteness is situated in my declaration of my agency, my Queer identity, and my investment in very specific forms of performance. I say that this look is weaponized, because I use my body and cuteness as a text to aggressively disrupt narratives that present Blackness, fatness, and Queer forms of identity as marginal, unseemly, unattractive, and unworthy. (Boson, 2014)

Like Boson, my fashion is acutely aware of the multiple identities I inhabit: I'm an able-bodied, cisgender black queer man in the academy, who teaches on the intersections on race, gender, and sexuality in a colonial context. To purposefully delimit space in an institution that diminishes one's own autonomy and sense of belonging requires weaponization.

By weaponization, I don't mean wearing spiky things, or carrying a mace (although a decorative mace is a tempting fashion accessory, I freely admit). Rather, weaponized fashion requires a purposeful deployment of style that borrows upon raced and gendered scripts and plays with them. It's a ludic approach that's still very serious about how one can occupy a space that was not (and still is not) designed for or actively considers bodies of color, fat bodies, or queer bodies. It's a sassy armor. It's an absurd top hat, bracelet, and a neo-Victorian black beard. It can require the use of brooches seen more often as old white lady fashion but being repurposed on waistcoats and with top hats. It's being able to laugh, snarl, and snark—all with clothes.

Clockwork Black: Occupying Spaces and Reckoning with History—One Selfie at a Time

One year into my employment at Washington and Lee I began to record my outfits on fashion blog. I titled the blog *Clockwork Black* as a riff on the film *Clockwork Orange* and to address what it meant to be a queer black academic using steam-punk inspired, nineteenth-century influenced fashion in my daily clothing. By recording my day to day clothing choices at work, I hoped to push back against the constant feeling of invisibility that I experienced on my campus and to actively claim a space to belong, even if that space was largely digital. In doing so, I chose to embrace the potential of what theorist Minh-ha Pham has termed “networked vanity,” the implementation of “individual and public acts of vanity (particularly those that centrally involve sartorial and corporeal displays of physical attractiveness)” in pursuit of larger social aims beyond self-aggrandizement (Pham, 2015, p. 224).

For me, *Clockwork Black* served multiple functions. First, the blog gave me a very real space (even if virtual) to feel like I was visible and alive. My daily quotidian self-photography felt like a way to mark my existence, to remind myself that I was seen and visible, if even in the mirrored reflections of my bathroom and cellphone. Indeed, both the phone camera and the actual mirrors in my apartment and in campus bathrooms became reflective amplifiers of myself, replete with all the ambivalence self-surveillance entailed (Rocamora, 2011). I became both hyper aware of my own existence and yet felt empowered to occupy space through this disclosure. Such a disclosure revealed the multiple ways in which embodied rhetoric operates. As feminist rhetoricians have argued, “in addition to the *rhetorical power* of the material

body...the body also carries *signifying power*, articulating some of any body's many affiliations. This bodily signification is only one link to a particular group, which is complicated by other links (cultural, historical, geographical, linguistic, etc.)" (Johnson, Levy, Manthey, & Novotny, 2015, p. 40). My posing and sharing linked both the rhetorical and signifying power of embodied rhetoric—I was able to locate my body in the midst of its performance and draw across multiple aspects to find a sense of place. As a fat, queer, black body I felt a certain liberation to the exposure, a claim echoed by blogger Maurice Tracy, who asserted

I live in a world where either body privilege or race privilege is always against me. So I point my camera at my face, most often when I am alone, and possibly bored, and I click; I upload it to instagram, and I hold my breath because the world is cruel and I am what some would call ugly, but I don't see it. ...I want them, you, to see that I am human, and there is a reason why I got to this size, but I owe you no explanation or justification for any part of my existence I owe you no explanation or justification for my smile or my swag or my selfie. Hell I didn't even owe you this. (Tracy, 2013)

As Tracy affirms, taking selfies is not simply a form of self-indulgent vanity. It is also a powerful act of self-acknowledgment in a world fundamentally shaped by historic denials of bodies. Teaching African history at a predominantly white wealthy campus that housed the grave of a Confederate commander and an unreconstructed approach to the dehumanizing atrocities of slavery that literally built the institution that employed me resulted in a quotidian series of erasures and aggressions. I felt as if bits of my soul were being sloughed off in a cheese grater every day that I passed through the whitened, sepulchral columns of the campus. Pressing click on the phone camera and uploading the images was more than a millennial form of self-indulgence; it was a way of reinserting myself into a space that systematically denied me every day.¹

Secondly, *Clockwork Black* encouraged me to experiment with clothing, patterns, and style, all with the possibility of a potential audience. In addition to possessing an easily retrievable archive of individual looks I could then, with input from friends and other internet observers, re-curate, reimagine, and recast particular accessories or patterns with an eye toward new forms of self-representation. The initial motivation for the blog, and the purposeful sartorial display in general, began with a desire to overly embellish nineteenth century forms of respectability, knowing that they would fail to ever truly give me acceptance. Instead, I created a daily archive of photographs that allowed me relatively quickly to move into new clothing genres or forms, while still sticking to a generalized nineteenth-century inspired theme. I was drawn in part to the choice of nineteenth-century steampunk/dandy fashion because of the lengthy history of black peoples occupying Western sartorial trends and literally re-fashioning them into expectations of ostentation, power, and belonging.

As Monica Miller has argued, "black dandyism is a strategy of survival that has a long and multifaceted history" (Miller, 2009). Black people's deployment of clothing that has been

¹ In the bio on my personal Instagram page (<http://www.instagram.com/teejasaurus/>) I refer to this process as "selfie care." There is something profoundly useful about the reassurance of daily photographic work against the regularly experienced feelings of displacement.

imbued with the exclusionary respectability of white supremacy is both a form of claiming belonging and an opulent and ostentatious form of resistance. Historically, enslaved black people have appropriated Euro-American fashion items in order to craft their own pathways to freedom; historical archives are rife with stories of people obtaining their freedom through recasting clothing in order to successfully blend, barter, and bluster their way to freedom (Miller, 2009). It is this history that I sought to tap into when I started curating my clothing every day at work and on *Clockwork Black*. Doing so connects to the powerful histories of freedom, self-expression, and challenge at the heart of black dandy culture. As Miller makes plain, “the black dandy’s style thus communicates simultaneously self-worth, cultural regard, a knowingness about how blackness is represented and seen. Black dandyism has been an important part of and visualization of the negotiation between slavery and freedom” (Miller, 2009).

In my own research, I frequently write about the ways in which African peoples challenged European settler claims to power and authority over their bodies in the nineteenth-century colony of Natal in Southern Africa. Part and parcel of the claim to colonial domination was an assertion that Africans were inherently backward and in need of the uplifting civilizational power of European control (Tallie, 2019a). Although not settlers themselves, missionaries were often directly complicit in this rhetorical effort and expected Africans to adopt Christianity as a marker of civilizational change. For many missionaries in nineteenth century Natal, the only visible measurement of African Christianity was their adoption of European mores regarding clothing and domestic inhabitation; considerable amount of writing was dedicated to the uncivilized nature of African clothing or the ‘incorrect’ way in which Africans adapted European fashions (Tallie, 2016). On the brief occasions when Africans adapted to European styles that closely replicated hegemonic expectations, settlers reacted with fear and disdain. When Mary Anne Barker, wife of the governor of Natal, visited an African Christian community and observed the fashions of the women within, she reacted with a curious mix of admiration and derision.

I was specially invited to look at the contents of the good wife’s wardrobe hung out to air in the garden. . . . I did not possess anything half so fine. Sundry silk dresses of hues like the rainbow waved from the pomegranate bushes; and there were mantles and jackets enough to have started a secondhand clothes shop on the spot (Barker, 1879, p. 205).

Barker’s reaction is particularly telling. She expected African men and women to emulate European sartorial designs in order to reinforce her own primacy in a settler society. Yet, when Africans did so, they threatened the very order that Europeans hoped to import in a white supremacist system. Barker’s snide retort and admission of her own insecurity reveals the destabilizing potential of black bodies occupying and subverting Euro-American styles on their own terms.

Thus, when I pair a vest and hat, and perfect a gaze behind pince-nez, monocle, or acetate frames, I am explicitly choosing and curating my look as a means of survival. It is a form of historic play that not only brings pleasure but re-enacts strategies of fugitivity and endurance. As Miller argues

Anyone can be in vogue without apparent strategy, but dandies commit to a *study* of the fashions that define them and an examination of the trends around—which they can continually re-define themselves. Therefore, when racialized, the dandy’s affectations (fancy dress, arch attitude, fey and fierce gesture) signify well beyond obsessive self-fashioning—rather, the figure embodies the importance of the struggle to control representation and self- and cultural-expression. (Miller, 2009)

The archive accumulated then in *Clockwork Black* is a serious study of everyday resistance, of purposeful posing in mirrors and posing through histories of oppression and marginalization. Indeed, as a tenure-track faculty member, I listed *Clockwork Black* every year in my annual evaluations of faculty activity, both at Washington and Lee and now here at the University of San Diego. For me, the accumulation of these images is not only constructing an archive of embodied resistance; it is also a purposeful form of academic labor. In addition to the regular duties of teaching, research, and academic service, I am also doing daily performative work in and outside the classroom with my fashion. I am telling a narrative, occupying a space, reframing my claims to belong. It is far from a merely frivolous act or a mere affectation; as Pham has described, *Clockwork Black* and my quotidian sartorial choices are part of a wider praxis of networked vanity, a pleasurable experience of self-armoring that tells a narrative even as I teach in buildings never designed for my body.

That is not to overstate the power, reach, or efficacy of this undertaking. I am well aware of the fact that this work is symbolic and personally powerful but is not necessarily world-changing. I do not believe that a selected waistcoat, worn on a muggy Virginia September day, or a shared photograph of a tweed cap from which the flyaway curls of my black heritage escape, will end structural racism. Nor am I ignorant of the fact that such a practice is only possible because of intersecting privileges that exist simultaneously with my historic marginalizations. I am a cisgender man even as I am black, fat, and queer. In academia and in fashion in general, there is far less of a likelihood that my body will be subject to the structural, panoptic gaze that my female colleagues undergo. To put it simply: I have the latitude to be eccentric and ludic with my fashion choices and not have it reflect immediately on my academic performance either with my colleagues or my students. The marked difference between my student evaluations and my female colleagues is ample evidence of this.² In my five years of weaponized fashion, my clothing has elicited one single mention in a student’s course evaluation, an essential part of the tenure evaluation process for an assistant professor like myself. This is not the case for my female counterparts, who must navigate daily a sexist system of embodied judgment that also trivializes their fashion as frivolous while also dedicating outsized importance to what every piece of cloth signifies about their capability to teach (Baker, 2015). Similarly, *Clockwork Black* does not exist within the highly ambivalent space of women’s fashion blogs that simultaneously operate within and are disciplined by a gaze that seek to constrain women’s bodies (Rocamora, 2011).

These insights were not reached in isolation. In October 2017 I was invited to give a talk in Wellington, New Zealand about the disruptive and decolonial potential of “weaponised

² I remain, as always, deeply indebted to the patience and insights of Dr. Mikki Brock for this.

fashion.” Similarly, in March 2019, nearly a year after leaving the institution, I was invited back to Washington and Lee to give a lecture on weaponized fashion as a professor. Both talks were met with thoughtful, considered critique, and I’m grateful for the challenges offered both in Aotearoa and the Old Confederacy. Of particular concern to both audiences were questions of scale and acknowledgments of relative privilege in being able to undertake this work with *Clockwork Black*. I think it appropriate to recognize that academic work can be significant but also not radically transform lived structural oppressions. In addition, to be able to buy and curate clothing requires investment; it is not something simply available to everyone given the financial outlays necessary to do the work. I neither imagine the work I do with *Clockwork Black* to be all-encompassing, nor do I see it as a universal template that all people can also replicate. The work that my snarky clothing perambulations do is fun, liberating, and significant, but it is not comprehensive. I am as eager to stay in my lane as an academic as I am to deconstruct, challenge, and playfully destabilize historic structures of oppression, one waistcoat at a time.

I spend the remainder of this article analyzing several outfit choices from *Clockwork Black* over the last four years. This requires not simply describing the outfits or relaying the reason behind their description. This also necessitates a thoughtful appraisal of the image itself and its situation within larger historic contexts in Virginia (and later in California). To do this, I am particularly challenged by the theoretical work of scholar Tina M. Campt at uncovering the everyday power visible in images of black people in a world structured by white supremacy. In *Listening to Images*, Campt explores the myriad ways in which black people articulate and define for themselves a futurity in the midst of histories of silencing and erasure. Studying state-sponsored photography in ethnographic work, passport photographs, or carceral spaces, Campt interprets these images in a markedly different way; she chooses to *listen* to the images, focusing on the feelings elicited by these everyday objects, when examined in larger social contexts. For Campt, “‘listening to images’ is at once a description and a method. It designates a method of recalibrating vernacular photographs as quiet, quotidian practices that give us access to the affective registers through which these images enunciate alternate accounts of their subjects. It is a method that opens up the radical interpretive possibilities of images and state archives we are most often inclined to overlook” (Campt, 2017, p. 5). Campt locates within these images, the power of the quotidian, “the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life” for black people in white supremacist societies. The quotidian practice of daily selecting clothing that will cover the body and create moving images, can create profound frequencies of feeling for observers; these quotidian actions are “mobilized as everyday practices of refusal” (Campt, 2017, p. 5). While the images in *Clockwork Black* are not state-ordered, they are quotidian examples of black self-expression within a historically exclusive institutional space, and similarly can benefit from a careful listen. By listening to these images of my body, we explore the power of embodied rhetoric across visual, spatial, and aural modes—we merge the symbolic and the rhetorical and make visible previously hidden histories of labor and violence (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 39).

This was one of the first photos I ever uploaded to *Clockwork Black*, and it incorporated many of the items that became regular parts of my daily sartorial choices (Tallie, 2015). I paired a black polka dot dress shirt with maroon canvas nineteenth-century pants, secured by

Figure 1: Black-n-Red (September 22, 2015)



reproduction suspenders. I added a red floral bowtie, maroon bowler hat, and a velvet black vest, to which I attached a sparkly gold brooch. The overall look is generally a simple bichromatic look of red/black, invoking both my racial heritage and the blood that went into the institution every day. The red also points to the anti-indigenous originary violence that created the possibilities of enslavement at education at Washington and Lee. The color scheme is embellished by nineteenth century touches—the hat, vest, and pants styles are all indicative of a Gilded Age era aesthetic. Following Campt’s lead, we can then turn to the photograph itself and listen to what the image itself tells us through this quotidian practice. As a photographic subject, I’m posed calmly, yet directly looking into the camera, daring

the viewer to see me, to occupy space even as I wear these formal garments at work. The seeming placidity of my pose and expression suggest what Campt would term a quotidian refusal, “practices honed in response to sustained, everyday encounters with exigency and duress that rupture a predictable trajectory of flight” (Campt, 2017, p. 10). I think of this image in relation to the blood-red bricks of the historic campus colonnade at Washington and Lee; I think of the enslaved African peoples who had to build and maintain these structures and their descendants who were systematically excluded from attending the institution. I take on this challenge by placing these histories sartorially on my body; histories that were already marked historically on skins like mine, and now arranged symbolically, purposefully in this image as an embodied rhetorical act. The location of this photograph is also intentional; I took the picture on campus, in a newly retiled bathroom near my office. It felt symbolic and important to repurpose the spaces of the campus for my own desires, beyond those of the institution. I allow myself a bit of playfulness by reappropriating a garish gold brooch that I had acquired at an antique mall; the piece hints at femininity and type of older respectability practiced by older women in the professional world, and thus it makes a fun and confusing juxtaposition overall. I think about the absurdity and the tension of having the privileged position of assistant professor in a place where black bodies like mine had only been seen until recently as background laborers. My half-smile and placidity, then, is a quotidian refusal, not an escape from the institution, but a direct decision to occupy space that had previously not been mine to claim. I think of the quiet confidence of refusing histories of erasure, and I think of the audacity of wearing a velvet vest and a bowler hat in a place where my ancestors were denied space.

Three and a half years into my time at Washington and Lee, I decided to wear this relatively simplified outfit to work (Tallie, 2018). The dress shirt is a light blue with stylized sunrise patterns, paired with a simple pair of jeans. However, I’d also added purposeful accessories: first, a copper wire minimalist crown headpiece, a West African bead necklace, and a skeleton handflower bracelet. While there is something a bit playful or even costumey about this (my

Figure 2: *Wakanda Forever* (February 27, 2018)



hand is a *literal* skeleton, something my students laughingly pointed out throughout the day), there is a larger point in the midst of the lighthearted touch. Together, these pieces tell a different story of space and challenge. The photograph's regal elements, combined with the self-assured facial expression in the image, are more confrontational than the previous piece. They speak to an aggressive occupying of space, and a recasting of a future. I named this piece *Wakanda Forever*, after the statement in the mythical African kingdom of Wakanda in the Marvel comic and film, *Black Panther*. While Wakanda is not a real place, and not without its own limitations, invoking it can be a call to somewhere beyond the daily realities of enslaved histories and violence. Doing so reflects Tina Campt's

articulation of black feminist futurity, which offers a:

grammar of possibility that moves beyond a simple definition of the future tense as *what will be* in the future. It moves beyond the future perfect tense of *that which will have happened* prior to a reference point in the future. It strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real conditional or *that which will have had to happen*. The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must. It is an attachment to a belief in what should be true, which impels us to realize that aspiration. It is the power to imagine beyond current fact and to envision that which is not, but must be. It's a politics of pre-figuration that involves the living future *now*—as imperative rather than subjunctive—as striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present. (Campt, 2017, p. 17)

After three years of teaching at Washington and Lee, I was exhausted. I was one of only four African-American faculty on the campus, I was one of less than ten out queer faculty, and the only person to identify as both. I was tired of being the point person for students (and colleagues in crisis). I was exhausted with the endless trotting me out by the administration as a sacrificial offering on the altar of performative change. I was tired of being the expected physical bridge between a racially oppressive history and an imagined inclusive global elite college. I didn't want to live in the quotidian exhaustions of February 2018. I wanted a future that *will have had to happen*. I wanted to invoke the histories of violence and enslavement and oppression in my skeletonized hand, but I also wanted to imagine a pan-African, autonomous position within the ruins of the institution's violent white supremacist past.

