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Getting Dressed and Being Dressed: A Constructed Autobiography of Identity

Jana Jarosz

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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GETTING DRESSED AND BEING DRESSED:
A CONSTRUCTED AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF IDENTITY

by

JANA JAROSZ

A master’s capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts,
The City University of New York
2019
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies  
in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Date                       Nancy K. Miller
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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
This written and visual thesis examines how feminist theories surrounding the construction of a gendered subject are related and situational to the narrative of a lived body experience within a layered context of clothing. It opens up a discussion concerning the negotiated space between an individually-empowered, subject-in-process and the boundaries of social expectations outlining gender and cultural identities. The thesis introduces the concept of using an automediality framework to connect the material culture of clothing to still and motion imagery with text as a way to encapsulate and illustrate the fluid nature of becoming. It concludes by suggesting that there is space in the ever-shifting argument between the intangibility of theory and the daily practice of getting and being dressed to create new methods of writing feminist theory using a multi-dimensional autobiographical practice.

The practical components of the thesis are divided into three phases. The first phase consists of designing and constructing various articles of clothing I wear and embed into my closet as an autobiographic archive of my self.

The second phase is a complex series of visual pieces and artifacts that are divided into five sub-categories: Theory in Practice - Maps, Moments of Being - Wearings, Fragments of Self - Video, What She Said - Citations, and Material Culture - Archive. Each embraces the multi-dimensional nature of automediality. Photography, illustration, video, text, design, and digital collaging are all mediums used in the construction of the pieces.

The third phase consists of designing the disparate artifacts into a digital framework that is based on the conceptual idea and fluid structure of a creative notebook. Because the narrative within an autobiographic process is continuous, The Notebooks are an evolving digital work-in-progress space that documents the thinking, designing, and making that happens in pursuit of solving the overlapping creative challenges between theory and practice.

KEYWORDS: autobiography & automediality, memory, affect, gender, age, identity, becoming, clothing
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Here’s to all the people past and present, who have encouraged me to design and build clothing, to go and sew it off, or to rip the seam and fearlessly start over. Here’s to all the women and men who have shared with me their sewing stories, bequeathed me their precious machines, scissors, tools, buttons, fabric collections, and vast sewing knowledge. Whether creating a very small cape for a very small, stuffed elephant or a big, fancy, drag queen dress, I imbue the power of their spirit and legacy into everything I make.¹

Here’s to each family member, friend, and colleague who were kind and generous in their interest and support with my research and thesis writing, far too many to name here, but are all named in my heart and threaded throughout my deep creative process.

Lastly, a special posthumous thank you goes to my Aunt Susan, who sent boxes and boxes and boxes of books to 73 Agnes Street—opening up a world which has never stopped feeding my life-long love of the personal story.

Sparks and inspiration can come from anywhere, words are inadequate to convey how grateful I am for everyone’s creative generosity.

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A NOTE ON TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

The technical specifications for this project are simple. Potential readers of The Notebooks project can “read” or experience the different autobiographic components of the work through visiting the main website link. The nature of the project is designed much like life—it is layered and complex. The site invites readers to engage with the images, videos, and maps on a personal level, and at their own speed—there is no right or wrong way experience the work.
Rage. Full-throated. 
Expelled through rolling, flingig, 
howling. My pink dresser 
and pink lamp watch silently 
until I acquiesce to climbing 
into Jeff's hand-me-down-bib-overalls 
—the cotton ones, 
the noisy corduroy ones, 
or his too-small-for-him-turtleneck 
— Seneca Drive, Marietta, Ohio

Prose Photograph #1
How is an identity, the self, the subject, the who, the I—constructed, made, defined, and performed through clothing? How are we dressed as subjects? Do we present our subjectivity through our attire? Does my self\(^2\) exist before I get dressed? Does my dressed body become an object? One unpredictable answer to these questions is that there is no stable answer. Because I am living the answer to those questions,\(^3\) I am writing my story as I live it. Hannah Arendt would argue that the telling is in the living, the doing, and the action. Though she writes, “these stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be told in poetry […] and worked into all kinds of material” (Arendt, Vita Activa, hereafter VA, 180), she argues they do not have recognizable authors because the stories, or the lives, exist as an outcome of action, not as an intent of action. Continuing this line of thinking, I will only be able to tell my own story if I attend to the experience as I live it. I can become an after-the-fact author during the process of writing my autobiography live. “Action without a name, a “who” attached to it, is meaningless” (Arendt, VA, 179). My vita activa will reveal and define my “who” that exists before I confront the contents of my closet. I author myself every time I get dressed.

A key twentieth-first-century feminist issue—how a gendered subject, a “who” is constructed, is surrounded with multiple theories that are related to the lived body experience.

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\(^2\) I am intentionally separating the my and the self from each other to underscore the ownership of the self.

