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**Dress Practices as Embodied
Multimodal Rhetorics**

Dress Practices as Embodied Multimodal Rhetoric

Special Issue of the Journal of Multimodal Rhetoric

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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.”



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.

Figure 1: Special issue editor photo.

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 folk.

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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