Listening to the powerful frequencies in this photograph, I feel the juxtaposition of death and decay in the bony finger jewelry with the stubborn Christmas cactus that had begun to snake its way into many of my photos that spring. I feel life continuing to push, insistent into frames of

Figure 3: *Ancient Egypt, Modern Style (February 18, 2019)*



death and order, their unruly resilience demanding a space beyond the photo's convention. When I see this photograph, I see a calm but uncompromising claim for a future that *must come*—a future of genuine liberation, not one where black bodies are offered as a tepid panacea to structural dispossession. I see the future, and I call for it to arrive. Three days later I was offered a job at the University of San Diego.

Six months into working at a new university, I took this photograph (Tallie, 2019b). The University of San Diego is, in many ways, markedly different than Washington and Lee University. It is located back in the southern California in which I was raised and is a place that feels far more familiar than the particularly blunt histories of enslaved violence I

encountered in Virginia. Yet, it would be foolish to assume that a simple change of university would end any and all structural histories of oppression or exclusion. As a wealthy, Catholic liberal arts college with a predominantly white student body, the University of San Diego has familiar structural issues for me as a black professor. Indeed, in March of 2019, the university made the news for its inclusion in part of a wider admissions bribery scandal involving affluent parents purchasing spaces for their children (Robbins & Davis, 2019). This is particularly exhausting for black students and faculty, who are often viewed as suspect additions outside of the university proper, and who feel they have to prove themselves over and over again. As Ebony O. McGee and Danny Bernard Martin argued this year, “Being black in the academy too often means enduring ‘racial battle fatigue,’ particularly in spaces shaped by wealth and white supremacy” (“Being a Black Academic in America,” 2019). While the University of San Diego does not directly inhabit spaces of enslavement in the same way as Washington and Lee, it represents an uncomfortable alliance between Catholic histories and genocidal violence committed by the church toward the region’s indigenous Kumeyaay people, a particularly thorny issue at a campus that until recently memorialized the founder of the Catholic mission system, Junipero Serra, in one of their campus buildings (Wilkens, 2019).

What could this mean for my weaponized fashion? In short, it means that my dressing is still necessary to disrupt spaces in which I am not expected to belong; it means challenging conventions of who can be a professor in a space built through structural violence. It means some of the immediate existential factors at Washington and Lee have to shift, and so does my choice of clothing. While teaching about the history of ancient Egypt in an introductory African survey, I decided to put together this simple outfit that incorporated a scarab beetle set of sweater pins over a plain blue dress shirt and under a dark blue blazer. A minimalist headpiece and playful black eyeliner complete the look. For me, the look is elegant, and yet also unexpected. There are less of the immediate adornments of nineteenth century vests or

strategic accessories as in Wakanda futurity. Rather, this is a simpler look that also teases at what a “grown up” professor can look like. I look directly at the camera, challenging the viewer to see my body and my work in thinking about Egypt and Africa more broadly, as a series of interconnected stories, especially in my new San Diego location. In asserting an ancient Egyptian history in African classes, I am also trying to pointedly take up space in classes and remind us that black bodies have existed, continue to exist, and aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. Following the advice McGee and Martin offered to black faculty and students in light of the admissions scandal: “Remember that your blackness represents the highest form of excellence. You are enough. The system is what has to change, not you” (“Being a Black Academic in America,” 2019). Nothing quite makes that playful assertion, like minimalist ancient Egyptian elements in the middle of ostensibly grown up professor wear, does it?

Conclusion

Clockwork Black is a work in progress, a way of charting the ways in which my black, fat, and queer body does not immediately or easily fit the expectations people have for a professor, first in rural Virginia and now in urban San Diego. By drawing on a variety of influences, I have crafted a whimsical and absurd fashion blog that simultaneously tires to occupy spaces that my body was never supposed to take up while also remaining playful and ridiculous. Dress has allowed me the necessary space to challenge, flourish, and imagine a world, beyond the limitations of history and the realities of violence. Also, there are so many hats and/or waistcoats, and that may be the greatest gift.



Figure 4: A few more of the author's excellent sartorial choices.

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Exposing the Seams

Professional Dress & the Disciplining of Nonbinary Trans Bodies

GPat Patterson, Kent State University-Tuscarawas

and

V. Jo Hsu, University of Arkansas

"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



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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.

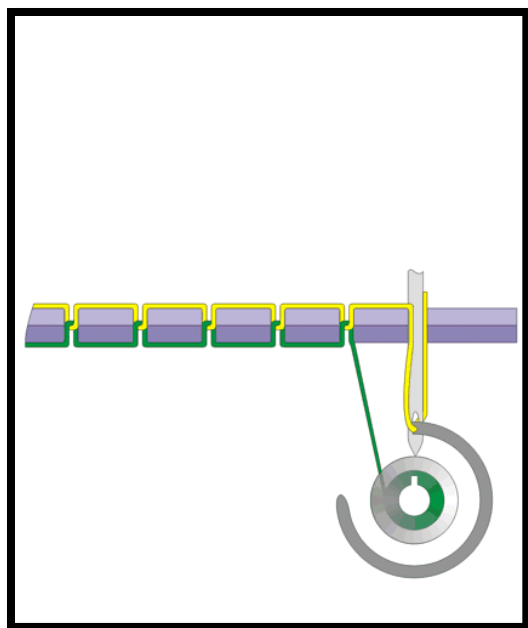


Figure 2: A model for dialogic storytelling.

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 multimarg enbies. 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.

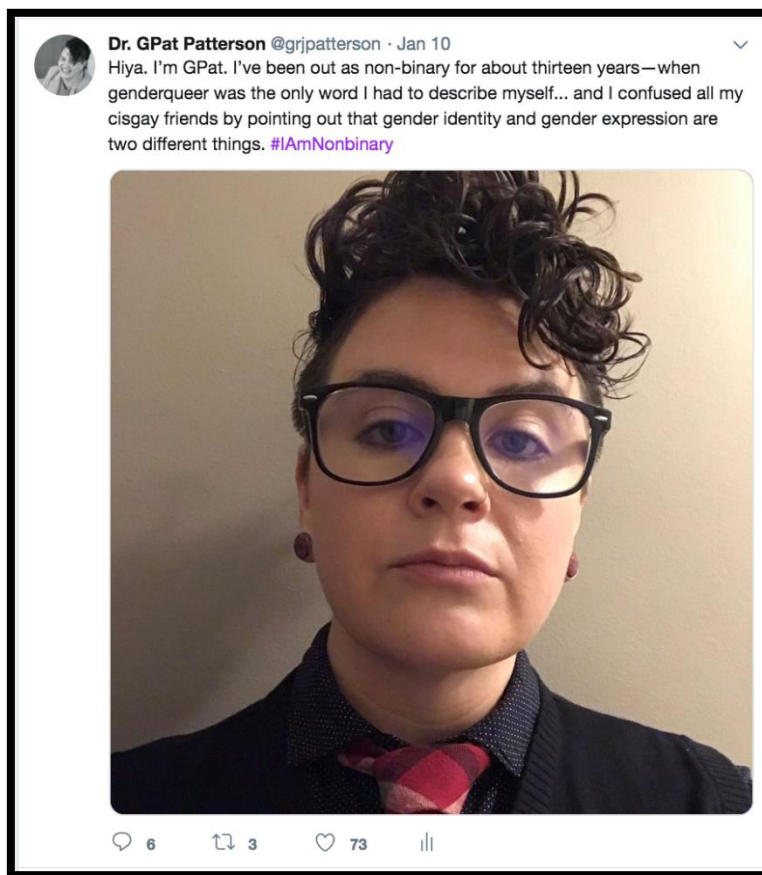


Figure 3: Image of a tweet by GPat.

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.

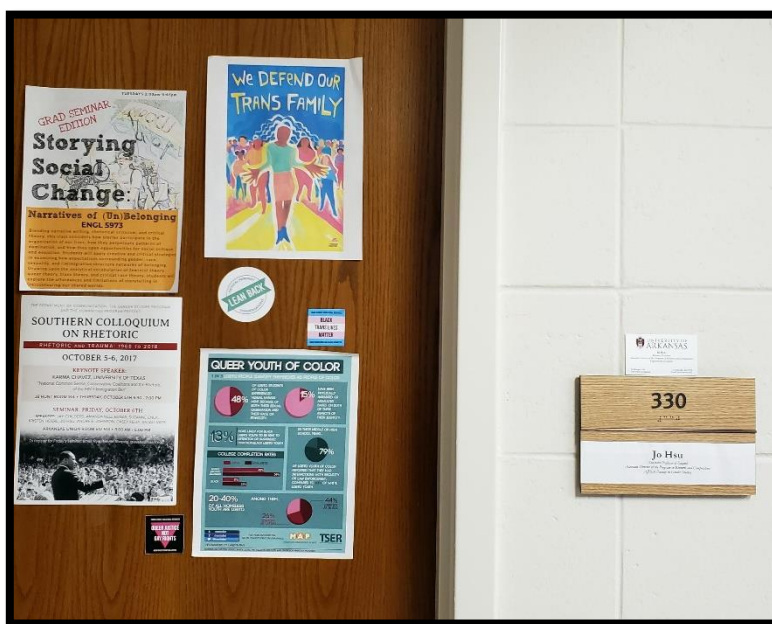


Figure 5: Image of Jo's office door.

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’m’a’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



Figure 6: Image from Jo's Instagram profile.

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

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,

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,



Figure 8: Stickers!

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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Age, Ability, and Self-Expression

The Question of Purpose and the Intersections of Comfort in the Classroom

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Introduction

Historically, marginalized groups have been criticized for their dress. Even if we examine events that happened 20 to 30 years ago, many masculine women were targets. As Brower (2013) outlined, Darlene Jespersen, a well-received bartender, refused to wear makeup and was fired in 2000. In 1989, Ann Hopkins was denied a promotion, despite her excellent work, because according to her work, she dressed and acted more masculine. As Brower pointed out, this created a double-bind: “the job requirements demanded traditional masculine traits such as assertiveness and forcefulness, yet when Hopkins displayed those qualities,” she was refused a promotion.

More recently, we find that people have been fired because of their cultural practices. Brittany Noble, for instance, was a black news anchor who asked her director if she could stop straightening her hair and wear it naturally. The director agreed, but after a month, the director told her that her hair was unprofessional and that Mississippi “needed to see a beauty queen” (Santi, 2019). Similarly, a Yemeni teacher who wore a hijab in metro Detroit was fired. She was written up, despite her competent teacher and connection with her students, and her supervisors told her that she would need to resign or get fired, and to “go find a job in Dearborn,” which is a nearby city that has a high population of Muslim individuals (“Lawsuit,” 2018).

There are many more accounts of the expectations of how teachers dress, particularly because they are “role models for students” (Freeburg et al., 2011, p. 37). In particular, according to a number of the handbooks include guidelines for teacher dress (out of the 82 that Freeburg et al. analyzed), teachers are to “project a positive image in the community,” “create an environment conducive to learning,” and “instill respect for authority, traditional values, and discipline” (p. 37-38). It is clear that teachers have a responsibility to the community as a whole to dress the “right way,” and certain clothes send certain messages. In addition to the handbooks that teachers are provided, they have another group to keep in mind: students. Sebastian and Bristow (2008) found that professors who dressed formally led to “greater

attributions of expertise,” but women professors who dress formally were deemed less likeable (p. 200).

These examples demonstrate the often complicated intersections of purpose, choice, and external expectations when it comes to analyzing dress practices as embodied rhetoric. Professors or instructors in particular must consider the “meanings” that are “articulated beyond language” in their clothing and how it affects themselves as well as others (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 39). Though instructors may be aware of how their bodies (as well as others’ bodies) are “figured into [their] work [specifically, teaching],” they cannot often control these external expectations from institutions, bosses, peers, students, and dress codes (Johnson et al., 2015, p. 39). What the examples above fail to uncover are the “hidden” purposes by the individuals wearing the clothes as well as implicit dress codes made by those in power behind dress practices. In “Wearing Multimodal Composition: The Case for Examining Dress Practices in the Writing Classroom,” Manthey (2015) stated, “Considering dress practices as multimodal composition means realizing that appearance is something that is constructed for a purpose, and that the only way to know for sure what the author’s intended purpose is, is to ask them” (p. 342). In other words, purpose is not always externally apparent, and as we will argue, the purpose behind an instructor’s external appearance is possibly complicated in terms of the intersection of choice and necessity. As our stories will demonstrate, we are aware of the audiences, their implicit dress codes, and the potential messages our dress may send when we teach; however, we sometimes aim to subvert these dress codes due to discomfort (for a number of reasons), a disjuncture in our identities. And, we find, that even when we (attempt to) meet these implicit or explicit dress codes, they do not guarantee power, safety, or comfort.

Furthermore, clothing is something that is easily added or removed from the body and can serve to alter or hide different areas of the body according to the wearer’s purpose. This is important to recognize, as the body itself is something that a person often has little immediate control over in terms of appearance or external perception. One example of this is age perception, or how old or young one’s body looks regardless of actual age. Another related example is external appearance and perceptions of ability. Differences in ability are not always externally perceivable, and dress practices may work to highlight, accommodate, or hide differences in ability depending on the wearer’s purpose. Moreover, dress practices in both of these cases are related to the concept of self-expression, as how one dresses is almost always related to their perception of their identity and their place in the world.

In this article, we wish to call into question definitions of purpose as they relate to our embodied teacher personas, especially as these personas relate to the question of both physical and emotional comfort. We will demonstrate this idea by discussing the implications of dress and age perception—particularly, how dress can alter age perception in order to achieve a desired response from students. We will also discuss how external appearance may be complicated by differences in ability, and how different abilities might necessitate certain types of clothes, fabrics, and styles so that the instructor can perform the various tasks their teaching style and/or class requires. The question of purpose is further complicated by self-expression,

which involves interplay between considerations of age and ability as well as culture, socioeconomic status, gender, sexuality, and any other considerations of identity the instructor can express through clothing. All of these separate accounts (Amy's of ability, Hillary's of age, and Mariel's of self-expression) will reveal how dress clearly influences our comfort and our ability to perform as teachers. Further, through our photo essay, we will provide images that accompany stories of how we arrived at our respective levels of and definitions of comfort through our own unique purposes, some voluntarily, others that are a result of circumstances beyond our control.

Dr. Amy Latawiec: "Don't you have to teach soon?" A Narrative about Ability

Not too long ago, I was invited to a friend's house for tea. I had to teach that afternoon and her home was mid-way between my place and campus so I thought it would be nice to stop by for our visit and just head right to the classroom afterward. At least an hour into our visit, and in the middle of an unrelated conversation, she paused suddenly and in a mildly concerned voice, said, "Don't you have to teach soon?" Without hesitation, I said, "Yeah." I glanced at the clock face on my Fitbit and added, "If I leave here in 20 minutes, I'll have plenty of time to get there."

I didn't read into her question at all, but she didn't even give me time to. She immediately looked me up and down and said, "Oh. I... I guess I thought that teachers had to dress...."

I stared with a blank expression. I wasn't going to fill that one in for her. Consider this data collection, I thought.

She continued, confident yet hesitant (it's a thing, really), "... ya know, more professionally."

I laughed. "What? This doesn't cut it?"

Because you are all dying to know, I was wearing a pretty expensive pair of black leggings (that were certainly not designed for the gym) along with a long, solid colored tunic sweater and pair of black knee-high boots. To be honest with you, this was the high end of "professional" attire for me. It certainly was not how I would typically dress outside of the classroom. That said, five or six years ago (before Multiple Sclerosis and hip reconstruction surgery), the outfit would indeed have been different - I don't know by how much, because I think that's ultimately a subjective assessment, but my contribution to this discussion of purpose and dress practices in academe revolves around this perceived difference.

What follows here is a narrative about the intersections of identity and purpose, whether those are ascribed, crafted, or both, and whether and how the ways in which we often define purpose—rhetorically—allows for circumstances like my own history of "professional dress." Most notably, though, is the ways in which the question of purpose is so intimately related to embodied multimodal rhetoric as I contend with both the impact of my body in the classroom and the desire to erase it from any potential impact in favor of other forms of communication (namely verbal and written). In fact, the idea of "obscuring the body" is something that scholars

have discussed at length (Lunsford and Fishman 2005; Foss 2013). As I wrestle with how my physical presence itself is rhetorical, I often wonder if it hinges on whether every way our bodies are “read” is interpreted as a purpose that is chosen rather than a purpose that is necessary. Ultimately, this specific story is told in an effort to highlight how the rhetorical concept of purpose can be perceived versus how it might actually been constructed.

How do we understand “purpose?” At face value, purpose feels intimate - after all, it’s often positioned as an individual or a group’s mission or primary driver for doing and being. Purpose is also understood on a smaller scale - as part of a broader rhetorical framework wherein we are considering our audience and other factors that might affect the way we present ourselves. Outside of those beliefs about fate, the cosmos, and any other not-of-this-world determinants that we sometimes see as the crafting of our purpose, the whole idea of purpose is, more often than not, something that is chosen. Even if we do not choose it, it is common to hear people believe that purpose must be carried out even if they feel they were led there by some outside force (like God, for example). So, what if purpose is not by choice? What if the choices we make (and the purpose for those choices) is something that is visited upon us? In this particular story, I will wrestle with the purpose of my dress practices and how - because of their “non-conventional” nature - I have been regarded as purposefully bucking the perceived norms of my profession. The truth of the matter, however, is that my dress practices (a primary part of them, at least) are a choice made not because of rhetorical purpose, but because of necessity. It is a choice made to facilitate comfort in the face of disability.

One might argue that necessity and purpose are related insofar as one’s purpose—in this case—is the necessity of function. I think this might be a cynical view of purpose especially since it removes the main ingredient of rhetorical aims: the audience. How am I addressing audience if my (assumed deliberate) purpose is to serve my own physical comfort? I know—because this is me I am talking about—that it serves my audience because they now have a teacher who is not suffering a physical limitation and more chronic pain due to the dress practices she has chosen. My students (my audience) do not know this. As far as they’re concerned, their professor has always and does always dress this way. Unless my students have furiously Googled me prior to showing up in my classroom (and even then their searches might not yield the evidence necessary for this devil’s advocacy), they would have no idea that in prior to suffering a hip injury and being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, I had a fancy for pencil skirts and tucked in blouses.