\(^3\) Katie Roiphe, in her introduction to Anne Roiphe’s Art and Madness: A Memoir of Lust Without Reason references the idea of living the answers to a question.
Whose lived experience is the one used in arguing the issue? Where does the power of the individual lie in relationship to the larger feminist theoretical discussion? The relationship between the theory and the practice of one’s lived experience occupies a liminal space where the active and rebirthing process of thinking, becoming, and being one’s own subject takes place. I theorize that as the space shifts, the boundaries of social expectations outlining gender, cultural, sexuality, and age identities soften and bleed into each other, much the way shorelines are pushed and pulled into different contours with each tidal movement. Thus, I argue that the subject, as the self, is both situational and relational. The theoretical construction of the self is embodied and re-embodied situationally over a fluid, unfolding series of lived moments that create an individual’s narrative arc of perpetual transformation. Our clothing choices over the course of our autobiographical experience function as evidence and markers of the ways in which we construct our individual gender, cultural, sexual, and age identities based on our free will and in response to social expectations. Using a non-linear autobiographical lens, I will explore ways of materializing my personal evidence that exists in three different areas: the evanescent affect that glazes an article of clothing through emotion or memory, active moments of becoming during the process of getting dressed, and as intangible sensations that reveal themselves through the lived experience of being dressed. I will use these methods as a different way of “writing” feminist theory, with the intention of allowing the ephemeral and theoretical nature of identity to become real through a multi-dimensional autobiographical practice.

Every day we wake up and put on clothes for work, school, or working out. We get dressed for church, business meetings, parent-teacher conferences, or just to run down to the
corner store. Pants, sweats, dresses, heels. Hoodies, blazers, t-shirts, and skirts. Jewelry. Hair, hat or headwrap? For parties and after-parties. Color or all black? Stretch pants and sneakers, shorts, jeans, or somebody’s hand-me-down coat. We get dressed for ourselves and for each other. Every time we get dressed, we consider who we are then and how we want to embody that self. Consciously or unconsciously, in front of a closet or an open drawer, we consider in that precise moment how we want to inhabit the clothes that represent our gender, age, cultural or sexual identity—we choose to define, not someone else, how our daily self, our “I,” will press up against the real world. We create our own “moments of being”\textsuperscript{4} that shape-shift every time we choose clothing that collapse the past, the present, and our future into one shirt or skirt. We shape each choice into complete outfits—into “I” statements of fashion\textsuperscript{5} that represent our individual truth in how we want to look on the outside and on how we want to feel on the inside.

In front of our open closet, we use two decision-making lenses that overlap. During the process of getting dressed we also consider how we want to be dressed, how we want to live as the subject we continue to construct with our attire for that day.

This is one way we author autobiography.


\textsuperscript{5}Throughout this thesis, there is some overlap between the idea and the definitions of clothing versus fashion. I am using the word fashion here to incorporate the idea of one’s personal style. I am not using the word fashion as it relates to fads, trends, or the industry.
The affect generated during the wearing of each piece of clothing makes us think, feel, and behave in specific ways; slowly, outfit by outfit, sensation by sensation, over time, we autobiographically construct our different identities. When we look back at our clothing narrative, we can trace our journey through the landscape of gender and age expectations and discovery. This unstable space could be described as “the praxis of theory in action as we live our lives” (Lorraine 270). It demands conceptual thinking and exploration beyond pure text. Examining methods to visualize the theory through practice is one way to push the boundaries of how we encounter and engage with feminist theories that can illuminate the fluid nature of gender construction as we age. How does my current subject-position as a white woman of 51 impact the way I create and live feminist theory? In other words, how can I theorize gender and age in an active, visual, and daily expression beyond a binary structure and beyond a formal written text?

The getting dressed phase of daily identity construction can be dissected into several smaller ones. First, there is the decision-making that stretches out across multiple timelines, the immediate present and various distant pasts. My mind, impatiently awaiting the next day’s promise, may begin contemplating what I want to or need to wear the night before. Or, the getting dressed process might begin in the morning when lying in bed after the alarm pings or when standing naked in the shower. There is no commitment to a particular garment, this phase is still speculative. The variations in the timeline dislocates the process depending on where the decision-making begins.
The second phase of clothing myself in who I am going to be for the day, begins when I am actively considering what to wear, while examining actual wardrobe options. I stand there, thinking, considering, and debating. I know that I will not just put on clothes in the present moment, but I will layer my “I” out of evanescent memories embedded in the clothing from yesterday, or last year and overlay it with anticipation in the future of the day I am getting dressed to meet. Virginia Woolf, writing her identity at her desk and not in front of her wardrobe, dresses herself with the material of language, “It would be interesting to make the two people, I now, I then, come out in contrast. And further, this past is much affected by the present moment” (Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” 75) and vice versa. As with Woolf, my successive selves overlap when building my self in the immediate present with clothing threaded with emotional fragments of the past. Moments of being create affect—smelling like joy, laughter, sex, pain, confusion, or sweetness, which cling to the shirt, pants, or skirt like gauzy perfume long after the clothes are worn once, twice, or seventeen times. I bring those layers of memory to life each time I re-wear a particular garment and contribute to my autobiography. The texture of the affective experience is what adheres to my memory.

