

The Aesthetics of Female Scholarship: Rebecca, Kris, Paula and Lisette

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Abstract

This is a visual and textual inquiry into the aesthetics of female scholarship as re/presented and lived through the clothed, disciplined/transgressing bodies of female scholars. In the tradition of arts-informed research (Cole and Knowles, 2007), through image and text situated meanings of scholarship and visual identity are analyzed, poetized, re/created and re/presented. Transcripts based on conversations with Rebecca, Kris, Paula and Lisette and photographs of them inspire poems, collages, drawings and paintings, embracing the idea that visual and poetic ways of knowing are discrete, connected, unique and taken for granted ways of understanding and performing scholarship, of being in and knowing the world. Situated in the theoretical arenas of arts informed research and social theory on the body and clothing, the poetry, drawings and paintings confirm Kaiser, Chandler and Hammidi (2001) and Green's (2001) assertions that female scholars strategize through dress in order to assert a scholarly identity and authority. Clothes are negotiated expressions of self and visual identity with the body as mediator (Brazier and LeBesco, 2001; Butler, 1993; Davis, 1997; Holliday and Hassard 2001; Shilling, 1993); clothing choices (in university settings) are gendered (Butler, 1999; Kirkham, 1996; Sanders, 1996). The poems and images speak of survival, pain, growth and stagnation; they make visible aspects of how identity and

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scholarship is embodied, lived and re/presented; they provide opportunities to reflect on arts-informed research, the aesthetics of the clothed body, the body and social theory, and the semiotics of clothing.

Introduction

Through arts-informed research I examine the aesthetics of female scholarship as re/presented and lived through the managed, clothed, disciplined and transgressing bodies of female scholars. I am interested in the ways that female scholars re/present themselves and their scholarship through their clothed and accessorized bodies. The objects that one chooses to place on or near one's body have inherent significance. The relation of oneself to one's body and the presentation of one's body in clothing signifies a sense of ease or dis/ease, a sense of clothed bodily comfort or not, a sense of or a repression of the aesthetic, a sense of what is correct and appropriate for dress in relation to one's acceptance by a particular audience, a desire to belong or be accepted by a particular scholarly group, and most of all a sense of oneself. In turn, creating a personal visual identity through aesthetic choices in clothing provides a metaphorical connection to a particular individual's socio-economic, aesthetic and political relationship to and with the world and with fellow human beings. This work is informed by the idea that the personal is political, which was foundational to early feminism, as well as art historian Linda Nochlin's (1989) art theorizing (p. 149).

Methodology

While arts-informed research as a theoretical framework is more recent, artists, poets and writers have engaged in this creative work for centuries. As Goethe states,

And thus began that tendency from which I could not deviate my whole life through; namely, to turn into an image, into a poem, everything that delighted or troubled me, or otherwise occupied me, and to come to some certain understanding with myself upon it, that I might both rectify my conceptions of external things, and set myself inwardly at rest about them. (Goethe, cited in Sparshott, 1963, p. 224)

Arts-informed research (Cole and Knowles, 2007) draws upon the idea that both image and text (individually and collectively) have inherent meaning. It originates in the practices of studio art and art criticism; that is, in making art, and in writing theoretically, analytically, and interpretively about art. Rooted in Dewey's (1934) thesis that criticism is the reeducation of perception, Barone (2005) holds that Eisner (1985, 1991) laid the theoretical framework for arts-informed educational research through connoisseurship. A group of researchers at the University of British Columbia have re-conceptualized this research approach as a/r/tography. According to Irwin and de Cosson (2004), to be involved in the practice of a/r/tography "is to inquire into a phenomenon through an ongoing process of artmaking and writing while acknowledging one's role as artist[a], researcher [r], teacher [t]" (p. 1), while informed simultaneously by the processes of ethnography.

In Winter of 2007 I engaged in conversations with and photographed four scholars: Rebecca, Kris, Paula and Lisette. The resulting transcripts and imagery formed the basis of and inspiration for the production of collages, drawings paintings and poems. Within the context of scholarship, I embrace the idea that visual and poetic ways of knowing are discrete yet connected, unique yet taken for granted ways of understanding and performing scholarship, of being in and knowing the world. As such, in this work I commit to looking, seeing and listening, and to writing about and painting what I have looked at, seen and heard. I engage with the visual; I examine, deconstruct and reconstruct visual representations of scholarship through clothing.

Conversations

I had conversations in private office and home settings with Rebecca, Kris, Paula and Lisette (pseudonyms) not because their clothing is flamboyant or unusual but because they represent different disciplines within the academy. The primary research question "How are your clothing choices determined by your work as a scholar?" was buttressed by the following questions:

What has informed your clothing decisions and representations over and across time?