I know that when I ask my students to consider the rhetorical situation, purpose is always discussed as the chosen reason or desire for conveying a message to their audience. A student’s purpose for writing a persuasive letter to the Dean of Students is to potentially change roommate selection practices for the dorms. A student might also say that their purpose is driven by the necessity of their comfort and mental health while living on campus, but nevertheless, they have chosen to take this action (the letter) and have considered their audience (the dean) as they crafted the letter.



Figure 1: Amy takes a bathroom mirror selfie before teaching in June of 2013.

When I think about my purpose for wearing leggings, stretchy-fabric'd skirts, and A-line dresses in the classroom, I think about the fact that because I have torn the labrum in my left hip, had it stitched back together and completely reconstructed, spent months in prescribed rehabilitation and additional months beyond that in my own healing practices, I have no choice but to wear clothing that allows me to frequently stretch my hips, legs, and lower back. If I am in any way to avoid either A) becoming a heap of useless human flesh on the floor or B) uncontrollably sobbing in a nearby bathroom stall, I have no choice but to wear clothing that allows me a wide range of motion.

It is not out of the realm of possibility that this change in my dress practices happened as a response to a deeper purpose—one, perhaps, that signaled a level of confidence and comfort in a professional world that I had existed within long enough to, for lack of a better

term, “let go” of previous dress practices that explicitly performed “a professional woman in the academy.” So, for example, one might ascribe purpose to my decision to move from wearing tights and pencil skirts to leggings and A-line dresses as a fashion choice. They might believe that the former—something traditionally seen as professional dress for a female in academe—is a perfect platform from which to deviate. The observation might also be that this transition happened to come after I had secured a full-time position in the same department that I was once a graduate student teacher. Perhaps I had gained a level of confidence in my new position so much so that I decided to (rhetorically) adopt a dress practice that more fit my personality and/or other aspects of my physical self (heavily tattooed, large gauged earrings, and dramatic hair styles). My choice of dress in Figure 2 above appears to support this theory—that my purpose in discontinuing the “professional” attire that I had chosen early on in my teaching career evolved also into something intentional. A purpose to not only be functional, but to also be comfortable (and perhaps buck a trend or two). The fact of the matter still, however, is that in Figure 2 my dress choice for that day is a response to multiple environmental and physical factors: 1) during the summer months in the Midwest, it is not uncommon to experience extreme heat outside and extreme cold inside, both of which I struggle with as a person with Multiple Sclerosis, and 2) I was still in physical therapy as I recovered from reconstructive surgery on my left hip which made it difficult to change in and



Figure 2: Amy takes a bathroom selfie prior to teaching two months after hip reconstruction surgery.

out of clothing, causing me to opt for these particular leggings (which were the most comfortable and functional I had at the time). Though it's important to acknowledge that we have often been reminded that "the author of a text does not have control over the readers' interpretation" (Manthey, 2015).

Rhetorical purpose moves beyond just defining goals. Instead, rhetorical purpose is persuasive - it wants to affect the way a particular audience might view a subject or even understand the subject altogether. My story is one of two distinct purposes: ascribed and actual. You might ask, do you feel that your identity is reflected in the clothing in Figure 2? Does the dress practice in Figure 2, while functional and comfortable, also fit your rhetorical purpose as a professor of writing at a four-year institution? I think

it's safe to say the answer is yes. So, while this is ultimately a case of "both/and" not "either/or," it still remains the case that though we might believe that our purpose in rhetorical dress practices is one dimensional, it is multi-layered, multi-faceted, and not always an intentional practice. It is my hope that my story might lead us in a direction of continuing to consider not only what it means to "dress professionally," but to stop short of assuming that dress practices (whether they be conventional or non-conventional) are enacted with a purpose that always has an audience (that is, one that is external to oneself) in mind.

On that note, let's conclude a story - one that relies mostly on the consideration of purpose as part of the overall rhetorical situation - with a discussion of audience. I must confess that my audience is almost always my students. My context is providing effective instruction that avoids distraction by privileging comfort and authenticity. My purpose in what I wear for this audience and context has been informed by factors that are beyond my control (surgery; chronic illness). Therefore, when I think about how embodied multimodal rhetoric intersects with my own purpose, I already understand that I am considering these things due to the performativity of my work - due to the fact that there is so much stock placed in the objectification of my body and what I choose to wear. I see this as parallel to Manthey's (2015) discussion of her own dress practices the following passage:

I see all of these accessories as rhetorical objects—material things that can be manipulated to cater to a certain situation (audience, context, purpose). This is not an exercise in personal preference—in a society where bodies, beauty, and gender are commodified, the woman in the third picture is more likely to be taken seriously than

the woman in the first picture because of her appearance, manipulated through dress practices, even though the person is the same in both photos (p. 339).

I think, quite plainly, that the idea here is that the manipulation of material things is, indeed as Manthey asserted, not always an exercise in personal preference. Though, while sometimes our purpose may not be our personal preference, it might also not be about being taken seriously, either. It might be about responding to and honoring our body's disabilities. And even though I don't believe many people would doubt the latter, there is value in calling attention to it in a world where we regularly regard irreverence and whimsy as a purpose in and of itself.

Hillary: Being Presented Versus Presenting Yourself

I student taught 5 years ago, and let me tell you, I am so glad that I teach college students. Every time I teach a class, actually, I tell this to college students. I don't usually get into details like I do in this article, though. 5 years ago, I was still somewhat uncomfortable with my body, and definitely uncomfortable with my teaching persona and the authority—in particular, how much should I exert, and when? This discomfort, as well as the expectations put upon (new) teachers, reflected in my dress practices.

Student teachers, much like many other workplaces, are to follow a dress code. As the head of teacher education at my undergraduate institution explained, the dress code is, to this day, “no jeans, no sweatshirts, no tennis shoes, use an iron if the shirt/pants require it, keep pants hemmed, sweater sleeves the right length, and always noting the ‘3 B’s....no boobs, no belly and no butts!’ The bottom of the top must meet the top of the bottom” because their “philosophy behind our dress code is to represent the professional side of our candidates.” In other words, in order to be taken seriously as a teacher, by both your students and the other teachers and staff that you worked with, and eventually get a job, you needed to follow this dress code: to wear slacks, skirts, button down shirts, blouses. Clearly, this dress code—or embodied multimodal practice—“upheld hegemonic norms” that “transmit [certain] values and traditions,” as Cedillo & Elston (2017) stated (p. 7). While the institution may argue that this is what professional dress culture looks like in elementary and secondary schools and will earn the respect of students and staff, this is subjective, ableist, and classist, at the very least. It's something I didn't know I wanted to subvert until much later, although I still feel uneasy about it.

For me, however, it was relatively easy to follow this dress code (see Figure 3). Although I did not have much money and therefore less variety in terms of dress clothes, I was able to look presentable in the eyes of the middle school and my institution. In addition, during my student teaching, I was in a stage in my life where I still wasn't comfortable with my body. I would always make sure that I was “covered up” in all capacities, especially my chest. Growing up, I received unwanted attention because of my figure, particularly my sizeable breasts for my small stature. From middle school onward, I wore clothes that concealed a lot of my body.

Although I followed this dress code, I realized later that dressing this way did not guarantee professional behavior from others. I felt like my slacks and blouses matched my attitude—



Figure 3: Hillary in 2014, dressed in typical student teaching clothes: slacks, a blouse, and a cardigan. Layers and certain colors distract from the body, as you can see here!

respectful but friendly, confident but not necessarily domineering. However, there were parts of my dress practices that I really did not have much control over, namely how young I looked.

During student teaching, I was a 23-year-old who looked like she was 16, as my parents and strangers at the grocery store love to tell me. *You'll look younger than everyone else your age when you get older!* They exclaimed enviously. However, what they seem to forget is the here and now. Looking young does not earn the respect of your superiors, your peers, or even your students. And, looking young and having a prominent figure does not help in this instance.

Boohoo, the skinny, pretty, young white cis girl has to deal with compliments. How sad. I sympathize with this mindset. I've often thought about my privilege as being a younger, thin, white, and feminine cisgender teacher, especially in a rural setting. Being a younger woman means you will never be told that you're "too old" for the clothes you are wearing. Being a thin woman means you will never be fat-shamed by staff or students. Being a white woman means you will never have racial slurs thrown at you or comments about what you do and don't do with your hair. Looking feminine while identifying as a woman means you will never be harassed about looking too masculine in certain clothes or having anyone question your gender or sexuality. But these characteristics also mean that people, especially students, will still try to undermine your authority.

I have two stories where students attempted to dismiss my authority as a teacher in the classroom during student teaching. While these two stories do not reflect the majority of the students that I have taught at this time or have taught more recently, they have stuck with me. They have made me reflect on the way I present myself and the way I have been presented in the classroom, and how these two often clash.

The first story is about a student who constantly made loud remarks about how attractive I was nearly every day. These ranged from booming out in the middle of the lesson, “Ms. Weiss is so hot!” to greeting me, with infatuated eyes, “Ms. Weiss, you look pretty today.” Usually, I brushed these comments off, like I was taught. I never took him aside to reprimand him. I just rolled my eyes or ignored him, hoping he would get the hint that I would not engage with those comments. Since this time, I had never thought about the power in the situation. This student, whether he realized it or not, was diminishing my power in the classroom. Now that I reflect, I realize that this student affected the way other students acted toward me in the class: students would look at me with sympathetic eyes, or some of them would talk more after this student made these comments, causing the majority of the class to lose focus. In this moment, this student affected the way I was being presented in the classroom; that is, by drawing attention away from school and to my appearance and his interest in me, he diminished the authority I had in the classroom. I wished for students to not be distracted by my appearance, which is why I dressed more conservatively. However, this didn’t seem to matter; if I had to speculate why, it may be because of my young and feminine appearance as well as my friendly and caring persona.

The second story is about a student who acted out every class period and who I believed schemed ways to disrupt the class instead of focusing on his work. Let me preface this by saying that I do sympathize with this student because I knew that he needed help, and I tried to help him, but he was resistant, which is perhaps why he acted in the following manner. One class well into my student teaching, I was on the move, helping other students with questions they had. All of a sudden, I heard this student’s booming voice from across the room, asking if “Ms. Weiss has a fire crotch” (the interesting thing is that he was also a redhead). Other students around me froze, and stared at me, petrified but curious how I was going to react. From what I remember, I ignored it, perhaps blushing slightly, and continued to help students. I’d like to note that I like to play this off when I tell this story in person, like it’s no big deal, but it still makes me slightly embarrassed writing it. Somehow, the bullying that I didn’t receive in school about my hair came out in student teaching.

As a natural redhead, I was showered with compliments growing up, how gorgeous it was, how so many people pay to have my hair color. My hair was never fiery red like Ron Weasley or Dana Scully (except now, because I use henna to color my hair), but more of an auburn when I was born, and then grew into a dark copper color. When I hit my undergrad years, my hair had lightened into a sandy red (slightly darker than strawberry-blond). In addition to my hair color, I am privileged because I somewhat meet American beauty standards in terms of body type (thin-ish, hourglass-shaped-ish, no physical disabilities), which is most likely why I did not face

any bullying. But now that I was in a position of power, particularly with middle school students, I was a target.

Why did this student's comment bother me but the other student's comments did not? I have a half-formed answer: the student commenting about pubic hair made a direct comment to my body, specifically about a private, sexualized part of my body. And although redheads are sometimes celebrated, redheads' pubic hair normally is not, because it is unique. Though both students seemed to be trying to devalue my authority in the classroom, the first student did not make as direct comments about any specifics of my body (at least that I heard).

In these situations, I did not have much power over how students reacted to the way I presented myself. Although I constructed my appearance with a purpose of not distracting students, because of many other factors at play—including my identity and the way I portray myself as well as the students' identities and biases—my purpose was sometimes irrelevant. These experiences ultimately changed how I approached teaching these students in particular. I would deliberately act a bit more guarded and answer their questions directly, with less emotion.



Figure 4: Hillary in 2019, feeling more comfortable (but sassy because of politics) in these clothes.

It has been two years since I have taught, due to my writing center position and my research assistant position. However, as I shared with the other two authors of this piece when we began writing this together, I tutor high school students online, and more recently, I wear comfy clothes to tutor. Moreover, no matter what, I always wear tennis shoes to campus, especially because of my walk (in any circumstances, though, I refuse to wear high heels). This, I have found, matches my teaching philosophy more than the rigid clothes that I wore in previous years (see Figure 4).

As I am sure I will find when I enter the classroom again, my dress practices will affect the interactions between I and my students, probably both positively and negatively. Until I have a stable job, though, I will always have second thoughts about subverting the implicit dress codes in academia. Multimodal embodied rhetoric such as dress practices can welcome some and alienate others, but

they can provide “liberatory possibilities” (Cedillo & Elston, 2017, p. 7). I hope to use my thin, white, cis, able-bodied privileges to start conversations in and out of the classroom about how to work on liberatory possibilities for more marginalized teacher bodies.

Mariel: Dressing Authentically

For a long time, especially throughout my teenage years, my clothing and dress represented an area of stress. I, Mariel Krupansky, grew up in a wealthy suburb of Detroit, and felt a lot of pressure to look and dress a certain way when I was at school. Whereas in the summer months one would find me sporting an endless array of t-shirts and soccer shorts, my hair pulled away into a ponytail (see Figure 5), the school year marked a period defined by tight, layered, name brand t-shirts, low rise boot-cut jeans, and burnt, stick-straight hair. While the clothing itself was not particularly uncomfortable, I remember a feeling that the clothes did not really look “right” on me, or, more specifically, that they did not feel like a good representation of my personal style (see Figure 6). It was an emotional, visceral reaction that I ignored for the sake of fitting in or, at the very least, for the sake of not being noticed. I now recognize that my attempts to “fit in” in high school—rhetorical choices I made about the clothing and hairstyles I sported—were indicative of a need to please others, to project an image, or to hide insecurities, and for those reasons, I spent years of my life feeling uncomfortable in my clothing.

As I entered adulthood and established a professional life (for a time as a graduate student and graduate teaching assistant, and briefly as a high school teacher), dress once again became an area of heightened concern and discomfort. How could I craft a professional and instructor identity through clothing? What types of clothing did my students, peers, and professors expect me to wear? These questions intersected with my desire to be taken seriously and were intensified by the knowledge that I presented as a very young, small-framed, cisgender woman. Clothing was a way I could establish authority, and likewise a way to mitigate the effects of the things I could not easily change or did not want to change about my body—such as my height or youthful appearance. I shopped for “teacher clothes,” which in my mind consisted of ankle



Figure 5: Me, in high school, with straight hair and a tight T-shirt.

length dress pants and blouses, leggings paired with long tunics or baggy dresses, and neat, respectable flat shoes (see Figure 7). This clothing, I hoped, sent a clear message: Mariel was a serious, professional scholar and instructor.

Similar to the way I would abandon my uncomfortable high school clothes during the freedom of summer, I soon found myself shedding my “teacher clothes” as soon as I walked in the door of my home. My clothing might have been sending the message that I was a serious, professional scholar and instructor, but it said little else. It felt like high school all over again—I was attempting to “fit in” to a role by wearing clothing that did not reflect any aspect of my personal style



Figure 6: A typical example of "teacher clothes" I would wear.

and comfort. This led me to realize that there was an uncomfortable dissonance between my roles as an instructor, graduate student, and other identities and roles I regularly took on outside of the classroom and that the work I was doing felt similarly fractured. I felt as though I was "putting on a costume—putting on an identity" (Manthey, 2015, p. 341). In attempting to embody a "teacher" persona via the rhetorical choices and messages of my clothing, I had abandoned the importance of my personal identity for the sake of putting on a "teacher" costume: my clothing reflected rhetorical choices based on some abstract idea of what a teacher should look like, but did not represent the multifaceted identity of *Marisel Krupansky*—a teacher, yes, but also an assemblage of countless other roles and identities that were ignored and hidden as I stepped into those sensible, but uncomfortable and somewhat impractical, black flats.

In other words, the clothing on my body did not feel *right* because it reflected rhetorical choices that had nothing to do with the other facets of my identity, and did not reflect the different ways I wished to represent myself, in the classroom and out of it. Furthermore, I realized that, if I were to pursue a tenure track or lecturer position after finishing my studies, I would be faced by a similar fracturing of my identities unless I attempted now to reconnect them. While other careers perhaps require a more distinct separation of roles, the nature of academic work requires a certain fluidity and authenticity that is not so easily disconnected from one's personal life. In my case, my area of study (rhetoric and composition) directly correlates to my area of instruction (first year writing). Why was I creating distinct roles for myself as scholar and instructor, when it would be much more beneficial to combine these roles with my other identities and let them inform each other?

I do not mean to suggest that changing my clothing choices immediately resolved this fracturing of my professional and personal identities. It did, however, symbolize the joining of my identities through embodied rhetoric. My identity as a teacher, student, researcher, and individual are tied together, and inform all areas of my life. I am the embodiment of all experiences, roles, and identities—past and present—and my clothing is an important way I can express my personal style. I no longer dress to distinguish which role I am fulfilling at any given moment (see Figure 8). To do so, at least for me, feels disingenuous: I am never completely a teacher, student, or researcher, but am all three, all the time, just to varying degrees. And through this realization, I have learned that authority does not come from masking my small,



Figure 7: Dressed authentically.

young-looking body, but from embracing the authenticity of who I am. Dressing authentically to one's personal and professional identities has come to represent a feeling of self-acceptance, which provides me with more confidence as I move through my various roles. My authority originates at this point of self-confidence and self-expression, which is largely expressed through my clothing practices. I want my clothing choices to say "*this* is who Mariel is, and it will not be compromised."

Conclusion

The best part (subjective, but still) of all this is the all-important "so what? Who cares?" moment. Now that three people have told their personal stories calling into question the concept of rhetorical purpose as it relates to dress practices and identity, what are we to do with this information? A fair question, all around. The implications will be detailed in three categories: pedagogy, personal growth, and professional development. Readers are, of course, welcome and encouraged to continue this conversation and—in some way or another, perhaps through a panel at an upcoming conference or via a thread on social media—add their own implications that might be helpful as we all wrestle with this very important topic.