The third phase of building myself happens in the material experience of getting dressed. Though the decision-making timeline shifts\(^6\) and my clothing choices are influenced by what I will call the affect of memory, the moment of identity commitment occurs during the actual getting-dressed process of sliding the shirt off the hangar, stepping into a skirt, tucking,

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\(^6\) Click and scroll down to Fig. 4: Shifting Phases of Getting Dressed, (https://www.janajarosz.com/theory-in-practice-maps)
buttoning, zipping, and looking up and into the mirror. Identity construction accelerates through action. The physical motion of an arm-push through a silk sleeve, my neckline adjustment (pull down for cleavage? Pull up to hide a scar?), button fumbling (why does that one button never stay put?) layers the affect of memory through live action. In other words, I am performing fleeting, intangible actions using tangible objects of clothing. These moments generate personal value in the form of memory through the sensations aroused during my process of getting dressed. If, during the lifetime of my purple blouse I wear it 87 times, then I accrue 87 sensorial arm slides through double-weight-silk every time I get dressed. A second layer of affect builds onto that same purple blouse while I am inside it, 7 accruing wearing sensations that are generated through, around, and in between my experiences walking, working, saying yes, saying no, getting scared, feeling embarrassed, standing, talking, waiting, listening. “Affect marks a body’s belonging to a world of encounters” (Seigworth and Gregg, original emphasis, 2). The tension in between the moment of being in my shirt and becoming changed by that moment of being is where the affect resides.

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7 Click and scroll down to Fig. 6: Affect Chart, [https://www.janajarosz.com/theory-in-practice-maps]
September, 2014, en route to my lawyer.

It’s hot. I’m late. I’m trying desperately not to sweat through my purple silk shirt. The light goes green. A man stops me as I step off the curb. He gestures, “I don’t know what you’re wearing, but I like it very much.”

—6th avenue and 43rd Street, New York
Affect’s potency will be persuasive the next time I contemplate wearing my purple shirt. The unexpected pleasure of a stranger’s compliment interrupts the image of my unsettled self that I see and hold in my mind’s eye in that moment. Unlike an actual photograph that functions as visual evidence of a clothing choice, or materializes a memory of a specific outfit, there is no tangible evidence of memory’s affect. In the context of clothing and the way it shapes identity, affect is ethereal, though we feel its power as it connects the past, the present, and the future. As a visceral force, it also functions in multiple layers between who I am, who I think I am by virtue of my clothing choices, and the observation and judgement of others who witness my attire. Affect can create, shift, and control those layered relationships. I feel and see myself on the curb as unsettled, the man sees me in my shirt as intriguing or some shade of purple-fabulous, which illustrates the ways in which the directional flow of the gaze can be negotiated between internal and external sources. Seigworth and Gregg define affect as “at once intimate and impersonal. [It] accumulates across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between “bodies” (bodies defined not by an outer-skin envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect)” (2). In the moment on the curb, my purple shirt functions as an envelope to my real body. Building on Seigworth and Gregg’s idea, because my purple shirt was chosen for a specific identity task for the day, I would argue that my body, my self, and my who, has the potential to reciprocate, because it is enveloped inside that shirt. “There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them” (Woolf, Orlando, 119). The power within the affect of the shirt is what sparks the dialogue on 6th avenue. It connects two people—two identities that would otherwise not interact.
Pushing this line of thinking further, “in this ever-gathering accretion of force-relations, lie the real powers of affect, affect as potential: a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected” (Seigworth and Gregg, original emphasis, 2). I clothe my body in the power of affect through my choices of attire, generating sensations in the body, and raising questions of how my experience “transmits knowledge through embodied action” (Taylor xvi).

The next time I am staring at my closet, deciding what to wear with the sartorial goal of feeling confident or powerful, I will remember the silk shimmer of affect I experienced when being dressed in my purple shirt. In the moment of making my clothing choice, I am aware of my potential to create a sensation in someone else and I am also aware of the potential that I might affect because of another person’s reactions based on precedence—based on my memories. Without being able to articulate it, I will recall the fragmented connection between myself and the man on the street. In that moment of being dressed, its sensations are related to what I felt getting dressed and making decisions about how I wanted to be for that day. “The power to think and to act increases the power to be affected” (Hardt x). The power-of-building the self, resides in the choosing. We consider what feels good then and what will feel good later. We can, during the moment of getting dressed, look both backward to the affect of memories which influence our clothing choices—building future memories\(^8\) before we even step into a skirt. We negotiate our self for the day through a lens of clothing options. If we know we experienced

wonderful things the last time we wore the purple shirt, we hope that that will continue to generate power in the purple shirt through our potential to affect others and be affected ourselves. I can choose to exercise that power. And though I may plan my future reality through my clothing, I also need to accept that my favorite purple shirt may not fit the way it used to when I first constructed it. My body will reveal its own potential for change. Over time, as I age, the shirt may tug at the shoulders or creep up in back, retaining the memory of affect, but shifting the balance of present affect mirrored in my changing body shape and thus, reducing its power.