To what extent might you use clothing to reveal, subvert, hide, or to clarify your particular identity as a scholar?

How do you think others perceive you?

Have you received feedback on your clothing choices?

To what extent do you believe that your identity as a person as reflected through clothing choices relates to your visual identity as a scholar?

How are your scholarly clothing choices context dependent? For example, do you wear different clothing for teaching, for attending meetings and conferences, or for working in your office?

The conversations resulted in transcripts which were richly detailed and storied. I took the words the participants spoke and the stories they told and retold them as poems. Although I found in the transcripts that these women's stories were not told chronologically, I found it helpful to order them chronologically in the poems, and to highlight specific images, words and narrative that evoked the essence of each woman scholar and her relationship to her clothed self as a scholar. The narrative poems form the text portion of this arts-informed study.

Photographs

Photographs were used as the basis and inspiration for drawings, collages and paintings. First, I searched for images in newspapers, magazines, and journals in order to create collage imagery evocative of the values, ideas, experiences, hopes and fears which emerged as a result of meeting, talking with, and photographing these women. In turn, the collages inspired drawings and paintings. Selected examples of the artworks, reproduced digitally in this paper, form the visual component of this arts-informed research study, and together with the poetry re/presents each participant's aesthetic of scholarship.

Context: Theoretical Ground

Embellishing the Cartesian notion "I think therefore I am" Keenan (2001) cites Thomas Carlyle, an early cultural theorist about clothing: "I dress therefore I am". For Carlyle, "dress is an important signifier of subjectivity, symbolizing traditions, values, ideologies and emotional states" (p. 15). As Bourdieu (1984) asserts, taste unites and separates.

Dress informs, positions, distinguishes, classifies and legitimates social differences. It is, as Goffman (1959) claims, a way of presenting ourselves to the world and making a statement, whether intended or not. It is a means of self display, Giddens (1991) argues. Clothing, together with clothing choices and configurations, is a form of literacy, a nonverbal form of communication that can be constructed, read, mediated, interpreted and subverted (Levi-Strauss 1963, Bogatyrev 1971). As Lurie (1981) remarks, "For thousands of years human beings have communicated with one another first in the language of dress" (p. 3). Long before I am near enough to talk to you on the street, in a meeting, or at a party, Lurie continues, "you announce your sex, age and (social) class to me through what you are wearing – and very possibly give me important information (or misinformation) as to your occupation, origin, personality, opinions, tastes, sexual desires and current mood" (p. 3). What Lurie (1981) fails to acknowledge is the gaze of the viewer. There is no such thing as the naked eye. Whether enacted entirely consciously or less so, the scholar is an active agent, complicit in creating and subverting his or her visual identity in order to mis/direct the gaze of the viewer. As Bourdieu (1984) observes, taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Particularly useful in establishing a theoretical framework for this inquiry are Bourdieu's theories of reproduction and cultural consumption, and especially his theory of physical capital (1978, 1985), wherein he conceptualises the body as a form and bearer of symbolic value, produced presented and managed to acquire status and distinction across social fields. Bourdieu argues that different social classes produce distinct bodily forms and dress codes, interpreted and valued differently in and across different social fields. Furthermore, bodies carry dissimilar exchange value across social fields and social classes. According to Shilling (2003) "bodies develop through the interrelation between an individual's social location, habitus and taste" (p. 113). Following Bourdieu's (1978) claim that bodily forms produced by the working classes constitute a form of physical capital that carries a lesser exchange value than those developed by dominating classes, Shilling (2003) argues that social class wields a significant influence on the way in which individuals develop their bodies and on the symbolic values attached to particular bodily forms. However, what is not fixed is the symbolic value attached to specific bodily forms, activities and

performances. In addition to social class, gender, sexuality, work and religion are important factors to consider. Bodily forms and performances take on different symbolic value in different social fields, and while bodies are implicated in society, they are equally and continuously affected by social, cultural and economic processes (Bourdieu, 1985). The body is always an unfinished entity which develops in conjunction with various social forces; it is simultaneously social and personal. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the body as a form of physical capital is useful in unravelling how the body is re/constructed and symbolically valued, or not. Following Connell (2002), bodies are agents of social process as much as objects of social process.