Personal Growth

Those of us that have served as mentors to graduate student teachers will know how deeply a teacher's personal growth (especially during graduate education) informs their practices in the classroom. What does it mean to "manage" our personal growth as it relates to our identity as teachers? First, whether we can present our true selves through our physical identity is an issue we must continue to interrogate while we work through concepts like professionalism and professional dress. To be sure, this concept of physical presentation of identity is layered and complex (rightly so), and we do not mean to distill it or dilute it at all just for the purposes of wrapping this up neatly. That said, dress is often a critical part of so many pieces of our identity and we are not always permitted access to those aspects of dress that would adhere to our identities, thus hindering personal growth. So, the first implication of these narratives is whether and how the places we work are amenable to those parts of ourselves that we identify through dress. As we continue to work on those systems that might seek to prevent (unwittingly or wittingly) us from dress practices that provide us comfort, identity, necessity, all of the above or more, we can also think about how to support teachers as they move through these systems. After all, the personal growth of a teacher and their ability to be comfortable in their dress and physical presentation in the classroom relates to the next implication: pedagogy.

Pedagogy

It might be easy to think of teachers—when they are in the classroom—as a uniform entity existing to deliver information to a group of people. In fact, in a world of dress codes and common curriculum, it is entirely simple to view the profession in that way. What we lose if and when we give in to this belief is the very real fact that, statistically speaking, the primary factor

related to a student's success in higher education is a bond they develop with an instructor. At the risk of oversimplification¹ we believe that dress practices, and the consideration of rhetorical purpose relating to them has a direct impact on the ways in which instructors engage with their students inside and outside of the classroom. After all, if we understand rhetoric as not just something that we speak and write but also something that we embody, it would follow that our expression (our multimodal embodied rhetoric) may dictate our ability to deliver the words, to teach the concepts, and ultimately to write effectively for any rhetorical situation. Taking into consideration the various factors that affect rhetorical purpose as it relates to our dress has the potential to increase the engagement between student and teacher.

There exists a large body of research on student engagement and faculty behaviors as it relates to whether and how students feel empowered to succeed in postsecondary education (see Meikeljohn; Tinto; Price), and while an instructor's own physical and emotional comfort in the classroom is rarely (if ever) part of these studies, we might ask ourselves, "how could it *not* be?" Perhaps this photo essay can encourage conversations amongst those who are interested in pedagogical practices (and evaluating them to determine outcomes) leading to (additional) qualitative research that seeks to understand faculty member's perceptions of their own personal purpose and agency within the classroom and whether and how that might influence their pedagogical practices.

Professional Development

The stories contained within this essay all deal with, in some way, feelings about and considerations of professionalism in our workplaces. We have all been confronted with the concept of "professional development" in one way or another whether it be through an entire graduate level class devoted to the topic, a formal mentoring relationship with a senior faculty member, or through informal discussions and group interactions with our peers. The idea that we grow and evolve within our profession is pervasive not only in the field of Rhetoric and Composition but in most career paths and professional environments.

Professional development is often defined as comprised of the following practices: "Continuing Education; Participation in professional organizations; Research; Improved job performance; Increased duties and responsibilities; Skills Based Training; and Job Assignments."² In every single one of these aforementioned practices, we dress. In fact, our dress practices and our identity play a role in whether we are able to move through many of these professional development practices, namely job assignments and participation in professional organizations. What the interrogation of rhetorical dress practices and rhetorical purpose does for professional development is to open a line of questioning into what the assumed norms might

¹ Really, we know the body of research here spans multiple disciplines and ranges from the theoretical to the grounded-theory data-driven analyses of classroom practices and student outcomes. Here in our implications, we hope to demonstrate how these narratives might ground some of this work and encourage more.

² <https://hr.buffalostate.edu/professional-development-examples>

do to create visible and invisible barriers to success for people who are grappling with age, ability, and self-expression.

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Dress Your Professor

Embodied Rhetoric as Pedagogy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Writing Assignments

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

I frame the assignment for students in these terms:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dress Your Professor

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Conclusions

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



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

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Negotiating Crip Comfort

Dispatches from My (Involuntarily) Subversive Wardrobe

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I hobble to the elevator to lift my bodymind from the ground level of the English Department's building to the third, where I will soon hold mid-semester one-on-one conferences with first year writing students in my office. I—a graduate student in Composition and Rhetoric—am joined in the elevator by a senior faculty member who takes a moment to regard my outfit. “How many cat t-shirts do you even own?” he asks through something of a reflexive harrumph. He gets off the elevator before I can articulate an answer more meaningful than a shrug.

I am concerned about how my carefully negotiated clothing choices—inseparable from the rhetoric of my (white, male, disabled) bodymind—are *read* by students, colleagues, and administration. And like other disability studies scholars, I am interested in issues of access. Accessibility issues often manifest themselves in mundane aspects of academic work. As mundane as the often unwritten dress codes adopted by academia might seem, I argue that they are an important site for considerations of accessibility that—when interrogated—render visible concerns of privilege at the intersections of ability, race, gender, sexuality, and class. Let me be blunt: our collective notion of “professionalism” is—by design—ableist and inaccessible.

In *The Professor is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job*, author Karen Kelsky describes fashion “micro-practices” (2015, p. 299)—idiosyncratic tendencies within academic subfields. Here I seek to understand both a broad range of macro-practice tendencies and attitudes in academia, but particularly how these practices are informed by ableist normative values and how those rules—implicit and explicit—are cunningly transgressed by disabled folks as a form of material, multimodal composition, which highlight oppressive and exclusionary norms.

Professionalization and Crip Comfort

Calls to be “professional,” to dress up our bodies, our language, or our lives are exclusionary practices. As Carmen Rios asserts, marginalized folks “aren’t supposed to be comfortable when we’re being professional.” Rios describes her own experiences as a queer, working-class woman of color in “professional” settings, detailing how dress codes upheld power structures that were blatantly racist, sexist, classist, and xenophobic. Rios argues that “professionalism is a tool of the elite to keep workforces “in their place”—and often, that place is defined in opposition to

communities of color, queer culture, and the actual working class.” While Rios’s criticisms are about the world of business, the same critiques of “professional” expectations are certainly present in higher education, expectations which deny access and comfort to marginalized folks.

For example, research considering how these concerns of academic dress are intertwined with race and identity. One study—which focused on how student responses to teaching faculty at an HBCU manifested in everything from absences to teaching evaluations—found Black professors were considered “more trustworthy” when they dressed in formal attire, and suggested White professors were considered less intimidating when dressed casually (Aruguete et al., 2017, p. 498). The researchers warn that—especially in prevailing consumer-driven models of higher education—that institutions must take it upon themselves to avoid discrimination in these instances (p. 500). While I certainly agree with the researchers, I focus here on their findings to point to how the pressure to dress in formal attire is disproportionately experienced by POC. Rhetorical negotiations of dress are certainly complicated by racial inequality and perceptions of race.

And the rhetorical negotiations of fashion choice are also entangled in conversations of gender and sexuality. In explaining her own rhetorical negotiations of dress, Holly Genovese describes clothing as “just one more minefield for female graduate students that their male counterparts do not encounter in the same way.” Ben Barry writes that—as a queer scholar—he has observed how wearing masculine clothing confers male privilege: “Understated blazers and button-downs can shield marginalized academics—whose identities would otherwise stand out as different in the university—from the discrimination that often discounts and diminishes our ideas and contributions.” *Masculine* formal attire has a specific connotation of male power, where simply wearing a suit and tie (or inhabiting a masculine body) comes with it unearned privileges.

And concerns about fashion choices are intrinsically connected to socio-economic class. Shahidha Bari echoes concerns about economic disparity in academia: “the harried teaching assistants of today’s university, underpaid and overworked, have neither time nor income to spare on sartorial matters. Somehow they must seamlessly segue from graduate students slumming in sneakers to professorial formality.” The combination of the *expectation* that academics dress professionally contrasted with the *material realities* faced by many academics is patently absurd, particularly as higher education relies more and more on underpaid and undervalued contingent faculty expected to *dress* the part of solidly middle-class professionals while being paid poverty wages.

In short, dress standards create a space for bigotry to become policy—akin to assumptions about Standard American English—that exclude already marginalized folks in the name of *professionalization*. In this article, I interrogate expectations for how we dress up *bodies* creates assumed-to-be neutral barriers for marginalized folks. Within academia, work has been done to demonstrate that unspoken dress codes exist and that the stakes are different for already marginalized bodyminds. While the scholarship I’ve described above begins to describe how professional dress expectations are compounded by marginalized identities, I am interested

here about the rhetorical negotiations made by disabled folks. While I am aware my cat t-shirts and jeans might not indicate to some the careful rhetorical negotiations of dress—perhaps even communicating that I simply don’t care about my fashion choices—they are the result of a great deal of rhetorical negotiations, of bodily trial and error, and of prioritizing *comfort*.

I take pause to clarify *comfort*. Returning to Rios’s argument, marginalized people are *denied* comfort by calls of professionalization. I realize that within an abled purview the connotations of comfort may mean something entirely different than I intend: here, with the word comfort, I mean being able to meet ableist expectations and demands, even in crip ways. I mean those necessary adjustments disabled folks make to exist in disabling spaces. Like many other disability rights advocates, I draw on the social model of disability that explores how *disability* is a social construct dependent on its context. Feminist disability scholar Susan Wendell observes “Disability in a given situation is often created by the unwillingness of others to adapt themselves of the environment to the physical or psychological reality of the person designated as ‘disabled’” (1997, p. 30). Wendell goes on to describe how—for many disabled folks—the changes they make in their own lives (such as mobility devices, the daily lives of blind folks, or the ways neurodivergent people may experience conversation differently than neurotypical folks) *do not seem* unusual, but are quite ordinary aspects of disabled lives. I am interested in these moments—experienced as *normal* to the disabled person but considered unusual or an *accommodation* by outsiders—as potentially subversive, rhetorical acts that render the implicit oppressive norms of everyday policies clear.

I am interested in how disabled folks *crip*¹ the concept of comfort. And, in doing so, I hope to pinpoint a specific form of Metis that I refer to as crip comfort. Metis, as outlined by rhetorician Debra Hawhee, refers to an embodied rhetoric dependent on *hexis*, a Greek term denoting the condition of the body (58). These concerns of embodied rhetoric, of metis, become a central concept for Jay Dolmage in his work theorizing disability rhetoric. Drawing on differing accounts of both the myths of the Greek goddess Metis as well as other rhetorical traditions as articulated by scholars Helene Cixous and Gloria Anzaldua, Dolmage traces how feminine bodies have been historically pathologized and how disability and disease are key metaphors in understanding embodied rhetoric (2009, p. 3). Dolmage traces the selective embodied rhetorical traditions in which the body is stigmatized and perceived as the antithesis of knowledge, rather than the rich rhetorical traditions which point to the body as a source of knowing and knowledge. Dolmage locates the construction of disability *within* rhetoric, and suggests “that we might respond to this oppressive legacy by using our bodies significantly and making rhetoric significantly bodied” (p. 4). While his rhetorical and historical scholarship on the subject of metis offers contested meanings and possibilities for embodied rhetoric as metis (2014, p. 6), I focus on crip comfort as a specific practice of metis that becomes necessary when we create barriers that deny comfort, when we subscribe to professional standards that are inherently exclusionary to already marginalized bodyminds.

¹ Here I echo other disability activists in the use of “cripping,” reclaimed from the derogatory “cripple.” For more on this, I point you to the work of Carrie Sandhal, who examines the intersections of crip and queer identities in *Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer? Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance*.

I claim crip comfort as a form of multimodal composing, echoing Katie Manthey who argues “the construction of my identity through manipulating clothing is an example of multimodal composition” (2015, p. 340). But I focus on how certain categories of identity, certain kinds of bodyminds, are incompatible with “professional” expectations: Precisely *because* of professional expectations—and not because my bodymind is inherently deficient—*my bodymind* is unprofessional. In an effort to meet the needs of my unprofessional bodymind, my wardrobe is unprofessional, too. While I realize my crip comfort wardrobe choices may seem odd and idiosyncratic to others in the field—and certainly to many in my own department—these are carefully negotiated tactics of crip comfort that enable me within an otherwise disabling context. I hope that in allowing access into these rhetorical negotiations and practical considerations I often choose to conceal, I might better articulate a working theory of crip comfort.

Crip Comfort Redux: A Tour of My Disabled Wardrobe

Our tour begins with the fashion accessory to which most of my closet space is devoted: my colostomy supplies. For those of you lucky enough *not to* know, a colostomy device serves as an artificial colon: a tiny nub of small intestine (called a stoma) protrudes from my belly and empties (gas, fecal matter, and—because of an intestinal disorder—blood) into the bag. The assembly is connected by a wax seal and fixed to my abdomen by medical adhesive.

My days are planned around my colostomy, knowing at all times where the nearest bathroom is should my colostomy bag fail and I need to change it. I have at least three sets of colostomy gear in my bag with me when I leave home each morning, and another half-dozen sets ready to go in an office storage bin. Should this device fail—and it frequently does, as its “medical science” is basically a glorified Ziploc bag held in place by sticky putty and off-brand duct tape—I have no control over these bodily fluids erupting *everywhere*. This unfortunate, *unprofessional* occurrence takes place at professional functions of all stripes, like in my classroom, in faculty meetings, and at academic conferences.

This single medical necessity dictates a large portion of my wardrobe choices. For instance, the seemingly ubiquitous professional fashion advice (usually directed at those who identify and present as masculine but sometimes at feminine-presenting, genderqueer, and non-binary folks, too): “tuck in your shirt and wear a belt.” I understand how this *seems* to be a fairly simple thing to do. But tucking in my shirt is to *guarantee* my ostomy device will fail. And despite the fashion advice, I’d rather have a shirt *not* tucked in than one soaked with feces and blood.

I mostly wear jeans, the kind that are made of elastic, stretchy fabric, and even then jeans that are quite loose. As if the blood and feces conversation wasn’t unprofessional enough, let’s talk about incontinence: it’s hard to hide the outlines of adult diapers under any form of dress pants. I prefer to conceal that I’m wearing an adult diaper if I can, as that particular item of clothing seems to be considered *very* unprofessional, even connected to incompetence. I’m reminded of the protest against “safe spaces” staged by members of Turning Point USA—the



Figure 1: This is one of four drawers in a closet cabinet devoted to the medical supplies I need to manage my disability.

group perhaps best known for their fascist professor watchlist—where a protestor wore a diaper (Shugerman, 2018). Though I passionately disagree with the argument against trigger warnings and safe spaces the protest was trying to make, I can't help but internalize that my daily existence requires me to rely on this same piece of clothing their demonstration used to denote incompetence.

But my stretchy jeans are also connected to another part of my disability: the uncontrollable variance in weight and shape of my body. During the past four years of my PhD studies, my weight has oscillated from 150 lbs. to 310 lbs. Despite what assumptions people might have about weight and health (and the frustration of having so many well-meaning people approaching me, while my health was failing at 150 lbs., to tell me *how much better* I looked), I was *much* healthier at 310 pounds than 150 pounds. Having clothes that can accommodate weight changes—even flexible fabric that can accommodate changes of several pounds in a week or severe bloating and distension in the course of a day due to a blockage—is important.

As my disability has become increasingly visible, I've shifted from button down shirts to print t-shirts. Besides the lowered expectations that t-shirts be tucked in and how the edges of my ostomy seem to get caught up in the buttons, some of my medical apparatus (the ostomy supplies and wound dressings) create awkward protrusions under my clothing: visible lumps and odd curves. When I'm wearing a print t-shirt with cats or Nintendo characters or disability advocacy prints, I can at least try and let myself believe when that when my torso elicits long



Figure 2: Except clean water and paper towels, this image represents everything I need for a single change of my colostomy and related wound care.

stares from people—family, students, colleagues, strangers—that they are staring at the boxing cat, Majora’s Mask, or “Disability Justice is Love.” I am too-well aware that they are not staring at the cat shirt when their facial expressions convey disgust, but at least I can feel less alienated by *pretending* they are.

But the tees are also important because I can change them in about three seconds. This is no clumsy estimation or exaggeration. I have the entire process of changing my outfit and ostomy assembly carefully practiced and timed like a one person NASCAR pit crew. I feel the weight of each passing second when a colostomy bag fails and I need to duck out while teaching a class, attending a meeting, or taking part in other *professional* functions because of my *unprofessional* body.



Figure 3: Some of my favorite printed tees to wear while teaching: my “Feminist Fight Club” shirt, a shirt featuring Nintendo’s “Majora’s Mask” designed by Spanish graphic designer Paula Garcia, and a shirt reading “RESIST” (the word RESIST signed in American Sign Language) ABLEISM from disability rights activist Imani Barbarin’s Patreon store.



Figure 4: Me sporting a handmade colostomy bag cover made by my partner. This one features an arrangement of postage and letters.

But it's not just the colostomy that's unprofessional: The joy of autoimmune disorders is that they often impact multiple bodily systems. It also grants me psoriatic arthritis. It's hell on my knees. That's why this 30-year-old academic is rocking the same orthopedic inserts as his 93-year-old great-grandmother (true story). I grow out my beard to cover the psoriasis on my face and down my neck. When the psoriasis gets intolerable on my scalp, I wear a baseball cap to conceal the symptoms up top.

I close this tour of my wardrobe by touching on my favorite accessories: my ostomy covers. I hate the ostomy device as a whole; it's messy. There is no voluntary muscle control with an ostomy, and so I have no control over when the nub of intestine protruding from my belly will empty into the ostomy pouch. It happens when I'm teaching, when I'm speaking with a colleague, when I'm presenting at conferences. It's not a big deal, but without the covers it may be visible. The covers—lovingly homemade by my partner to fit the exact sized ostomy pouches I need—hide it. And, like my t-shirts, they feature prints of all kinds of things I enjoy, so when people stare, I can choose to believe they are staring at Pokemon or bees.

This brings me to how the rhetoric of my wardrobe may be *read*--as if I my wardrobe choices are simply laziness. I will not soon forget the moment during my graduate coursework when the professor teaching the class singled me out by asking a peer the *hypothetical* question while pointing to my body "if you were the chair of the department, would you let Adam teach dressed like *that*?"