Once dressed for the day, I begin aggregating experiences of being dressed. In a sense, I actively construct my self in real time, within clothes I’ve chosen that empower me to experience life fully embodied as myself—“I insert myself into the world” (Arendt, VA, 179). The awareness of my self I felt while getting dressed, produces another level of awareness that my “now” will be my “then.” Memories of self are unstable and preserving the now can take different forms. As with Arendt who recognizes that stories of our “who” can be “worked into all kinds of material” (Arendt, VA, 180), I am designing and building automediality fragments that collectively negotiate the visual boundaries of memoir—pushing to create new experimental methodologies that work to visualize theory. By collecting graphs, collages, prose-photographs, videos, photographs as printed objects, digital images existing on a phone or laptop, and the material culture of individual garments all together in one container, each one works to help navigate the relocation process of my identity between the time and space of memory. The shifting relationship between the disparate material elements in my autobiographical collection of fragments, underscores how photographs and their subject matter—what is portrayed in the
image—are unstable in comparison to the memory of what is in the printed photograph. There is also a dislocation of time and space that exists between the self portrayed in the image and the viewer of the same image. Both foreshadow the instability between the memory of my self wearing whatever outfit I’m wearing in the photo, and the memory of the image without any recollection of the outfit whatsoever. In other words, I may look at a photograph in 2018 that portrays me wearing a pale orange sweatshirt circa 1986 but have no memory of posing or taking the photograph. Yet, that photo has attained titled memory-status in family lore as “Jana’s orange sweatshirt photo.” My timestamped 1986 identity is based on a collective memory of a photo of an orange sweatshirt, not an individual memory of self. The resting place for a family lore photo also contributes to the ways in which the memory of the self migrates. “Photography consequently fails to capture and retrieve, replaying the failure of memory rather than replicating its process” (Kuhn and McAllister 11). Photographs of myself wearing my brother’s overalls in nursery school have migrated over the years between family album and baby book. The book with the photographs of the overalls has also migrated from California to New York illustrating how material culture physically shifts memory containers. The moment of re-viewing the nursery school image years after it was taken is one that requires a relocation of both the memory of the moment portrayed in the photograph and the memory of the image as a photograph embedded in the books that house my personal narrative. The memory of the moment is fused with the memory of the clothing associated with the photograph, which allows the idea of the self to migrate over time.
Image 1: Re-located Memories

“Photography consequently fails to capture and retrieve, replaying the failure of memory rather than replicating its process” (Kuhn, McAllister, 11).

I have no memory of the actual event, the excursion portrayed in Image 2, but I have consistent memories of the photographs as an object in the hallway of the old house and in scrapbooks. The photograph as an object is part of my child and adult hood, the object replays the failure of my memory of the event and does not conjure up what the sun felt like, the woody feel of the stick I’m holding, or the salty smell of the bay. When I look at the image, I cannot replicate the experience portrayed in the photograph, because I have no memory of the event—only memories of seeing the photograph in the context of...
Depending on who is looking at the image, what is portrayed in the nursery school photograph may represent a false memory of self; however, what I am wearing in those photos and the way the clothing codes my gender, constructs a piece of my identity that I have to reckon with. Building on the ideas in bell hooks’ essay, *The Oppositional Gaze*, I would continue the argument that it is essential to actively engage with the portrayal of the person in the image, not passively observe. As viewers, we have to decide whether or how to, identify with the subject in the image. “Looking […] with an oppositional gaze, black women were able to critically assess the cinema’s construction of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and choose not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator” (99). There is power in disruption. I can adapt or reject identifying with the male gender as presented in the image of the nursery school picture, even though I know that the person portrayed in the 1972 photograph is me. Because clothing choices over the course of our autobiographical experience function as evidence and markers of the ways in which we construct our individual gender identities, what happens when we are documented in gender-identifying clothing that does not correlate with our true selves? hooks writes “we come home to ourselves” (98). We come home to who we are as a subject before we get dressed. I can refuse the masculine representation of my self in the image because it was not a representation generated or chosen by me at the time the photograph was taken. Both the prose photograph and image photograph of myself wearing my brother’s overalls and boyish haircut allows me the power of looking and feeling at who I was then, inside those clothes with the viewer’s advantage of time and distance. What I cannot control is how others choose to see me in that photograph, regardless of the years between when the photo was taken versus it being viewed. Over time, as my clothing choices evolved, they reflect not just the styles of the
time period, but my subject-position within my narrative. Public perceptions and expectations centered around the ways attire is coded for traditional femininity and age are complex and layered. The language used on both sides of the gaze to hijack the power of gender self-definition underscores the struggle in assigning worth to women who look like what traditional ideas of women are supposed to look like. Who gets to define those cultural codes of representation? Dressed and on the street, the gaze of others has a value attached. Social approval comes with strings. As women age, that approval requires fulfilling additional criteria layered with a higher number of restrictions based on the intangibility of social mores. In addition to considerations about hair and makeup, I would extend Sontag’s idea in “The Double Standard of Aging” that clothing is also an external “sign” of appearance a woman uses to ‘establish her status as an “object”’ (290) which answers the question, ‘does my dressed body become an object?’ with yet another question—In which direction does that transformational gaze from subject to object occur? “All these are signs, not of what she is “really” like, but of how she asks to be treated by others” (Sontag, “Double Standard,” 290). Does a woman control her bodily appearance as an object to mask herself-as-subject in response to social rules?