In their introduction to *Contested Bodies*, Holliday and Hassard (2001) assert that in Western culture, the Foucauldian notion of the "normal" regulated, controlled disciplined body is accorded high status. By contrast, the (Bakhtinian) grotesque body, fat/ugly/disfigured/ disabled is reviled: Mad people's bodies look mad, they move weirdly, twitch and contort; "queer bodies get coded as promiscuous and contagious; working men's bodies are imbued with excessive masculinity and bestial aggression" (p. 6). These unruly uncontrolled bodies suggest similarly disordered subjectivities. In the workspace, the disembodied body is ordered, managed, controlled, regulated, desexualized yet gendered. Compulsory uniforms and suits de-subjectify and "invisibilise" the worker (Green, 2001, p. 117). By contrast, at the work party, pre-enlightenment unthinking orgiastic practices can prevail (Foucault, 1990). Boundaries are pushed, the scatological visceral body is revealed: A secretary "is told that 'it's traditional' for her male colleagues to 'see her tits at Christmas'" (Green, p. 129). Workers have sex, get drunk, argue, and the "boys" photocopy their penises for laughs.

Minimal scholarly work exists on the social theory of dress in relationship to scholarship, and to date I have not encountered arts-informed research on dress and the professoriate. I found two studies carried out in the United Kingdom that focus on social theory of female scholars and dress (Green, 2001; Kaiser, Chandler, and Hammidi, 2001). Green (2001) argues that female academics strategize through dress, which is key to "any intervention in academic debate...women professors in particular, are exposed as visibly female bodies intervening in what is overwhelmingly male territory" (p. 98). Clothes are used by

female scholars to assert a particular identity and authority, “as part of the process of establishing themselves as serious academics, in ways which both engage with the dominant discourses of the intellectual worlds and at times subvert them” (p. 98). While feminist theorists discredit mind/body dualism, Green’s participants (senior professors) feel the need to present an aura of authority, someone who has to be “taken seriously” by wearing a male skin, a suit of armour: the power suit (p. 105). Being sexual and provocative is disallowed entirely. Chubby arms expose and compromise the middle aged female professor’s ability to chastise students and face colleagues. She feels vulnerable in her “floppy, middle-aged body” and must cover it (p. 110). Meanwhile in Kaiser Chandler and Hammidi’s (2001) work, there is a mind/body tension for women scholars in “choosing between thinking and appearing” (p. 117).

Rebecca, Kris, Paula and Lisette

Psychologist Kris’s experience as a man trapped inside a woman’s body provides a unique perspective on having to (try to) perform as a cross-dressing man. Paula in women’s studies and Rebecca in visual arts deal with other body-clothing issues, while Lisette, an administrator, speaks of transformation in her body-clothing relationship, and of clothing efficiency. When speaking in the voice of the participant, I use italics in the poems. The poetry and images presented here aim to explicate arts-informed research in alternate scholarly languages, the languages of visual art and poetry, through visual imaging and metaphor. The portraits and poems are narratives embodying and re/presenting scholarship. The portraits and poems depict, reveal and conceal. They interrogate the aesthetics of female scholarship, and what it means to be a female scholar. They question and they inform. Following Eisner (1997), they strive to deepen meaning, expand awareness and enlarge understanding of the interplay between bodies, scholarship, visual identity and representation.

POEM FOR REBECCA

It's scruffy work
teaching painting
docs and kodiaks
and comfortable clothes
layered

you dress like your students
for comfort
without a bare midriff

*Do I dress too young?
You ask
Here's me, a woman in her sixties
dressing like a twenty-one year old*

*I can be more artsy
you say
for an opening or a lecture
I'll dress
in my embroidered jacket
all shades of brown and gold
dangly earrings
black pants
hot green shoes*

*my earrings are souvenirs
these
are Labradorite
from Newfoundland*

You tell me you dream of being presented to the Queen
of winning an Oscar
as Mum's twin Judy Dench
sleek pixie head
Judy's long silver brocade coat

down to your ankles
plain long sleeves
silk pants
comfortable shoes
maybe a little heel
because you don't want to trip

*In the 1950s stilettos I didn't trip
dinner parties in England
suits, cummerbunds and bow ties
the women were quite naked from their arm pits up and halfway down their
backs
backs and breasts and arms
so awfully cold
so drafty
so vulnerable
and if women are equals
why subject themselves to this
discomfort?*

*But it's nice to look sexy
If I had the opportunity I'd wear a strapless dress*

*but really, it's childish
women administrators
wear skirts and jackets
like Condoleeza Rice
skin colored pantihose
are pretend bare legs
why would a woman of power
dress to show her legs?*

you tell me, I say
thinking: because they can

I see you
dreaming

hiding
yearning

your funky apricot hair and earrings
that performed artsy you
the motherly brocade another still
sexy you another
layered

and your mother
was there that day
like Woody Allen's
as a contraceptive
she warned you didn't she?
she said: *beware of mutton dressed up as lamb*
and you
are
afraid of the cold