Any number of positionalities might influence the wardrobe choices of any unique bodymind. That they would choose to dress "like *that*" for any number of reasons—our colleagues may choose adaptive clothing to be more comfortable in a wheelchair, they may choose to wear seamless garments to meet their sensory needs, or build their outfit around a colostomy bag.

Dressing for crip comfort, I do teach dressed "like *that*." And it would seem dressing "like *that*" demonstrates there *are* expectations, there are boundaries being crossed. And this imposition of *normative* dress policies is to create a barrier, to say which kinds clothing and the bodyminds wearing them are *welcome* in higher education.

Getting Away with Crip Comfort

In establishing the dress expectations of women, Genovese articulates the gendered standards of implicit dress codes in academia, stating: "male graduate students often get away with casual dress in the classroom that would not go over well for women" (2017). I in no way express disagreement with Genovese or her experiences, and have witnessed these same gendered dress expectations in higher education, particularly as I mentored first year graduate teaching assistants navigating fashion choices. I understand that, in this context, male privilege is certainly *what allows* the *getting away with*, just as white or cis or other normative privileges may enable it. But I want to focus on the phrase *get away with*.

Get away with suggests subversion. It suggests that there was a rule, a standard, an expectation that was sidestepped, avoided, or cunningly overcome. *To get away with* suggests transgression

of an established norm. In his book outlining precisely the ableist nature of higher education, Dolmage argues that “accessibility itself is [. . .] existentially second to inaccessibility. Accessibility is existentially second in a way that demands a body that cannot access. Nothing is inaccessible until the first body can’t access it, demand access to it, or is recognized as not having access” (2017, p. 53). Crip comfort is a rhetorical intervention, it is *demanding access* by making the ableist policies—implicit and explicit—clear. While simultaneously entangled with and inseparable from race, gender, class and other social concerns, crip comfort as a rhetorical intervention is a form of sidestepping, a kind of “getting away with” or bending expectations.

But in *getting away with* a different form of dress, crip comfort makes clear not only the absurdity of implicit professional dress standards (should it matter which fabric covers my hide?), but how they are both unnecessary and oppressive. Approaching concerns of professionalization (and other matters of policy) through crip comfort highlight oppressive, ableist expectations. Margaret Price and Stephanie Kerschbaum, for example, challenge normative research practices in higher education, pointing to how “disability cripps methodology” (2016, p. 20). The authors point to their own choices as researchers with disabilities and how “when disability is assumed to be an important part of the qualitative interview situation [. . .] the interview’s normative framework is exposed and challenged” (2016, p. 20). Thinking about another facet of academic culture, Price describes how institutions might better think through job market interviews and campus visits. She points to the experience of a woman, Clarice, who has Asperger’s. Her presence in the interviews highlights how the process is designed for neurotypical people (2014, p. 118). These are other forms of crip comfort, of the rhetorical negotiations of disabled bodyminds subverting ableist expectations.

Of course, a department allowing an instructor to dress against the grain, of doing interviews or conducting research in an atypical manner, or thinking through accessibility issues for campus visits may be considered an *accommodation*. Accommodations create the same sort of division Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell describe in terms of *charity* (2015, p. 56)—a parasitic relationship where disabled folks *should be grateful* instead of addressing systemic oppression.

As such, this framework of accommodations puts the onus of accessibility on disabled folks. Consider this reflection on the matter by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarashinha, who writes about accommodations as a disabled woman of color, highlighting how accommodations are even more fraught for at the intersections of marginalization:

It was unsafe for me to say that I might need a tutor—tutors and accommodations, newly allowed under the brand new ADA, were for the rich white boys; I just had to be twice as smart if I wanted to get a scholarship. I couldn’t afford to look “stupid.” [. . .] Some of our needs were so vulnerable, so embarrassing, so complicated to ask for that it was much easier to just not admit we needed them. (2018, p. 56-57)

Crip comfort resists being an accommodation because accommodation belong to *institutions* and are born from a particular kind of neoliberal logic. Stephanie Kerschbaum describes neoliberal trends in higher education as they relate to diversity logics rooted in marketability, arguing that “such diversity discourses make it difficult to identify or alter systematic practices

that legitimate oppression and disenfranchisement” (2014, p. 39). Similarly to these institutional diversity efforts, the language of *accommodations* positions the institution as the gracious host and disabled folks as reliant on their institutional charity. Instead of an accommodation, *crip comfort* is a rhetorical intervention which lays bare institutional ableism and created inaccessibility.

But while disabled folks may *get away with* one form of *crip comfort* or another in that we are “allowed” to do it, I don’t mean to imply that *crip comfort* comes without consequence. I have not been outright punished for my *crip comfort* fashion choices, and I recognize this is likely because of a convergence of white, male privilege. But I have been approached by more than one colleague who has told me to dress *more professionally*—one even commenting that my ostomy bag was “inappropriate” in my classroom and academic settings (as if I could just choose *not* to wear it). For others, the consequences of *crip comfort* have been much more dire: in an altogether different professional context, Barbarin recounts how—because of disability—she wore sneakers to a job interview in an inaccessible building. “I look around the room and see beautiful girls wearing heels that perfectly complement their outfits. I’m in sneakers that make me stick out. And then there’s the crutches, which gleam like a neon sign saying ‘I’m expensive’” (Barbarin 2019, p. 113), The interview Barbarian describes is both a nightmare and the lived reality of many disabled folks: the interviewer being visibly shocked upon seeing her, the *motivational* poster on the wall reading “The only disability in life is a bad attitude,” and the interviewer condescendingly responding “good for you” to her accomplishments.

A full range of the material realities of disability, often the result of ableist norms, is on display through the hashtag #TheCostOfBeingDisabled, which was also created by Barbarin and shares its name with her article. The hashtag captures several stories by disabled folks who have paid dearly because of oppressive ableist norms, but in voicing what was *lost*, it also makes clear the social expectations that disabled people transgress. Disabled folks shared stories of losing



Figure 5: A #TheCostOfBeingDisabled tweet by @Aoiferocksitout.



Figure 6: A #TheCostOfBeingDisabled tweet by @AddyPottle.



Figure 7: A #TheCostOfBeingDisabled tweet by @SFdirewolf.

employment opportunities, being unable to have monetary savings because of how disability income regulations are structured, and having friends and loved ones abandon them because they couldn't meet social expectations.

These moments, these snapshots of the lives of disabled folks demonstrate crip transgressions against ableist culture, the social spaces that exclude certain bodyminds. In short, these tweets highlight the policies and attitudes that are disabling.

In trying to further understand the role of the body in rhetorical tradition, Dolmage turns to the mythology of Hephaestus:

a Greek god who embodied *metis*, the cunning intelligence needed to act in a world of chance [. . .] His body was celebrated, not despite his body, but because of his embodied intelligence. Hephaestus story has been neglected, but we can now read it as a challenge to stories that reinscribe normative ideas about rhetorical facility and about which bodies matter. (2014, p. 151)

While the lives and experiences of disabled folks have certainly been neglected, even ignored, I argue that the embodied intelligence of crip comfort as a specific form of *metis* serves to normative ideas and ableist ideologies. The rhetorical navigation disabled folks master to “get away with” having bodyminds “like *that*” in public productively disrupts notions what is *professional* and which bodyminds can be and have been considered professional. From implicit dress codes to interview ethics to how campus visits are conducted, crip comfort challenges ableist attitudes both within and outside of higher education.

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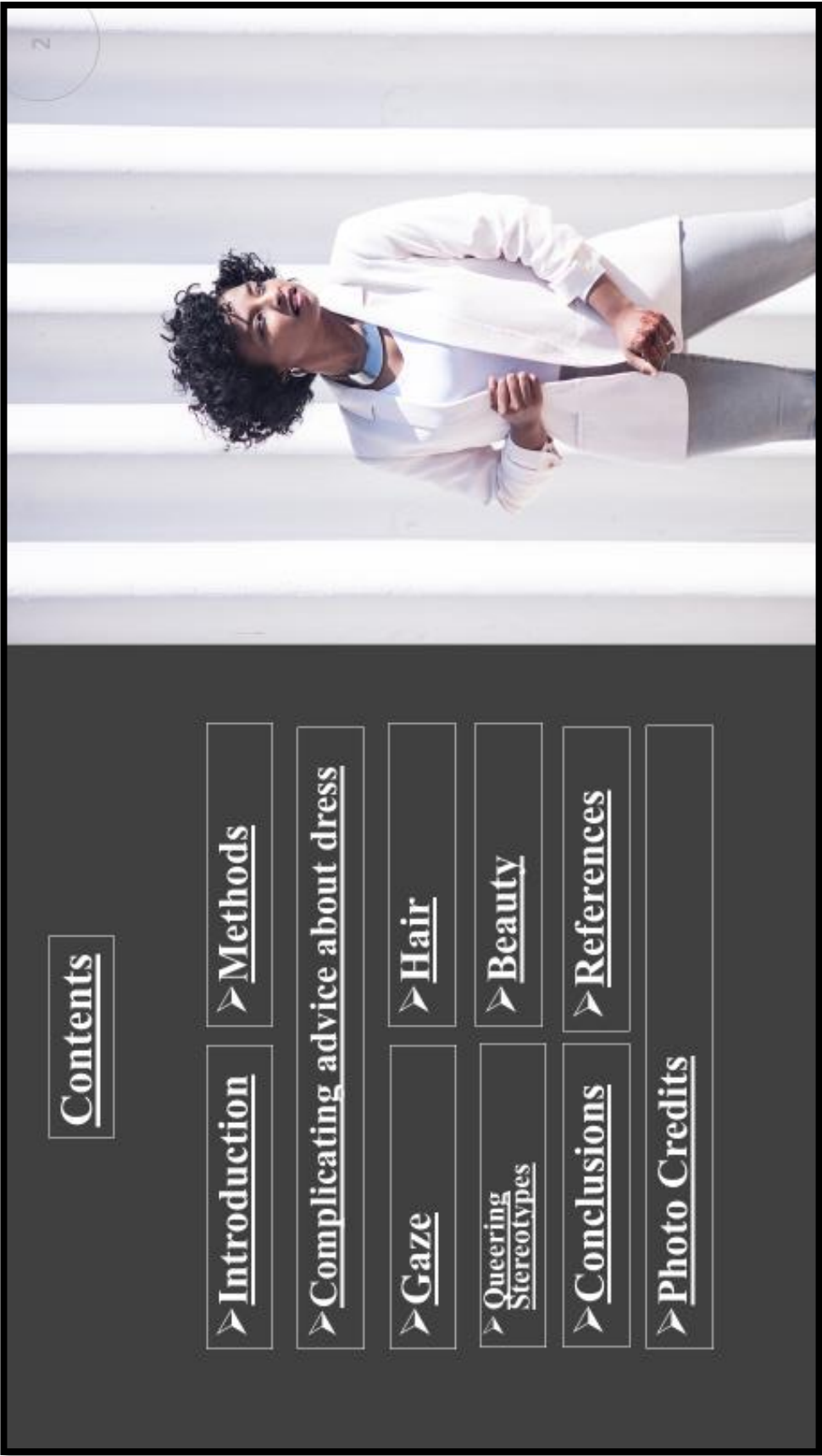
On the Defensive or Deliberately Dazzling

Black Women Professors' Performative Body Rhetorics of Success (slides)¹

Michelle Grue, University of California, Santa Barbara



¹ Subsequent slides rendered vertically for readability.



Introduction

The marginalization and isolation of women of color in the academy is a well-documented phenomenon (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Goodburn, LeCourt, & Leverenz; 2012; Muhs, Niemann, Gonzales, & Harris; 2012). Persisting through an academic career often leads women of color to engage in thoughtful bodily performances. They frequently consider how they are perceived in multiple parts of their academic career (Butler, 1988; Foucault, 2012; Logan, 2006), from conference presentations (McGee & Kazembe, 2016) to the classroom (Saavedra, 2006). Of course, White women professors also must make rhetorical decisions about dress.

However, the stakes are higher for Black women, who already operate in marginalized spaces in academia (Collins, 1990). Further, in the field of writing, rhetoric, and composition, White women make up the majority of faculty (Ballif, Davis, & Mountford, 2008) and have more advice available to them that was cultivated by people who look like them (Ballif et al., 2008). Black professors in particular are aware of the surveilling White gaze, which consciously and subconsciously critiques Black bodies (Foucault, 2012; Logan, 2004; McGee & Kazembe, 2016; Nunley, 2004).

In order to better serve and represent Black women in the academy, I argue that it is necessary to expand the literature on academic dress practices that other scholars have already discussed (Ballif et al., 2008; Cooper, Morris, & Boylorn, 2017; Johnson, Levy, Manthey, & Novotny, 2015; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Introduction

As one step in that direction, this article draws from a completed, larger study of four Black women in academia, who represent different career stages and universities, sexual orientations, and regions. In particular, clothing and natural hair, particularly locs (aka dreadlocks), were heavily discussed, followed by beauty and the tensions surrounding their decisions.

To bring to life the variety of ways the participants wear and think about their clothing, hair, and beauty ideals, this article takes the form of an interactive photo essay, in which images that represent key frameworks, thematics, and findings can be clicked by the reader to learn more about the specific topic. Clips from the interviews are imbedded where appropriate and with permission. It is designed such that each section following this introduction interrelates to other areas but could be read out of order without affecting comprehension.

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Methods

The research displayed herein is part of a larger study on Black women's rhetorics of success. Qualitative inquiry was used to answer this study's questions through a phenomenological approach utilizing:

- Black women's rhetoric (Kynard, 2016; Logan, 2004; Royster, 2000; and Smitherman, 1977)
- Black feminist methodological approaches
 - intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016).
 - womanism (Walker, 2011).
 - the importance of identity and the revolutionary work that identity exploration can be (Collins, 1986; Lorde, 2007).
 - and liberatory writing, activism, and pedagogy (hooks, 1994).

The data used in this study is a set of semi-structured interviews (n=4).

The women selected for this study meet traditional definitions of academic success as tenured, well-published, and both nationally and internationally regarded scholars in their field, yet they also expand on this definition through their physical and digital public work that furthers their academic profile while also bringing attention to the needs of the Black community.

Approval for conducting human subjects research was obtained before conducting the interviews, which took place in the United States. Pseudonyms are used below to protect the anonymity of participants. To allow for flexibility, probing questions (Murphy, 1980) and a joint construction of meaning (Mishler, 1986), one researcher, also a Black woman, conducted all the interviews. If you would like to know more details about the methodological process, please contact the author at michellengrue@gmail.com

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Complicating advice from White women

Women's ways of making it (Ballif et al., 2008), a seminal text in the field of writing, rhetoric, and composition, begins with an illustration of the perception of a woman's bodily performance of professionalism, anchored by the clothes she wore that made the authors of that text admire a woman who "seemed to have 'it'... she was always impeccably dressed, impeccably prepared for the seminars she taught, impeccably articulate, impeccably published... impeccably *professional* [italics original]" (Ballif et al., 2008, p. vii).

The performance of success was multi-pronged: publications, fluent academic language, excellence in teaching, and an reproachable wardrobe. However, a successful bodily performance of professionalism does not stop at superficial things like the "skirts, slacks, suites, sweaters" (Ballif et al., 2008, p. vii) that the authors found in their academic idol's closet. Rather, it includes bodily performing the tasks necessary for academic success, wrapped in the trappings of professional clothing, worn by a professional. Further, it includes all the private prep work to engage in those public performances, the closet full of clothing "all neatly hung and categorized" (Ballif et al., 2008, p. vii).


The
advice
from
*Women's
ways*

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Complicating advice from White women



Motherhood

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Clothing and motherhood

“I was also at this very high position, it took a lot of time, and so I adopted this rule that I would never do anything myself that would take time away from my kids, that I could pay someone to do, provided I could afford it. So, I had someone cooking for me and cleaning for me and you know, and I had someone picking out my clothes.

And it turns out, when you have someone picking out your clothes who really loved clothes and loved to shop, they're really good at it! And so, once you get used to that whole thing, it just takes on a life, at this point, it's kind of on autopilot. Like, I don't, I go shopping once a year at Nordstrom's and my person picks out my clothes and I, you know, it's actually pretty cost-effective, too.”

-Dr. Tamora



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Clothing and confidence

“I find that you are, or at least I find it for myself, to be much more effective presenting when you have great clothes, that fit. Sometimes it’s as simple as having a good bra, which changes your posture and changing your posture makes you approach things differently.”

-Dr. Tamara

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Dressing my best is ethnic

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I don't know how to describe how I dress. It's sort of some version of bohemian academic something. But I strive for comfort over style. And if the comfort has style in it, all the better, but I guess what I try to communicate, either consciously or unconsciously, is that it's okay to be comfortable in your body.

-Dr. Evelyn

The clothing advice in *Women's ways* (Ballif et al., 2008) runs contrary to this advice, specifically around wearing 'ethnic' clothing that may or may not have fringe. While Dr. Evelyn feels confident enough as a rhetor to send the message that her comfort and health matter more than the potential discomfort of and backlash from predominately White audiences, not all the participants feel similarly.

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I dress my best (because of pressure)

Dr. Veronica represents the Black woman academic who does not feel free to wear comfortable styles, like those in McGee and Kazembe's (2016) study.

I can't do what many of my white male and some female counterparts do, I don't wear jeans, I don't even wear jeans to work, not even on non-teaching days. I don't. I always try to dress my best when I'm on campus.

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Advice from/for white women

In the field of rhetoric and composition studies, one of the most significant pieces about how women navigate academia is *Women's ways of making it in rhetoric and composition* (Ballif et al., 2008). Despite claiming to speak for "women" in rhetoric and composition, Ballif et al. spent little time in the main text discussing the institutional and structural racism that they briefly acknowledge in their introduction.

The methodological overview reveals one potential reason for Ballif et al.'s (2008) limited discussions of race: professors from non-white racial backgrounds are not well-represented in the surveys (sent only to professors at PhD granting institutions) on which the authors base much of their book. Out of 142 survey participants, 131 self-identified as "Caucasian, non-Hispanic," 3 identified themselves as "Native American," 4 as "Caucasian, Hispanic," 1 as "Bi/Multi Racial," and 3 as "Other" (Ballif et al., 2008, 7). In their own words, "not one respondent identified her race as 'African American'" (Ballif et al., 2008, 7).