Though I am arguing that the ownership of my self and my individual narrative is mapped across time through my clothing choices, it is important to recognize that each choice is connected to a deep range of evanescent social assumptions and expectations parading as etiquette. Learned, absorbed, or imposed, etiquette and manners are a powerful force that affect the idea of free will centered around clothing choices. Though ephemeral, Lionel Trilling
describes manners as “a culture’s hum and buzz of implication […] It is that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unutterable expressions of value (194-5). The performance of etiquette with its delicate shades of meaning pressed into faded conduct books can be experienced as a potent force that builds and calcifies cultural and gendered boundaries of expectations around attire, ways of thinking, and being. Those constructed boundaries represent the way that femininity and masculinity can be seen as a fabricated product.⁹ The social structures that direct and dictate personal choices clothing can be traced to a wide variety of direct sources, from parents, to occupational requirements, culture, religion, and through all media platforms, and outlets. Indirect input comes from the tradition of gendered expectations, subtle acceptances of the social status quo. The roots of expectations that have long-defined socially-acceptable ways of dressing based on how gender and age are supposed to be performed through clothing run deep. Cultural and social judgement is applied to “women who fail to dress as befits their age” (Lövgren 376). Codes of social etiquette both propagate and calcify assumptions about the visual construction of one’s feminine identity at different ages. When we examine the methods that help us decide what to wear, we can also see how women’s agency regarding clothing choices is often not personally owned, it is publicly dictated. Individual reactions to attire are derived from collective judgement, calcified social tradition, personal history, and attitude. In A Sketch of the Past, Woolf describes with detail, the bone-chilling dismissal her brother, the arbiter of appropriate, expresses for her green home dress, “made

⁹ In her book, Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination, Annette Kuhn writes about a mother’s labor involved in “dressing up” her baby girl and questions what happens when the baby girl grows up and begins to “assert her own wishes about her appearance.” (pp 61-63).
cheaply but eccentrically” (150-1). “He at once fixed on me that extraordinarily observant scrutiny with which he always inspected our clothes. He looked me up and down for a moment as if I were a horse brought into the show ring. Then the sullen look came into his eyes; the look which expressed not simply aesthetic disapproval; but something that went deeper. It was the look of moral, of social, disapproval, as if he scented some kind of insurrection, of defiance of his accepted standards” (Woolf, A Sketch of the Past, 151). Woolf describes her brother’s solid, autocrat-like position near the fire as his look pronounced judgement not just on Woolf’s dress but on her identity as someone of worth, of individual being. Her attire, and thus her self, became a personal affront. That a woman should dare to express herself within her financial limitations with a “home dress, for a pound or two” (Woolf, A Sketch of the Past, 150), generates social repercussions that penetrate the skin of the dress. In that moment of sartorial inspection, Woolf’s clothing creates an embodied experience, which contributes to constructing her subjectivity. Though Woolf, her self, existed before she put on the green dress and descended to the parlour, the memory of that moment of being dressed embedded itself into the stratum of her autobiography.