PAINTING OF REBECCA FOLLOWED BY DETAIL





POEM FOR KRIS

I knew as a toddler I was male

*at seventeen anorexia
bulimia
body image stuff
I became a drug addict
alcoholic
transgendered
bipolar*

*at twenty seven
I was fired from the school board*

*for living with a woman
she was the center of my universe.
I got drunk for days
I wouldn't leave her*

*I went in
took that principal's brown lunch bag
and wrote my resignation on it
yeah, it was like
I'm not going to put any ceremony to this bullshit*

*Thank god it was about my integrity
more than my love for her
because that didn't last
right?*

*In the seventies
dykes
wore male clothing
and dykes don't like me
I'm a poser
I'm not a lesbian
I don't like them, and their dyke hierarchy
happy with their sexuality*

*I'm not a woman
I love this body
but not on me*

*I like a beautiful feminine woman
soothing to my eyes
skirts
heels
I learnt to like heels
watching strippers
as early as I could go*

*It's been a wasted life
I've never been able to be
the man that I am
my sexuality
is beyond these body parts
I'm a cross dresser
a male wearing woman's clothes*

*At fifty-seven
I'm still juggling
image and clothing*

*I wear men's pants
men's shirts, black
with a necklace*

*I put it on
to confuse
about what, who, I really am
in my department*

not for the fun of it

*I don't know if I'm obviously
seen
as transgendered
a lesbian, probably
I'm bipolar so I'm paranoid anyway*

*the necklace
feminizes
confuses
calms*

*I want a sex change
but mother's alive
giving me women's stuff and saying "I wanted a daughter"*

*and then there's work...
it's been done by professors
but
I'm getting brainwashed that tenure is the most important thing
in my future*

maybe

*right now my life is calm
I go home to the cats
get a movie*

*the other is an
incredible
psychic
Volcano*

*and I'm worn out
empty*

PAINTING OF KRIS FOLLOWED BY DETAIL





POEM FOR PAULA

Women's Studies Paula
assertive
authoritative
strong and
comfortable

*Once, years ago, I taught labour history to laid off steelworkers
I looked fourteen
so I dressed up
I wore a plain long khaki skirt and jacket
Professional
Authoritative*

*during class one came up to me
What's he doing?
Suddenly, he put his hand down the back of my shirt
and snapped off the tag
saying, in a stage whisper
"When the tag is up it ruins the aesthetics of a woman's look!"
He made me an object for one hundred men
How would I gain authority in that class to speak again?*

*He read me as a sex object
wanted to demean me
it didn't matter what I wore*

*Professional dress
makes you more professional
Authoritative
a skirt: more feminine
vulnerable
there's the catch*

*jeans send a social message
if a woman can wear jeans to work
she has some control
a man in jeans could be working construction*

*jeans are ok in my office
but for teaching
a casual dress pant
a shirt
nothing fancy
I'm separate
even from my female students
because in teaching, jeans undermine authority*

*for meetings
a suit
a long skirt*

low heels
I'm tall
authoritative
never sexy
no Barbie-ish sexy stilettos
because men at university meetings
objectify women
sexy is dangerous
I want to be respected
listened to
professional

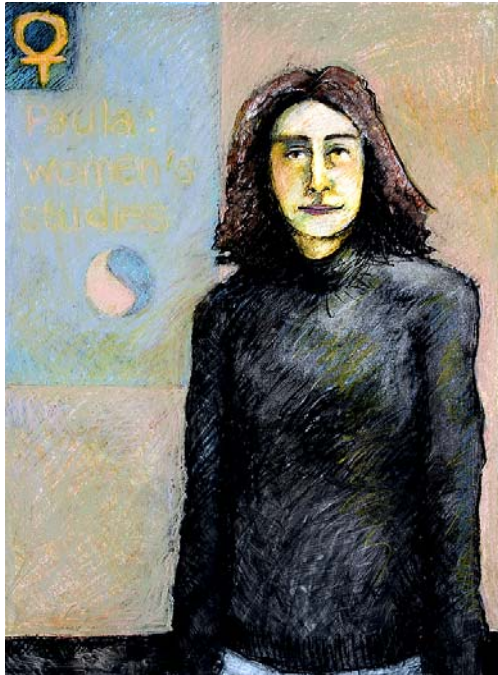
not looked at

no form fitting dress
there's a fine line between glam
and object
values are expressed by how we look
self represent

an interest in clothes
as a scholar
says you're not interested in ideas
and in this department
we all dress the same way
we're thinking
wearing authority
and professionalism.