Contents **Complicating advice**

Clothing Advice from Women's ways

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Categories	Advice
For an interview	<p>"Probably not in gray trousers and a white shirt, nor in the equivalent of a tailored 'power-suit,' both of which could make her appear too ball busting, too scary, too 'manly'. But not in anything too soft or 'feminine' either, as that could make her appear too weak, too unprofessional, too 'girly'." (p. 33)</p> <p>"Aim for a look that's stylish but conservative. Wear a fashionable business suit in a low-key color, a minimum of jewelry, simple accessories and low-heeled pumps" (p. 33).</p>
For a conference	<p>"The best clothes for a professional woman to wear to a big-time academic conference are dresses or skirts that no one will notice or remember: not too tight, not too short, not too colorful" (p. 34)</p> <p>"A mature woman should avoid looking 'frumpy' at all costs; she should instead go for an 'earthy, ethnic, or elegant' look" (p. 34)</p> <p>"understated elegance can be valuable" (p. 34)</p> <p>"miniskirts are always incorrect...pants can be risky for conservative schools...dressing as a Wall Street Banker...will seem too powerful" (p. 34)</p> <p>"Ms. Mentor retains some skepticism about 'earthy' and 'ethnic', especially if 'ethnic' means turbans and swirling fringe" (p. 34)</p> <p>"colorful scarves are tasteful and welcome accessories" (p. 34)</p>



Gaze



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Gaze: a quick look at the literature

The pressure to dress a particular way in a professional setting is hardly one only felt by Black women. However, the surveilling White gaze, employed by both men and women, has multiple layers and the impact is multiplied (Saavedra, 2016). According to McGee and Kazembe's (2016) research on 33 Black presenters at an academic conference, bodily critiques received after 'presenting while black' were based on: "demeanor, dress, mannerisms, and behaviors...[and] assumptions about the presenter's personality [as well as] energy level, appearance, poise and posture, authenticity" (McGee & Kazembe, 2016, p. 109). These presenters shared strategies they use for coping with racialized bias, which include: intentional choice to use humor or not, being "purposefully pleasant and upbeat" (p. 110), and "making white audience members comfortable" (p. 110). Three out of four of my participants expressed using similar techniques. Audience member critiques also included commentary about clothing being too tight or revealing, which is one Saavedra (2016) notes reflects a history of attempting to separate the sexual or sensual from teachers' bodies. It also connects to the history of racialized gender stereotypes around Black women, which paint them as either hypersexualized Jezebels, angry Sapphires, or sexless mothering Mammies (Harris-Perry, 2011; Satchel, 2016).

Wearing Afro-centric clothing also led to presentation disruptions. Strategies for handling these critiques sometimes included assimilating in dress, much like 19th century Black orators did (Logan, 2004). Black public figures have struggled with this tension for centuries. White/Western clothing, like a tailored business suit with glasses, received no detractions from audience members, then or now. Participants (McGee & Kazembe, 2016) considered changing outfits like this a sign of assimilation that ran counter to their views, but led to better reception and funding opportunities. Black women made other sacrifices, including straightening their hair, wearing significantly lighter makeup to appear fairer, and shopping at predominately White stores, in the hope that they would be more readily accepted (McGee & Kazembe, 2016). White women's conflicting advice further confuses the issue. Some senior scholars say wearing ethnic clothing is fine, others say it is not, and the presumption of telling someone they can or cannot wear clothing that reflects their own culture is never mentioned (Ballif et al., 2008).

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Clothing Advice from Women's ways

Remember, this is the advice given to White women, by White women

In the field of rhetoric and composition studies, one of the most significant pieces about how women navigate academia is *Women's ways of making it in rhetoric and composition* (Ballif et al., 2008). Despite claiming to speak for "women" in rhetoric and composition, Ballif et al. spent little time in the main text discussing the institutional and structural racism that they briefly acknowledge in their introduction.

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Hair

Some Black women wear their hair straightened or in weaves that match White expectations of beauty and professionalism, evoking the politics of respectability (Harris-Perry, 2011; White, 2001) and assimilation (McGee & Kazembe, 2015; Saavedra, 2006) that are frequently necessary to be viewed as 'professional' women. Others wear these styles because of ease and genuine enjoyment.

Braids of widely variant styles are also common to the Black community. Unsurprisingly, the women in this study wear their hair differently, though most in a type of natural style. Two women wear dreadlocks, also known as locs or dreds. The other two women wear their hair in natural curls of different textures.

Academics need to become more familiar with these types of styles so they can understand that they are, indeed, professional. Black women should not need to make decisions about their hair based on critiques of colleagues about the unsuitability of their natural hair or protective styles (McGee & Kazembe, 2016). If seeing a Black woman's hairstyle makes a non-Black scholar uncomfortable, critical, or overly fascinates them, introspection is needed on the part of that scholar, not the Black woman.

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Locs (aka dreadlocks aka dreads)

Dr. Veronica: "...in graduate school, I decided to lock my hair and it was a difficult decision. I had been straightening my hair so the only way to go from straightened and you know chemically straightened hair to natural hair is by cutting off the chemically straightened hair. You can't grow your own hair out and just transform it somehow. Still um, so I found that I don't look very good with short hair (chuckles) I didn't like how I looked. That made me turn even more inward um but by the end of graduate school you know I had pretty decent looking locks. They weren't great, they weren't long, but they were obviously locks, and not whatever else was going on with my head" - because Dr. Veronica decided to loc her hair in part because of a few friends' suggestions, she considers this an outwardly influenced decision.

For Dr. Evelyn, the decision to maintain her locs is about having stability: "I think um, the fact that I've had dreads for over twenty years or so, something like that, close to twenty, if not more, I don't know. I've had dreads for a long time. And they come and they go in popularity. And right now um, I see so many of the young women, Black women in particular, on campus who um, are not wearing their hair in natural styles. Although a lot are, so we really are a compendium, but I think for me at least, maintaining a natural look is um, important. Um, it gives me personally a stabilizing point for who I am and what I am about."



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“Doing” hair, even when it is ‘natural’

Dr. Tamara “does” her hair by experimenting with different styles, from updos to different ways of wearing her natural curls. Other common ways Black women do their hair include weaves and braids. These styles are still considered natural by some, because they can protect the hair from weather and are not chemical treatments. There is some disagreement in the Black natural hair community about whether these styles are considered “natural” but many Black women prefer them because they allow them to style their hair in what is considered more professional styles without chemically altering their hair (Gill, 2015).

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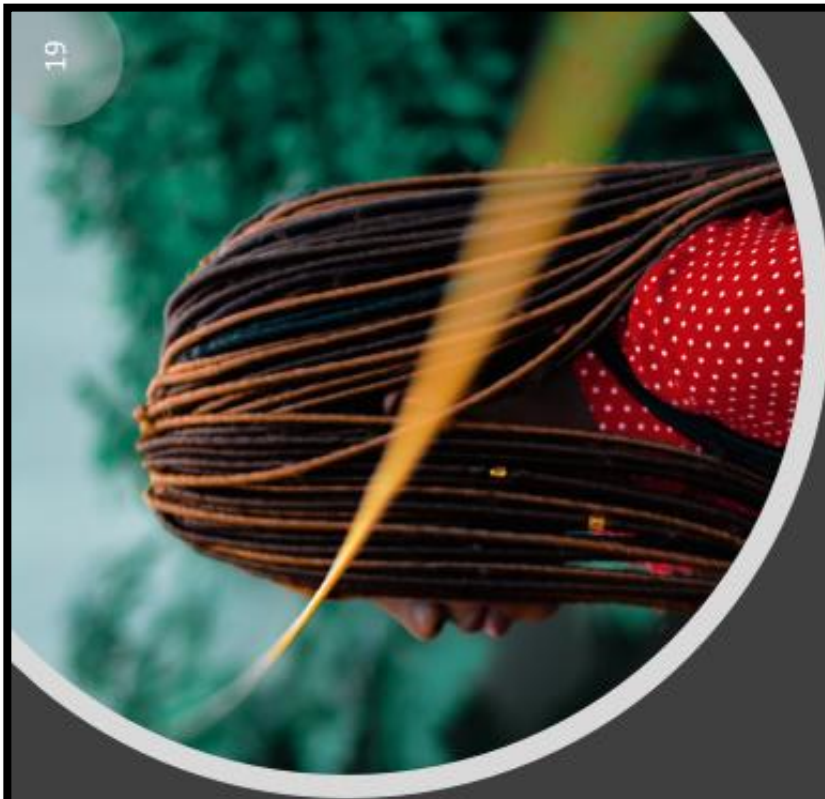
Beauty: two reflections

“When I grew up in Queens, and I remember seeing on Jamaica Avenue or something, a Black, Muslim woman. I know she had flowy clothing on and she also had a pearl in her nose, and I thought that was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen and when I grow up I’m gonna do that. So um wow, it took about 15 years for me to see that and then do it.”

-Dr. Veronica

“You know, um, at the beginning of my career, I did make a decision like I wasn’t going to try. You know, I was one of those people who didn’t wear makeup, and I didn’t shave my legs. You know, I did all of that stuff. It was also exploring the relationship between femininity and having a career. And then I made a decision that I was always going to be dazzling, in every manifestation of that term. I would blind people with science, and I would also have the best clothes. I would be the person that people would be ‘wow’! You know?”

-Dr. Tamara



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Queering the angry Black woman: dress and demeanor

Dr. Tamora uses a similar tact – flipping a stereotype to her advantage – though it looks different in action because of their spheres of academic work. Because Dr. Tamora's work in both law and policing places her in spaces that are pervasively masculine, Dr. Tamora must perform differently than the other participants (Zhanatayeva, Muhambetova, & Saliveva, 2014). The older, funny maternal figure or the humorous aunt performance do not work for her. Instead, she takes on more typically masculine behaviors to protect her racialized female body in an environment that is often not respectful of Blackness or femininity (Zhanatayeva et al., 2014).

So, I do a lot of work with police chiefs and, you know, it's interesting. I will get emails from them, and they're often, they admire the work, but I gotta be real. In that world, full of a lot of masculine men... to be a woman who is attractive, and super smart, who doesn't take any BS, you know. I am well known for not suffering fools.

She owns that to be an attractive, intelligent woman in the physical spaces she navigates, she needs to perform a certain way to protect her body and her intellect, so she can do the work she wants to do. Channeling current Western body and behavior ideals for women, or the humor and mothering roles other participants utilized, would likely have backfired. Instead she subverts both the Jezebel and Sapphire (Harris-Perry, 2011) stereotypes of Black women and uses them for her purposes.

In some ways, it's like queering the angry Black woman. It's like, I'm not getting angry, but I am not, I'm not playing with you, you know? And I'll have my colleagues, my white male colleagues, "Well, I'm scared of Tamora" you know. That's the thing.

Dr. Tamora performs daily as a woman to be feared so she does not have to be a fearful woman in environments where she has few allies. In the classroom, that translates into channeling the governor and CEO types of personas (Gose, 1999), which works well for her as a law professor. The "ball busting" persona that *Women's ways* advises against actually works in her favor.



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Conclusions

This research project began after I read “the book” about succeeding in the field of rhetoric and composition, but not seeing or hearing people who look like me in its pages until the back of the book. *Presumed Incompetent* (Mullis et al., 2012), considered in the web of other scholarship produced by academics on both sides of the pond, establishes the fraught situation for Black and other women of color faculty in the academy (Collins, 2008; Cooper & Stevens, 2002; Gardner, 2008; Grant, 2012; McGee & Kazembe, 2016; Stanley, 2006; Wright et al., 2007). There was no denying that creating an environment of success for Black women faculty would be a challenging and multi-faceted task.

Part of the task of retaining Black faculty is to examine successful Black academics and to share their practices. It was vitally urgent to provide a resource for Black women, by Black women to help not just survive but thrive in the academy. While there were limitations to this study, the results of this small-scale study yielded rich data. Additionally, it served to begin bridging the gaps in the conversations around dress and faculty success currently taking place in the literature. Further, the findings here can be used to help White faculty better serve their Black students and be better supporters of their Black colleagues.

From the beginning of this project, I have promised the participants that I will provide a digital, open access resource of their stories and advice. This multimodal essay marks the first step toward answering that promise. Future publications will include their advice on using Twitter and other digital resources as ways to live out their Black feminism, as well as rhetorically performing success in the physical environment (classrooms, public scholarship, etc.)



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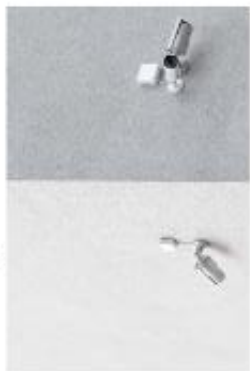


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Trans* Embodiment, Rhetoricity, and That Which Clothes Them¹

Griffin Xander Zimmerman, University of Arizona

I don't know what makes you label my genitals.

And perhaps you feel it inappropriate for me to speak bluntly of genitals, especially here, in a formal and academic context. But that opinion demonstrates your privilege. For my genitals speak for me, over me, in spite of me every day.

I can feel the exact moment you find them. See in your eyes, as they travel over my frame, the naming of them suddenly apparent as I fall neatly into your binary schema. They travel over my hair, cut masculinely and spiked with light blue tips, travel over the collar of my men's button up shirt, perhaps my favorite one that is pale pink with blue sharks traveling side to side, assess how it gathers and bunches over the swell of my full hips and BAM, there it is. Vagina. Glad that's settled. You can move on with your day now.

Hello. My name is Griffin, and I am a whi (woman) te

Non- (female) binary

Mascu (girl) line-presenting

AF (CHICK) AB²

(WOMAN) person.

The observation that our dress practices influence how we move through societal and interpersonal exchanges is hardly a revelation. Clothing as embodied rhetoric, to say nothing of posture, voice, stance, and phatic language, is something each individual scrutinizes as they contemplate whether this pair of pants can be worn with this color shoe, whether this dress exposes too much or just enough, whether I can be taken seriously wearing this tie. But for a newly out, queer, and trans*-identifying³ PhD student and faculty member, my dress choices

¹ Includes essay and video transcript.

² Afab stands for assigned female at birth, a designation for individuals whose sex is female but whose gender and presentation may be incongruous with that designation.

³ Throughout this essay I use trans* in keeping with a practice of acknowledging the myriad identities that can align themselves underneath the trans* umbrella. While this practice is contentious and not

don't fade from consciousness as I exit from in front of the mirror and go about my day. Instead, the rhetoricity of my presentation is a pervasive, daily question of negotiating identity, professionalism, and the practice of taking up space. My rhetorical presence, as Dean Spade (2010) states, is a constantly visceral and unwillingly polemic one that consists of "moments of identity management and discord that are the specific burden of those with tenuous relationships to the purportedly neutral, meritocratic, multicultural, inclusive terrain of white, straight, hetero, cisgender, bourgeois male...academic culture" (p.76). This essay will walk you through those moments.

The goal of this essay is to extend the discourse of embodied rhetoric as trans* identity to those whose identities allow them to exist more or less "in place" in academic environs, to highlight the limitations of academic policies in negotiating this dialectic, and to help create discourse around intersectionality, dress, and judgement in academic contexts. This work is deliberate melange of modalities designed to echo the lived experience of the trans* body in academia from moment to moment. It also deliberately flouts the conventions of composition, breaking the fourth wall to call out its audience and create discomfort in the reading. As Alexander and Rhodes explain, "Queerness exceeds the composed self" (2011, p. 181); just as the rhetoricity of my queered presentation exceeds the bounds of the outfit I put together each morning, so too does my composition reach beyond the conversation and allow the audience to feel the discomfort of never being able to exist unselfconsciously.

When I dress, walk, speak, and gesture, I exist in a state of meta-cognitive awareness of a dialectic that I cannot win; Z Nicolazzo (2016) points out, "those with diverse genders consistently fail to pass as they wish to be seen....[which] has effects on one's life and livelihood, thereby influencing one's level of social risk and vulnerability" (p. 1175). Thus, my body and my dress place me rhetorically betwixt, akin to being clothed in a different genre than that in which my audience is situated.

Alt Text: Griffin stands in front of a mirror holding up a phone to take a selfie. They are wearing a black, patterned, button-up dress shirt rolled up to the elbows, a yellow and



Figure 1: A mirror selfie of the author.

supported universally within the LGBTQ+ community, as a nonbinary individual, I choose to employ the asterisk as a way of signaling my inclusion within a term that is often interpreted to include only those with binary (that is, only male or only female) trans* identities.

grey striped tie, and grey suspenders. They are wearing a bemused and questioning facial expression.

What do you see?

Do you see a man? A woman in men's clothing? Do you read me as a butch? A queer? A professional? A dapper academic?

You may see some of these, or none of these. But do you see me?

If I approached you in the hallway outside my classroom, would you find my appearance distracting? Would you brain wander away from my face, from my hands as they stretch and wave in communication? Would you wonder *what* you were talking to before you engaged *who* you were talking to?

"I don't know. I just, ya know, read her as a *man* still." An individual I know is speaking of my friend, a gender-nonconforming trans* woman. Gender-nonconforming means my friend does not try to hide that she was born a woman with male genitalia; she shows chest hair and unshaven legs in the glorious freedom of her short skirts and semi-transparent blouses; her curly, bobbed hair is clipped neatly away from a face unadorned by makeup from which emits a voice with a decidedly masculine timbre.

In many ways, I am jealous of her honesty, and her courage. I am uncomfortable in any form of feminizing clothing. Being non-binary, for me, means that my gender is comprised of both the masculine and the feminine. I identify with the little girl that was taught to sew, cook, and keep home in preparation for being the perfect 1950's housewife as much as I identify with the man of the household who is the sole provider and fixes the broken faucet or the car when it breaks down. But I have always felt I failed at being a woman. Feminizing clothing makes me feel as if I am in clown makeup, on display to be laughed at for my ineptitude in some sort of hideous, daily forced drag performance. So I dress completely masculine: I shop for my shoes and glasses in the mens' section and get held up by TSA when I travel by air because my female body wears men's boxer briefs. It took me eight months to allow myself to buy anything pink, lest I be misinterpreted. I miss jewelry, very specifically dainty necklaces that make you feel pretty, and I keep telling myself one day I'll be masculinized enough to play with the boundaries between male and female the way my friend does.