As with Woolf, assumptions and expectations surrounding appropriate clothing can shift who owns not just my look or style in the wearing moment, but my identity as expressed through my choice of garment. If I acquiesce to parental, occupational, or cultural and social dictates about my attire, then how can I claim that every outfit I “choose” to wear contributes to my identity construction? Philosophically, I will not be sole author of my constructed identity, there will be multiple authors. Adrienne Rich writes, “Until we can understand the assumptions in which
we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves” (18). Because I have spent a significant part of my autobiography wearing someone else’s assumptions about who they thought I should be and wearing what was appropriate by social standards, I have, as Judith Butler would argue, “performed my subjectivity” through a daily-getting-dressed “repetition” of socially enforced rules of “gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” Thus, “it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying” that I can “subvert social norms of identity.” (Gender Trouble, original emphasis, 145). By consciously exercising my individual choice of attire during my daily practice of getting dressed, I can begin to negotiate my own ideas of self within the scope of the world’s expectations. And by developing a practice of designing and building my own clothing that embodies ideas of my self, I have learned how to see and understand who I am through the clothing I create. “When I insert myself into the world, it is a world where others are already present” (Arendt, VA, 179). Those “others” wait with their spectator gaze and their set of expectations ready to pounce with approval or disappointment. “Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us” (Woolf, Orlando, 119). I know that having experienced a crucible of expectations I have emerged fearless about my attire. I look out from inside my shirt, pants, or skirt differently than I did 37 years ago. Every garment I construct, and wear, is threaded through with an idea of how I want to move through the world as myself. At times, I forget how others may see me in what I am wearing, until, in a sweaty, hot moment on 6th avenue, a piece of the world pierces through my armor to approve of my “who.” Rich writes of the woman who “goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps,
possibilities” (21). The woman Rich describes is not one who is looking for a way that others think she should be. She is not looking to traditional etiquette or conduct books that will dictate thinking, attire, or behavior based on another person’s definition of appropriate gender roles, and their corresponding rules in relationship to age. What we can call the othered gaze is a way to rethink what wearing clothing out in the world means. I use the visual rhetoric of the clothing I design and build to write my own story. It is a way of silently writing my “I.” As with Rich, who argues that women cannot and should not gestate subjectivity for others, they must mid-wife their own selves, (25), I cannot wear someone else’s expectations of my gender or my age. Jenny Davidson, in her book chapter “Politeness and its Costs,” illustrates exactly how deep the roots of the obligation ethic masquerading as etiquette and manners is embedded in women’s decision-making of self. She writes how the “obligation to be both highly self-disciplined and constantly thoughtful for others” is specific to gender and race. That women and especially women of color “have been disproportionately enlisted in the cause of a sacrificial ethic for which they often pay a high price” is a clear text or subtext in most etiquette and conduct books from the turn of the last century that still echo throughout cultural media. There are public assumptions about the compulsory obligations that woman should assume for the good of others at a cost of personal desire or contentment with themselves. There is a corresponding social price extracted for disobeying.

Sara Ahmed argues in her aptly titled article, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness” how conditional “happiness provides a script for [a young woman’s] becoming” (578). The conditions are unequal and reflect the obligation ethic. Though Ahmed uses an eighteenth-
century novel of manners about a daughter and her parents to illustrate part of her argument, “for the daughter to be happy, she must be good, since being good is what makes them happy and she can only be happy if they are happy” (578), it clearly outlines the flow of decision-making power still in evidence today. Expectations surrounding appropriateness of attire and behavior become about more than one’s own theories surrounding subjectivity, they become about the practice of one’s subjectivity and the obligations embedded within the practice. Happiness “shapes the very terms through which individuals share their world with others” (Ahmed 580). Thus, the subject as the self, constructed within the lived experience, is discovered through negotiating a relationship between theory and a lived practice.

Susan Howe, in her book, *The BirthMark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*, writes in fragments and in moments of being that feel certain in their uncertainty. “Words are slippery. Question of audience, signature, self […] will be answered later by historians, who need to produce a certain rationalism for the unstable I-witnessing […] Trammels of identity. Revelation approaches as a mystery” (Howe, The BirthMark, 66). Howe and Woolf feel connected across time, both looking and writing simultaneously forward and backward, fearless in their daily active exploration of the fluid nature of identity. The instability of what true choice can feel like when facing transparent and opaque impediments to defining my identity has led me to explore a wide range of thinkers from different disciplines. Philosophy and poetry, cinema, literature, and gender studies all offer up active ideas.¹⁰

¹⁰ Click and Scroll to see What She Said. ([https://www.janajarosz.com/what-she-said](https://www.janajarosz.com/what-she-said)) I owe a debt to the work of a number of women intellectuals, too many to name here. Among the most consulted for inspiration: Susan Howe,
The vocabulary I will use throughout this piece—identity, the self, the subject, the who, the I, will be deployed somewhat interchangeably. The messiness of the space between theory and practice requires a commitment to exploring how theory can traverse the relationship between the single embodied “I” as the author of one’s own autobiography, and the all-encompassing, gendered “I” that personifies what Nancy K. Miller calls Carol Gilligan’s “invention and promotion of [the] universal female subject [as] a passionate adventure taking place on a variety of disciplinary fronts” (“Representing Others,” 3). I am “I” for my self and I am “I” in relation to other women somewhere in the space between genders. I am part of a collective universal female subject. From this point of view, the I is non-binary.

“The wind

was cleansing the bones.

They stood forth silver and necessary.

It was not my body, not a woman’s body, it was the body of us all.

It walked out of the light.”