We're Scholars

DRAWING OF PAULA FOLLOWED BY DETAIL



POEM FOR LISETTE: THE BLACK STRETCH PANTS

Lisette runs a program
She's busy
Efficient
With her blackberry beeping
And every day
She wears the same thing:
The Black Stretch Pants
Every Tuesday
Christmas Day
Meetings
Biking

*All this began in Summer
Ten years ago at my parents' fiftieth anniversary
I was so fat
My old boyfriend said
"Lisette, you had no right to get so fat!"
And my sister said
"Lisette, I have to talk to you, I'm worried...
What's going on? You don't need to be like Jane!"*

*Graduate student Jane
Who'd had the affair with her professor
Then remorse
Subliminally
Jane ate
At the very least to change her body image
To become unavailable
Enormous
Wobbly
Undesirable
To all except her husband*

*Then I went on to visit my mother-in-law
She answered my knock on the door with
"Oh my, aren't you getting fat?"*

*I thought
There's something I need to do.*

*I began to walk to work
I wasn't even sure I'd know how to walk, like, which direction to go
I set off
It took sixty five minutes
It wasn't hard
Just tiring*

*Then, that winter, walking became impossible
Snow
Ice
Biting wind
I thought
Running this program
The Paper Work
I don't have time
To walk like this*

*Then I thought
All those papers to sort
They'll be here
Whether I walk or not
And my desk was cleared by Friday*

*Walking is when I think
I write nasty emails in my head
Solve problems
Walking is essential now*

*I started losing weight
Fifty pounds in all*

*I started buying the same black stretch pants
In smaller sizes
I'm down to size 12*

*Now I have eight pairs of the same black stretch pants
I just change the top
And jacket
If there's a meeting or dinner
I wear a fancy newer better jacket*

*In summer I wear the same pants
In white*

*My shoes are standard too
Comfortable
black
And black Birkenstocks in summer*

*When I travel
I take the black stretch pants
One jacket, say red
Multiple matching tops
Usually striped combinations
black, red, white
It makes dressing easy
Efficient*

*About a week ago I got a phone call out of the blue
The old boyfriend
He's still married
Happy-ish*

*He said "Are you ready to run away with me yet?"
"No, I'm not"
"You'll probably hang up on me from asking this question, but how much do
you weigh?"
I told him 200 pounds*

Then I laughed and I said, "No, I only weigh 150. Now you're going to decide which is true."

DRAWING OF LISETTE FOLLOWED BY DETAIL





Conclusion

Situated in the theoretical arenas of arts-informed research and social theory on the body, this study confirms Kaiser, Chandler and Hammidi (2001) and Green's (2001) assertions that female scholars strategize through dress in order to assert a scholarly identity and authority. Clothes are negotiated expressions of self and visual identity with the body as mediator (Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; Butler, 1993; Davis, 1997; Holliday and Hassard 2001; Shilling, 1993); clothing choices (in university settings) are gendered (Butler, 1999; Kirkham, 1996; Sanders, 1996). However, beyond this it seems patronizing for me to confirm that, for example, Lisette wears a uniform, that the Black Stretch Pants represent a personal triumph over and control of her body, that Kris is torn, tortured and that he hides in a female body. Beyond these comments, and based on the postmodern notion of multiple realities which presupposes that artists/writers/poets can neither control nor authorize the meanings of the works they produce, I expect the reader to bring her/his interpretation and judgement to the works presented, to the

topic, to the literature, and to the method. I believe the poems speak for themselves, quite independently of me and directly to you. In this sense, they are visceral, naked and feral. They speak of survival and pain, of growth and stagnation. They are unlike statistical data which is sanitized and blanketed by notions of objectivity and neutrality. Visual and poetic research is a conduit to realize a more expansive tactile visceral and intuited understanding of a particular phenomenon. As Eisner (2005) reminds us, persuasive arguments in support of arts-informed research need to be made continually. I aim to do that here: The poems and portraits serve to examine, interpret and re/present multiple situated meanings of and spaces within scholarship. They draw attention to how bodies are formed, disciplined or neglected, situated, experienced, clothed, loved and hated in spaces and places that are receptive and/or hostile; they offer alternative possibilities. They examine places where research, the arts, re/presentation and scholarship intersect and meet and become something else, something un/seen, individually and socially constructed, individual and universal.

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