It's telling that this individual is speaking to me about my trans* sister. She knows that I, too, am trans*, but it's a knowing that sits at the back of the mind, conveniently forgotten as she gazes at a visage she still interprets as "one of the girls." Despite the button up, the Chucks, the shorts from the men's section of the local Old Navy, she sees my anatomy and hears the feminine in my voice. Her admission lets me know that she's one of the unsafe ones: the people

who will respect my gender to my face but silently name me woman in their thoughts. To her, I'll always be April⁴, no matter what I wear.

Jourian, Simmons, and Devaney (2015) note that “although the literature is still limited in scope, depth, and intersectional analysis....there is virtually nothing examining the lived experiences, identity process, and needs of trans* higher education and student affairs (HESA) educators” (p. 431). Policies that address LGBTQ+ individuals rarely create protections for our freedom of self-expression (what the LGBTQ+ community calls “presentation,” meaning what we look like and how we present ourselves to the world, as separate from our gender). In many instances, when such policies do exist, they address a single factor of our daily existence, most commonly pronouns or gendered facility/restroom access, as if that is all that is needed to make our experiences in higher education comfortable and equal to our peers.

The following photo highlights the brevity of my school’s dress code for employees. There are no departmental guidelines, neither in the PhD handbook or in the department constitution, bylaws, or website.

This policy, adopted in 1988 and revised in 2000, does nothing to assist a trans* educator with making decision as to what are “reasonable standards of dress and appearance” (University of Arizona, 2000, p. 1). While I ostensibly comply with the policy by mimicking the dress of the male employees in my department, the policy does nothing to protect my right to cross



Figure 2: An image from the University of Arizona's dress policy.

⁴ My birth name, or “dead” name. It is considered at best impolite and at worst deliberately hateful in the trans* community to call someone by their birth name without invitation or consent.

enculturated restrictions around gendered dress standards to express my own conceptions of self. Will this policy protect me if a student in my classroom is offended by my choice in dress? Will this policy help my department communicate how inclusion is expressed through the clothing that I wear?

To be clear, I am privileged to work at a public, land grant, R1 university in a department that takes great pride in the diversity of its staff and goes out of its way to create inclusive policies. I have absolutely no fears that I will be a target for my dress practices, and I have been received warmly, if to varying degrees, by the faculty and staff in my department. An excerpt from our writing program policies states

The Department of English engages at all levels the power of words to shape the human condition in its diversity. We educate our students about the many ways that our language organizes our imaginative capacity to understand, respect, care and find common ground with one another across real differences, or else to inhibit those capacities. Whether across lines of nationality, language, history, race, gender, class, sexuality, religion or ability, a reflective encounter in the contact zone of the English classroom fosters basic democratic values such as a sense of justice, civic concern, critical thinking, and an appreciation for diversity. (University of Arizona, 2019, p. 1)

This policy is complimented by one that explicitly protects the rights of individuals to use chosen names and affirmed pronouns, and another that allows me to use any gendered facility of my choosing. But these policies do not help connect language with the rhetoricity of the embodied experience. They do not help me understand how I can adapt to the kairos of the academy by expressing my purpose (to be valued and understood for who I am without constant explanation and negotiation) through the multimodal expression of cloth, leather, plastic button and steel eyelet, to an audience that is largely unaware that my gender even exists. What, I ask, is the genre of trans* identity? How does one embody gender neutrality, or androgyny? And whose fault is it, as I get peppered by the “Here you go, ma’am,” and “she said” ‘s of the day, when I fail to make that rhetorical connection: mine that I fail to emit a recognizable narrative, or that of my audience for failing to pick up on what I am laying down?

Before you silently chide me for lazy writing, these questions are not rhetorical; they are emblematic of my daily thoughts and existence. I wonder, all the time, what it is that makes people see through the clearly masculine dress to the female body underneath. What makes them reject the overt message that I am sending in favor of the somehow more valid tale told by my genitals? I wonder what would happen, the next time someone names me female, if I turn to them and say, “What made you call me that?” But of course, that would be inappropriately polemic of me, wouldn’t it?

For me, I think my voice is the worst part. My first teaching observation of the year ended with the comment, “Well, sometimes your voice is a little too high pitched, but other than that...” And to be honest, I am often misgendered before I ever open my mouth to speak, so I know it isn’t the only thing outing me. But it’s the thing I am most frustrated by right now.

People can overlook how much of our physical bodies, beyond the way we dress, is rhetorical. For instance, when I was younger and still imagined myself teaching in high school, I got my first tattoo. I was very careful, with that tattoo and several subsequent ones, to make sure it was placed on a portion of my body typically covered, so it wouldn't affect my ethos as an educator. In fact, my coming out tattoo is the first I deliberately placed on a visible portion of my body, and I am often confounded by how often people see my rainbow forearms and exclaim how beautiful it is without ever connecting it to my identity as a queer individual.

My voice, my stance, whether I yield for someone walking by or force them to make space...all of these are acts of rhetoric that are continually, subconsciously, engage in a dialogue on my behalf. The decision whether or not to medically transition, to transform our bodies into more normative versions of the gender to which we are born, is often a decision grounded in this discursive exchange. We yearn for our bodies to be recognizable, to shout our existence to the world.

Content warning: The following video contains graphic depictions of female-to-male medical treatment, including injection of testosterone and photos of the chest after double mastectomy. Viewers who are uncomfortable with medical imagery may wish to engage with the video transcript provided.

Video transcript:

"My name is Griffin Xandar Zimmerman, and this is my voice after six months on testosterone. My average vocal average is 184 Hz, which is at the lower edge of the female voice range. When I started testosterone, my voice was as 196 Hz, which, you know, is less progress than I had hoped, but I'll take what I can get." Griffin chuckles. As Griffin is talking, the video depicts Griffin loading a syringe from a bottle of Testosterone. The bottle is held upside down while the medication is drawn into the syringe. When enough medication has been drawn up, Griffin places the bottle down and prepares to inject the medication into their right thigh.

"What made you decide to start Testosterone?" a masculine voice queries.

"Well, you know, it was kind of a complicated and yet simple decision, really. Originally, I didn't plan to go on T. I was desperately focused on getting top surgery, meaning I wanted my breasts removed. I had very large breasts, and in addition to causing constant back pain, they caused me the most dysphoria. I couldn't bind them down flat, so I was stuck with a very visual queue that I had a female body that I couldn't get rid of. I was so excited to get rid of them. I remember, once I had the surgery, I was positive that being flat chested would change the way people see me, ya know? Make it easier for people to see me as more masculine and to use my pronouns." As Griffin speaks, the video cycles through a series of photos. The photos depict Griffin pre-top surgery, standing next to their partner and child. Griffin is wearing a white shirt with whales on it and their breasts are bound underneath their shirt. The next photo shows Griffin right after surgery. Griffin stands without a shirt on and has medical drains attached to their surgical incisions. Their incisions are red and prominent. The third photo shows Griffin smiling, seated in the car, and dressed in a blue button-down shirt with astronauts print, left

open to show a white tshirt underneath. The image demonstrates Griffin's flat chest. The final image shows Griffin goofing off for the camera in a mock strong man pose with arms raised up horizontally, level with shoulders, bent at the elbow, and hands in fists. Griffin's facial expression is a grimacing smile. Griffin is wearing a blue tie-dyed men's tank top with Stitch from Disney's Lilo and Stitch eating an ice cream cone, dark blue long shorts, and blue sandals.

"Then, as I thought more about what my gender meant for me and how I wanted to be perceived in the world, I realized that I did want to go on T after all. About the same time, my last ovary torsed: that is, the ovary twisted around on itself, which resulted in me losing the ovary. So then I really had to go on T, because I wasn't producing my own hormones anymore. The alternative was to go on feminizing hormones, and I definitely did not want to do that." The video resumes with Griffin inserting the needle into their thigh and injecting the testosterone.

As they withdraw the needle, the voice off camera speaks, "Has your medical transition made any difference?"

Griffin looks at the camera. "Unfortunately no, not really. I mean, it wasn't the silver bullet that I'd hoped for. People still see me as female ninety-nine percent of the time. Then again, I am very early in my transition. I know I haven't gotten my T levels to where they should be quite yet, and it can take years before masculinization is fully apparent. So I'm trying to be patient. And to remember that this is for me, not for anyone else. In the end, if I can get to a place where people are confused as to whether to call me sir or ma'am, I'll consider that a win." Griffin smiles broadly, and the video ends.

Fellow scholar and trans* individual Jay McClintock notes

When intents different than our own desires are read onto our bodies, we are both robbed of our agency even as we are described as agents acting out and thus justifying our destruction....I would argue that whenever the intent of gender nonconforming bodies is rejected, intentionally misread, or called disruptive, it is a demi-rhetorical practice. Embodying demi-rhetorical practices both expands the range of imagination for what counts as rhetorical, intentional, and willful, while at the same time demi-rhetorical practices can put us in danger for disrupting normative social spaces. (2019)

I mull this over as I try to put a bookend on this deliberately convoluted essay. I remember how, when the individual told me they saw her as male, I simply smiled uncomfortably, not secure enough in my own trans*-ness and position to argue on behalf of my friend. Jay and I recently spoke about how hard it is to keep going, day after day, projecting our trans* narratives and identities into a world that is at best unable to accommodate them and at worst deliberately, dangerously rejecting of them.

I am learning to lean into my embodied identity, regardless of people's deliberate rejection or misinterpretation of it. I've discovered a love for dandy butch fashion and a yearning for a more deliberately visible persona. I've begun shopping for dress shirts that are nice enough to have tailored to fit my unique body, this male-female mélange, and am even laughing as I admit to sewing my own geeky bowties. I am learning to hide less, struggle to pass less, embrace more.

It is easy to forget, when I get frustrated, that I have a great deal of privilege, as a white academic, and will be gaining more the more people begin to perceive me as male. As Eli Clare eloquently states

In another world at another time, I would have grown up neither boy nor girl but something entirely different. In English there are no good words, no easy words. All the language we have created—transgender, transsexual, drag queen, drag king, stone butch, high femme, nellie, fairy, bulldyke, he-she, FTM, MTF—places us in relationship to masculine or feminine, between the two, combining the two, moving from one to the other. I'm hungry for an image to describe my gendered self, something more than the shadowland of neither man nor woman, more than a suspension bridge tethered between negatives (2003, p. 260).

I am desperate for this other world, for a world that accepts the possibilities in my embodiment with the same nonchalance as it accepts my aging academic mentor in his tribly hat and patched elbow sportscoat. And yet.

And yet I stand in front of my departing students, packing up my bag, when one of them shyly approaches me. “Griffin? I just wanted to say thank you, you know, for asking our pronouns. It’s so nice to be in a class that makes space for trans* folx. My boyfriend is trans*, and he was so excited when he heard my instructor was trans* too.” I smile and thank my student, protesting that I didn’t do anything much. Later I give a presentation that attempts to complicate people’s perceptions of what it means to be gender-inclusive in the composition classroom. When I caution that many students may be unwilling to give their pronouns in front of the entire class on the first day, one of our gay faculty members speaks up. “I don’t know about you, but I love walking into a room and saying Hi, I’m here, and I’m queer!!” It reminds me that, even within our own community, we have drastically different experiences, and drastically different expectations. For myself, as a nonbinary individual, I feel unseen, while not sure if I want to be seen, while frustrated that I can’t accomplish being seen on my own terms. But I will keep flexing my rhetoric, dressing my queer body in clothing that confounds boundaries, taking up space in the way I force individuals to consider my clothed form before they can sort me into one category or another, challenging and emboldening and dismantling normativity, one button-up shirt at a time.

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Teaching Conventions, Teaching Critique

A Subtly Subversive Dress Code Assignment in a Professional Writing Class

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Although critiques of professional dress codes regularly expose injustices towards US workers along racist, sizeist, ableist, Islamophobic, and other lines, when I introduced the dress code as a workplace practice and document in a Professional Writing course, students were resistant to the idea that truly willing workers would critique or challenge an unfair dress code. In exploring the politics surrounding dress codes and accommodations for workers, I have found that, despite cultural claims that millennials have "killed the dress code," many traditional-aged students today are willing to toe any line, the least of which may be a dress code, at the expense of their own personal comfort and feelings to achieve their career goals. While that reflects an admirable work ethic on the part of students, it also motivated me to ask students to use rhetorical principles to understand, critique, and create dress codes in service of helping them hone professional skills such as critical thinking and written communication, which are among the goals of this general education Professional Writing class.

Since examples of workplace discrimination currently abound in the news -- for instance, in regards to trans people's bathroom use as well as "acceptable" gendered clothing—attention to the complicated politics surrounding dress codes forms the first half of the dress code assignment. Students learn of the conversation around workplace discrimination by studying examples of resistance and comparing them to accommodations listed in the Equal Opportunity Employment Act. The second part of the assignment is to actually create dress codes. Here, the assignment foregrounds rhetorical concepts such as purpose and context, orienting students away from deeming articles of clothing and, by extension, people and bodies, "in/appropriate." Considering the relationship between dress practices and rhetoric, this essay offers an explanation of how I attend to the twin goals of creating professional documents and resisting hegemonic dress practices when I teach the dress code as a multimodal rhetorical project.

Approaches to Dress in Rhetoric, Then and Now

One vein of scholarship on dress practices is historical, centered on the dress practices of women in various rhetorical circumstances as an empowering tool for gaining attention or to enhance their rhetorical prowess. For instance, Carol Mattingly's (1999) explanation of how 19th

century American women speakers used dress practices “as a means of resistance because women speakers often recognized that their dress discourse might discipline [in the Foucauldian sense] what and how their audience heard” (p. 25).

On the one hand, the radical dress of Frances Wright, who had short hair and wore harem-style “trousers,” was often taken less seriously or looked upon negatively, even by other women who supported her cause of antislavery (p. 32). On the other hand, women like Lucretia Mott, who wore the traditional and modest dress of Quaker women, were highly regarded. Upon seeing Mott in her Quaker garb, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote that Mott was “an entire new revelation of womanhood” (Stanton cited in Mattingly p. 33). As another example, even though they left the Society of Friends, sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimke continued to wear Quaker garb because it offered them a “measure of protection from and credibility with audiences” (p. 40).

Attending to a different era, I (White-Farnham, 2014) have also argued that a female public figure, a state senator from Massachusetts who served between the 1960s and 1980s, used dress practices in rhetorically purposeful ways. In the mid-20th century, Mary “The Hat” Fonseca exaggerated her feminine persona by wearing elaborate hats (long after they were stylish, into the 1980s) and distinguished herself from her majority-male colleagues. As a wife and mother, Fonseca emphasized that she did not have a full-time job other than as a homemaker, while, of course, her male colleagues in the state senate were also lawyers or businessmen. A 1952 campaign slogan of Fonseca’s hits her point home: Your *fulltime* state senator (White-Farnham, 2014, p. 173, emphasis added).

In these historical cases, women played into traditional and mostly conservative views of women’s roles as humble and homebound to advance their political agendas, a move that may be seen as a measure of expedience for longer-term political gain (that is true for both the abolitionists and Fonseca, who had an excellent legislative record). Today, such rhetorical moves may perhaps be less prized than overtly feminist approaches to embodied rhetorics, or the understanding that “all bodies do rhetoric through texture, shape, color consistency, movement, and function [which] encourages a methodological approach that addresses the reflexive acknowledgement of the researcher from feminist traditions and conveys an awareness or consciousness about how bodies -- our own and others’ figure in our work” (Johnson et al, 2015, p. 39).

Through a stance of embodiment in rhetorical work, scholars such as Katie Manthey, this issue’s guest editor, is more attuned to using dress as a constituent part of a rhetorical message of resistance and change. For instance, Manthey calls attention to and counteracts definitional assumptions about professionalism with her public activist project, “Dress Profesh.” Similar projects with the goal of expanding the assumed identities, genders, shapes, and dress practices of people of several professions have also recently emerged on social media, such as #ilooklikeanengineer, #ilooklikeaprofessor, and the tumblr site “This is What a Scientist Looks Like.”

Projects such as these dovetail with what Kristie Fleckenstein (2001) has called “biorhetoric,” or how bodies and language are inextricably intertwined in ways that rhetoricians should

acknowledge, especially in the effort to have students critique the world around them and produce arguments to make change. Fleckenstein writes: “Such a linguistic orientation [acknowledging the both/and relationship between the linguistic and the material] offers students the opportunity to disentangle the ways in which discourse writes them, constrains their identities, and limits their opportunities for growth. Simultaneously, this perspective offers them the means to rewrite those identities” (p. 765). Grounded in a Foucauldian biopolitics, Fleckenstein’s claims about the body do not neglect dress when she writes: “the insight that the material details of life – such as what we wear, how we sit, and where we eat – all conspire to maintain the dominance of a particular discursive arrangement of culture” (p. 770).

This frame suits the work of Manthey and other dress-practice activists on the internet because the arguments they make to expand understandings of their professions rest on their understanding of the material details – namely, bodies and dress. The multimodal affordances of social media – a 21st century blend of the discursive and the material/visual -- sharpen Fleckenstein’s point about the necessary togetherness of the discursive and the material/visual in critiquing and changing the dominance of a “particular discursive arrangement of culture.” In other words, multimodal rhetoric adds a specificity to the argument that women, women of color, women in dresses, women in scrubs, women in hardhats, etc. not only *exist* in certain professional spheres – in fact, their material presence *comprises* them. These rhetorical takes on bodies, biorhetoric, and embodiment inspire the dress code assignment; I teach from the position that bodies are always already part of a rhetorical situation and in the particular rhetorical situation that asks a person to write *about* bodies, the writer must purposefully recognize and counter any assumptions of a neutral or normal body or dress practice.

Dress Code, Part I: Critique

Foucauldian biopolitics offer the theoretical basis upon which I ask students to begin to recognize their assumptions in regards to bodies and rhetoric. We start with the dramatic yet accessible introduction to *Discipline and Punish* in which Foucault compares public execution with a prison timetable. His purpose is to note the swiftness of Enlightenment-era changes in conceptions of punishment from torture to penitence, as well as to focus attention on how documents made agreements for the way people will proceed: “how important is such a change [away from medieval methods of torture], when compared with the great institutional transformations, the formulation of explicit, general codes and unified rules of procedure” (p. 7).