Virginia Woolf, Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, bell hooks, Alison Bechdel, Julia Kristeva, Iris Marion Young, Toril Moi, Anne Carson, Nancy K. Miller, Toni Morrison, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson. This essay does not aim to catalog different identity and gender theories from intellectuals, but to take up an interdisciplinary approach, a work-in-progress conversation between the overlapping authors as a means of creating a new analytical framework to explore how we become our fluid gendered selves at any age.
Anne Carson’s description of the universal body at the end of her essay-poem centers around the same non-binary claim of both/and. The body is not claimed by the “I” who voices the narration, nor is it claimed by a subject, gendered as a woman in the essay-poem—but defined as collectively belonging to “us all.” When discussing the singular “I” and the “collective experience of women as gendered subjects” (“Representing Others” 4) Miller links the two points of view with the use of the word simultaneously, which underscores how the both/and model is not only possible but necessary. She places autobiography as a cultural practice “in which the self necessarily performs its relation to the other” (“Representing Others,” original emphasis, 6). There is an urgency to a simultaneous approach. When leaving my apartment for the day, I cannot think of who myself is, attired inside my clothing choices, without thinking of what myself looks like, on the outside, in visual-relation to others.
Here’s how I will visually map my theory of four seen-selves. There is the physical image of what I look like in my mirror—my reflected identity. Friday, February 15, my mirror reflects a woman wearing jeans, a fluid-cut, shiny silver tank top under a matte silver blazer with a black illustration printed on the left back shoulder like a second-skin tattoo. The image of myself that I see in my mirror is refracted in my mind’s eye and glazed with what I feel I look like—my reflexive identity. It is “a sign of who [I] am and want to be” (Aspers, Orderly Fashion, 81). That morning, I chose to dress in a contradictory shimmer of textures. My clothing feels like visual water when I move. To others, outside in the world, the self they see, may not be the same self I see in my

11 Click and scroll to see Fig. 1: Seen Selves, (https://www.janajarosz.com/theory-in-practice-maps)
mirror or my mind’s eye. I can control how I produce my identity for the day, but I cannot control how others perceive that identity I present to the world. I know I may appear on the street as a woman wearing an outfit that is unfamiliar in texture, shape or design. I know my attire may provoke a second look, confusion, appreciation, concern, delight, or disapproval. Each day, I have the power through my clothing choice to generate a simultaneous collection of three varying perspectives and affect: what I see and feel inside my clothing, what others see and feel based on their view of the outside of my clothing, as well as my own projected awareness of what I think others may or may not be seeing and feeling. To complicate matters further, I am also aware that my gendered self is seen wearing my choice of attire in relation to what other women choose to wear. These four perspectives of self, create sensory layers of the locatedness of the body clothed as the self. They triangulate at the precise moment when the four selves collide into one. Though I am dressed as in clothing that is traditionally gendered for women, my one gendered self does not replace or represent for all other women, but for itself. What it can do, is stand in relief—foregrounded and in focus to the others. The both/and model is one of visual simultaneity. My body in my zebra, princess-cut coat can be seen clearly in the foreground while the eye registers the details of the background through a soft blur of distance. When we rack-focus the eye on the background, though we lose the visual specificity of the self in the foreground as a body, that self does not disappear altogether. It is still fully present. Felt. Not seen. The rack-focus action shifts the sensation of locatedness, and that split-second flash

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12 Click and scroll to see Fig. 2: Mapped Perspectives, (https://www.janajarosz.com/theory-in-practice-maps)
13 Click and scroll down to see Figs. 5-5.2: Visual Simultaneity, (https://www.janajarosz.com/theory-in-practice-maps)
of moving clarity actualizes the “fragility of a claim to representativity,” (Miller, “Representing Others,” 16).

Fig. 5: Both/and Model—Visual Simultaneity

The length of time a camera needs to shift focus is representative of the length of time the human eye takes to rack focus from subject to object. It happens in a blink.\textsuperscript{14} The fragile nature of that 0.1-0.4 seconds is felt, not always seen. When we blink to adjust focus, we are barely aware of the visual shift, but we feel the sensation of the subtle movement. When shooting my portrait as the in-focus subject in the extreme foreground with the out-of-focus objects in the

\textsuperscript{14} Click to engage with data on blinking: https://bionumbers.hms.harvard.edu/bionumber.aspx?id=100706&ver=0
background, the 70-200mm zoom lens the camera uses to capture the desired effect compresses the angle of view. In other words, the view within the camera lens exists in proportion to the camera’s frame, but not to the normal human eye. The moment of being that the camera captures is “life in a flattened state.” The flattened state is created inside the camera and reproduced outside the camera as a printed image marking a moment in my individual narrative.