Foucault’s point is not a straightforward one; of course, he complicates what seems to be an improvement in society (the decline of torture) by illustrating the inhumanity of other types of control over humans, even in a “civil,” documentary society. Yet, the idea that documents become central to ordering bodies is laid down for examination. To bridge this theory with a contemporary example, I also share a case study regarding two protests made by a group called Fund for Animals in Pennsylvania in the 1990s. Courtney Dillard (2002) studied the methods of this activist group, which used civil disobedience to protest a live pigeon shoot. In 1994, the

group considered their protest a failure, as it attracted negative attention, and the media portrayed its members as angry and dangerous (p. 52). After reflecting and strategizing, the group created a code of conduct emphasizing principles of civil disobedience such as focusing their attention on the wounded pigeons rather than shouting at shoot participants, which won their group positive attention in 1996 and which eventually helped end the shoot in 1999 (p. 60).

Considering how codes order behavior, we turn to dress codes themselves. In the rural area where I teach Professional Writing, students do not have much experience with professional dress codes, although, occasionally, students remark on how a middle or high school dress code has been debated in their towns as being too focused on girls, a common problem with school dress codes. However, students share their experiences with wearing uniforms in their jobs at grocery stores, restaurants, or on sports teams. Students often advocate for the dress code, citing their usefulness in looking professional and keeping people free from distraction.

To offer multiple points of view on dress codes, I present some examples of public critiques. One is the case of the US Army's changes in rules around black women's hairstyles. Helene Cooper's 2014 *New York Times* article reported that the Army banned twist styles in favor of cornrows, chemical straightening, weaves, and/or wigs, hairstyles well-known for creating hardships on black women soldiers in the field in terms of time, cost, and hair health. The change came after a period of looser restrictions on personal appearance for all soldiers at the peak of enrollment in Iraq and Afghanistan (para. 4). Cooper cites Loren B. Thompson to explain the looser restrictions: "There's a tendency during wartime to permit personal styles and variations in approach simply because more important things are at stake than how your hair looks or what tattoo is on your arm," (para. 7). Once the Army began to draw down forces, bans on various personal styles (such as twists and visible tattoos) were reinstated. Public criticism and a request by the women of the Congressional Black Caucus to reconsider the standards were eventually heeded, and in 2017, both twists and dreadlocks of certain dimensions were allowed (Mele, 2017, para. 6).

Discussions by students of the US Army's flip-flop decision around black women's hair usually center around two main arguments: that soldiers should follow the rules no matter what or that, to be truly fair to all, all soldiers should have to shave their heads. These arguments perhaps reflect a preference on the students' part to avoid claims of inequity in the workplace. However, in an effort to teach how one might approach such a topic in a professional setting and not to ignore it, we turn to the Equal Opportunity Employment Act (EOEA), which explains what constitutes discrimination at workplaces, including rules for dress codes. The law lists the types of accommodations employers must make in regards to categories of people who most often face discrimination in the workplace, including pregnant women or people of minority religious groups. Accommodations around dress practices mainly concern religious discrimination, and the EOEA website and lay-language offer clear examples:

Unless it would be an undue hardship on the employer's operation of its business, an employer must reasonably accommodate an employee's religious beliefs or practices. This applies not only to schedule changes or leave for religious observances, but also to

such things as dress or grooming practices that an employee has for religious reasons. These might include, for example, wearing particular head coverings or other religious dress (such as a Jewish yarmulke or a Muslim headscarf), or wearing certain hairstyles or facial hair (such as Rastafarian dreadlocks or Sikh uncut hair and beard). It also includes an employee's observance of a religious prohibition against wearing certain garments (such as pants or miniskirts). (para. 10)

Closely linked are accommodations for people who would experience what is known as disparate impact, or the effects of a policy that does not discriminate on the surface, but which negatively and unfairly impacts only one group: "For example, a "no-beard" employment policy that applies to all workers without regard to race may still be unlawful if it is not job-related and has a negative impact on the employment of African-American men (who have a predisposition to a skin condition that causes severe shaving bumps)" (para. 8).

Another recent high-profile example illuminates disparate impact. In the 2005-6 season, the NBA instituted an off-court dress code that banned items such as chains and pendants, headwear, and team jerseys (of other teams). These changes affected mainly black players who dressed in the hip-hop style. In their study of this dress code and its attendant criticism, Stacy L. Lorenz and Rod Murray (2014) noted that "According to the NBA, the dress code was not about battling Blackness, it was simply about bringing 'professionalism' (Lage, 2005; Smith, 2005) back into basketball in order to rehabilitate a league image that had gone too far in its embrace of hip-hop culture" (p. 24). Given the public backlash at the disparate impact, the dress code was not renewed in following seasons.

These examples prompt important questions in regards to workplace dress codes: is the dress code truly job-related? And, does it belie a certain value or assumption on the part of its writers, unconsciously or not? These questions are the jumping off point for the second half of the assignment: to produce a dress code for a professional context.

Dress Code, Part II: Creation

Creation of dress codes follows from the discussions of rhetoric, bodies, control, and resistance. The assignment asks students to create their own professional dress codes that are focused on purpose and context of a certain type of job or professional context. Popular professional contexts that students choose reflect the majors at our university, small businesses such as day care centers and golf courses, as well as the K-12 school setting.

The assignment calls for two documents: the first is the dress code itself, a policy document that is modeled on samples provided by the Society for Human Resources Management and which emphasizes the policy's professional rationale, accommodations, and avoidance of disparate impact. And, the second is a visual illustration of the policy, a multimodal document using graphics, photos, and other design elements to illustrate the policy. The two documents are meant to work together to clarify and deliver the spirit and the letter of the policy, distinguishing the rationale and values from specific items of clothing. While items of clothing are of course important, these types of lists can turn problematic pretty quickly.

Therefore, the idea is for students to shift their perception of dress codes from simple rules for workers to a rhetorical act of policing bodies with all the attendant politics previously discussed above. When writers make that shift, the multimodal and visual nature of the second document supports well their efforts to depict a body-policing policy that also considers people's bodily and material realities with care. This section will share examples created in Fall 2018 by students Cassie and Niharika, who gave me permission to include their projects in this article. I chose Cassie's and Niharika's dress codes and graphic illustrations because they exemplify the concerns of embodied rhetoric and the politics of dress practices in a practical writing situation.

Professional Rationale

Cassie's dress code is inspired by her real-life job as a driving instructor. There, her own personal style had clashed with unwritten expectations at her job since there was no policy against facial piercings, but she had been reprimanded for having one. She changes that rule in her own policy in order to rectify the problem of unwritten rules and to emphasize the purpose of the dress code, which, in the context of driving, is mainly safety. Therefore, her written policy contains the professional rationale for the dress code (emphasis added):

All instructors will be expected to wear business casual attire with shoes that are appropriate for driving. Business casual includes jeans or dress pants, a sweater, polo shirt, or blouse, and shoes that are secured to the foot such as sneakers or boots. No pants with holes or skirts are allowed. No low cut shirts or belly shirts. No flip flops or high heels. ***Instructors must be able to move freely in order to demonstrate driving maneuvers for students.*** Instructors will be required to wear name tags, however instructors can decorate their name tags as they please so long as their name is legible. Tattoos do not need to be covered unless they may be considered offensive. Ear and facial piercings do not need to be removed unless the piercings become a distraction. If any instructors are unable to abide by this dress code due to a disability or religious beliefs, reasonable accommodations will be made.

This paragraph also provides insight into how many students perceive dress codes: as a list of Nos that over-represent what are often mainly women's clothing, such as belly shirts and high heels. To me, Cassie's dress code exemplifies the difficulty in attending to body politics while trying to police bodies; these tendencies are nearly mutually-exclusive. In the next section, attempts to strike this balance are explained further.

Accommodations and Avoiding Disparate Impact

In the above example, Cassie includes a final sentence on accommodations similar to what is suggested by the Equal Opportunity Employment Act to accommodate those who may be disenfranchised by her dress code based on disability or religion. This example does not provide much nuance, but Cassie is acknowledging that her ban on skirts may disenfranchise women who wear modest religious dress. The inclusion of this statement is the result of carefully considered reasons why skirts might be more dangerous in fast-breaking situations, but Cassie conceded that a ban on them would disproportionately impact women of certain religious minorities and are not an employment deal-breaker.

In a more explicit take on accommodations, Niharika's dress code for a veterinary clinic offers an entire section devoted to explaining them:

Accommodations

1. Disabilities and Religious Beliefs

The Clinic recognizes the need for accommodation for people with disabilities and for religious beliefs. There will be reasonable accommodations for staff who require this unless such accommodations would cause a problem in safety of either the staff person, other staff, or the patients.

2. Emergencies

If an emergency occurs and a staff member must attend to patient when not on call, it is acceptable to perform duty in business-casual clothing. It is not necessary to change into scrubs as the patient's safety comes first.

Niharika's dress code provides an example of how, when she considered the circumstances in which a dress code might oppress or restrict some people, she actually expanded her conception of why even further accommodations might be made. Interestingly, in this case, Niharika landed on the idea that, in an emergency, an employee would not be held in contempt of the code if they attended to a patient wearing street clothes.

Multimodal Affordances



Figure 1: "Appropriate" vs. "inappropriate" clothing.

The Do/Don't list is a popular organizing principle for the graphic illustration of dress codes. Cassie chose this organization, but some elements of her document stand out among her peers' in its care to avoid making assumptions about bodies, especially around gender. Consider Figure 1 in which Cassie arranges photos of clothing items without bodies in them. This is a purposeful choice to lend focus to the clothing items and not necessarily the bodies in them. Based on my conversations with Cassie, I know that she had some difficulty in finding stock images of clothes that were not gendered or on actual gendered bodies. The reader might argue that the right-hand side, the "Inappropriate" options, are actually less gendered and therefore, Cassie's sense of professionalism as evidenced by the clothes on the left-hand side reinforces gender norms. However, Cassie wanted to emphasize her expectations as closely as



Figure 2: Context-driven examples.

possible to the written words of her policy, something that had been lost in translation in her real-life experience.

In Figure 2, Niharika resisted a binary Do/Don't list in her illustration for the veterinary clinic. She takes a more context-driven tact with her two-page document organized around the workplace's office and surgical settings and presents the clothing items that are expected, rather than juxtaposing them against "inappropriate" items.

Like Cassie, Niharika also expresses her expectations through photos of clothing without bodies in them, as well as line-drawn images of body parts that allow for interpretation of whom they represent. The dress code's professional rationale centers around safety and sterile conditions, which are emphasized in the clothing requirements, as well as the reasons why some jewelry must be removed on some occasions.

In an earlier draft of this essay, I had planned to make a joke about the desire of both of these students to allow piercings and tattoos at their workplaces. I realized, eventually, that such an attitude on my part is anathema to my argument here. These students' attention to preferences of personal style that, in many professional settings, make no difference to the purpose or context of the work itself, exemplifies the calls that Manthey and others have made to expand what is perceived as "professional" or "acceptable." I appreciate the students' willingness to expand the status quo around the human subjectivities that are important to them and also those which they now know need the same kind of attention.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my experience teaching the dress code as an object of critique through a rhetorical lens, as well as a rhetorical act with multiple attendant legal and political aspects to

consider, there are at least two areas that may be addressed by future work and re-iterations of this assignment. First, there are further subjectivities to consider in regards to how people are “read” in their workplaces. For instance, Manthey writes: “Seeing dress practices as multimodal composition offers a valuable, everyday learning moment in the form of ‘ethical reading.’ Ethical reading is the idea that in a visual culture bodies are ‘read’ everyday, often in subconscious ways that reveal personal biases and systems of power. For example, fat people are often assumed to be lazy (Wann, 2009), while attractive people are often seen as successful and approachable” (Rhode, 2010) (340). In my attention to the main concerns of the EOEA—race, religion, and gender—I have not drawn the students’ focus to issues of sizeism or attractiveness, as Manthey mentions.

Second, I have allowed and encouraged students to elide considerations of bodies as one way to attend to bias and discrimination. This is evidenced by Niharika’s line drawings and both students’ stock images of empty clothing, and I recognize it is not the most progressive way to attend to the goal of resisting hegemonic expectations of bodies in the workplace, a goal of a stance of embodiment. To rectify this, I could provide models of and encourage multimodal documents that in fact feature people of different genders, races, sizes, abilities, and so forth. Confronting stereotypes and attitudes more directly might better prepare students for the types of situations they may encounter when they enter their professional spheres. This limit is a sign of my own positionality and privilege in regards to dress politics, something that has and I expect will continue to grow and change.

Considering the relationship between dress practices and rhetoric asks students to see and question the values and biases implicit in workplace dress expectations and conventions in the US. While I suggest using baseline resources provided by professional associations and the US government for models of these conventions, examples of oppression and resistance in the culture inflect this type of project with an imperative of care for other humans. When applying these principles to their practice in workplace writing, students have evidenced that kind of care in ways I hadn’t seen when teaching professional writing as a series of rote, mundane documents. I have found that dress codes in particular provide a chance to employ an embodied stance on (bio)rhetoric in critical and productive ways, to focus attention on the problems and purposes of policing bodies, and to use multimodality to imagine (and perhaps create) material changes one might not have expected from the professional writing curriculum.

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Dressing for Childbearing, the Patriarchy, and Me

Auto-Ethnography in Three Parts

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Abstract

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

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the Margins

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Embodied Rhetoric in Three Parts

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

Part I: Establishing, Negotiating, Developing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Part II: Moved Forward

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sit and Lament in [My] Discomfort

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

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

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



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

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

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

Conclusion

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Book Review: *The Uninhabitable*

Jesse Rice-Evans
Sibling Rivalry Press, 2019

The Uninhabitable begins with “I have flung my body away from my body” (p. 1). Throughout the chapbook, Jesse Rice-Evans does just that and encourages her readers to do the same. It is difficult to enumerate the exact experience of reading this collection because the language is affective—it causes me to take pause and assess my body as I read and pay more attention to my body as I write.

The collection is divided into 7 parts, each filled with intimate verse concerned with the experience of living in a nonnormative body. Rice-Evan’s passion is palpable as she writes through living in her body. Throughout the chapbook, the author repeatedly brings attention back to her body and all that it is: painfilled, imperfect, female, tough, tender, giving, and joyful.

Rice-Evan’s contribution to the field of rhetoric and composition with this collection is manifold, but particularly in how her poems offer an example of a body’s undoing. These verses conceive of the messiness of bodies—they leak, they spill, they are uncooperative. She writes of her “uncooperative flesh spilling into public space, an occupation” (p. 42). By likening the body’s abjectness to an occupation, Rice-Evans brings attention to the action and movement present within it. These poems force scholars in the field to address the issue already being discussed by many—that the body and its functions are taken for granted within the experience of a normative body.

The nonnormative body, as described by Rice-Evans throughout the book, is not whole or clean but something constantly undone. This undoing and messiness is not presented as a negative, as many normative conceptions of the body would do, but as a complex reality. The chapbook resists normativity through Rice-Evans herself, and her descriptions of her disability, her pain, her queer body and the complicated and ever-shifting way these presentations of her body clash and slip. Even the normative aspects of Rice-Evans body are explicated for a purpose, like “[her] whiteness a neutrality [she] can fade into” (p. 23). The body, within the poems, is not described as any one thing but in terms of the multitudes it contains. It is not only pain but pleasure, not just punishing but also forgiving.

Discussing the materiality of nonnormative bodies is not new in rhetorical studies, as particularly feminist scholars have been bringing attention to the body and the possibilities of writing/reading through it. Cixous says, “Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse... the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word ‘impossible’ and writes it as ‘the end’” (Cixous, 1976, p. 886). The same can be said for people with nonnormative bodies.

The experience of living in pain, in a queer body, necessitates the wrecking of discourses that describe the body as whole. Any codes that exist to theorize the body are not sufficient. The field of rhetoric can go farther in how it brings attention to the body, viewing it not just as a material concern, but a modality to write and read through, a nexus of understanding our own ways of existing and agency.

Rice-Evans models this, describing her own body in unfamiliar, yet intimate terms: “If we are anything, we are mismatched” (76). Later, in the same poem, she describes her body in rush of terms, each messier than the last: “I rattle, gush and curl, wrap across your hips and vanish in a web of blood and static, spitting grime and urge” (p. 76). These verses invent their own discourse for discussing the body—one that is spilling out, unique from one moment to the next.

By writing through her body, she opens up channels of embodiment for those lucky enough to read it.

Poetry is a mode that forces the reader to take stock of the body, each line break or punctuation denoting a breath or pause, a place to take stock of both the words on the page and the affective experience of reading. Rice-Evans takes advantage of this form in pieces like “The Necklace”—a poem with long lines and little punctuation, one that leaves the reader breathless.

Reading, then, is not just a process of eyes interpreting text, but in the way a body responds. One of the great contributions this collection makes is in a renewed understanding of what it means to read, that the body cannot be left out of reading.

The Uninhabitable not only brings attention to the body, allowing for the reader to not only examine their own lived experience, but addresses how that experience is communicated linguistically. In many places throughout the chapbook, she undoes notions of a whole body, stating “we are not made whole by pain, no matter what they say. We/ are broken by it, taught to peel back cushion between us and the/ world because we have no choice but to rebuild it, again and again” (p. 30). Communicating the body as not a whole entity, but as something rebuilt consistently, just as it is undone.

The culmination of these affects showcases the powerful potential of writing the body as a modality in and of itself. The nature of reading a text like *The Uninhabitable*, one that is so aware of the leakiness of the body and its entanglement in every aspect of rhetorical study, illuminates the agency that can live within the body—it is not a passive entity, but can act, communicate, persuade, enact, and resist. Rice-Evans’ work shows that the body is a rhetorical entity and that the ways we engage with it during our writing and reading are vital.

It may seem unusual to view a poetry chapbook as a theoretical exemplar, but *The Uninhabitable* shows the importance of attending to the body. As scholars, the body is so often left out of discussion, or relegated to the works of marginalized people. To echo a sentiment from the “[we] have to think about how [our] bodies will bend or give without emptying” and what it is

the emptying can do (p. 15). Much like the experience of reading this work, “To empty feels good,” and is something deeply needed within the field of rhetoric and composition.

—Hannah Taylor, Clemson University

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