Fig. 5: Both/and Model—Visual Simultaneity

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15 Click to view additional work by Ethan Hill, photographer, director of the rack-focus images. (https://www.ethanhill.com/)
Though I am wholly my self in the telling of my narrative, I cannot but help, through my clothing choices that I decide represent me, be foregrounded in relationship to other women. As women, we are also foregrounded in relationship to other genders. Each woman is making her own clothing decisions that may or may not be based on social or cultural expectations about clothing choices or styles traditionally assigned to a specific gender or age. I am wearing pants in relation to what other women are wearing and also in relation to what women are expected to wear if we want to “look like real women.” Who decides who represents as a “real” woman? Specific shapes of clothing function as sign posts. Even though my wide-cut, black wool pants flow skirt-like around my legs as I move, they are, still pants. And even though, in 2019, it is no longer scandalous or even eyebrow-raising for women to wear pants, there are still trace elements of traditional expectations regarding how people are supposed to dress if they want to be recognized as a specific gender. Making clothing decisions to accommodate social or cultural assumptions surrounding gender performance requires an understanding and acceptance of clothing shapes that function as semiotics for gender and age. Women are still visually defined by the silhouette of a skirt or dress, not pants. Even in the most basic of human functions—gender identity is assigned by attire. Because “clothes communicate subject position, one aspect of which is age, norms of what is appropriate vary
with age and stage of life course” (Lövgren 382). At different life stages, specific shapes of clothing that reveal or cover, signify age\textsuperscript{16} and demonstrate how subject formation through freedom of clothing choice is connected to subject position within a personal narrative.

\textbf{Prose Photograph 3}

\textsuperscript{16}“We are no longer girls and have not been for 40 years […] I look around the table and realize we’re all wearing turtleneck sweaters […] We all look good for our age. Except for our necks.” Nora Ephron in \textit{I Feel Bad About My Neck and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman}, Random House, 2008.
The moment of gendered being that compresses the relationship between the foreground and background into two dimensions is seen clearly in photographs documenting the artist Vanessa Beecroft’s early installations. They exist as evidence of the ways that women grouped together can create a visual representation of the universal female subject through specific garment choices.

Wearing what I will call second-skin-clothing, the women all wear bras, underwear, and pantyhose which are commonly considered gender specific, and the stripped-down version of clothing creates a cohesive similarity amongst all the women active in the installation. Yet, depending on the standpoint of the viewer, each individual woman does not represent for all and is at any given time during a shift in standpoint, moving in and out of focus, foreground to background, physically demonstrating a sensation of the simultaneity of both/and. There is a difference between the performance and the photographs of the performance. Whether the photographs function as memories of the performance for those that were there or as a teaser to those that were not, they still flatten the distance between each woman and condense the relief-like nature of the performance groupings. The photographs also capture in a camera blink, the way each woman stands simultaneously as an individual and as part of the universal group.

The visual simultaneity of the subject standing “silver and necessary” in relation and in relief to others is a conceptual through-line connecting Carson to Miller to Toril Moi by way of Simone de Beauvoir and visually represented by Beecroft. Moi takes up Beauvoir’s statement “I am a woman” and places it in the visual and ideological context of a relief sculpture. Because we construct our gender and age identities fluidly in relation to our aggregated selves and also in relation to others, it is useful to consider the duality inherent in the word woman. It is a verbal duality that supports a visual model of both/and. Moi examines the tension that exists between the foreground of the individual self as a woman and the background of social expectations and assumptions surrounding the doxa of femininity. The “‘background’ [...] is what the world wants to make of women” (Moi 9). Moi analyzes Beauvoir’s “I am a woman” statement, continuously
racking the reader’s focus between the foregrounded autobiographical “I” and the theoretical woman standing in relief. The photographs of Beecroft’s installations conceptualize the impossibility of seeing only one woman in the image without considering her in relation to the other women in the composition’s background. The woman wearing the red underwear is herself as an individual, made more so because of the color red—but within the context of the group photograph, she will always stand in relation to the other women photographed in the installation. Engaging deeper with Beauvoir’s thinking, Moi also demonstrates how Beauvoir’s woman acts as the “I” within the statement and is able to pivot and see the world’s definitions of her as a woman is expected to be. “Beauvoir’s fundamental understanding of subjectivity is based on the assumption that we continuously make something of what the world makes of us” (Moi 9). In other words, Moi allows for the world, or the viewer, to rack-focus from woman to women, but she also demonstrates how an individual woman can rack-focus between how she sees herself and her awareness of what the viewer might perceive as her representation. This shifting sensation constitutes a different level of experience. It is the way in which the self looks outward and feels the bodily experience of that viewpoint. “I see myself, and I see myself being seen” (Young 63). It is a kind of internal seeing that is both active and experiential because it manifests a sensation of feeling the gaze which transcends to a feeling of knowing and thus to a holistic body sensation of complete being. It can be considered a lived experience of being dressed. Without diverting to what the world’s gaze signifies when directed at women as object, the overlap between the two different ways the direction of the object and subject’s gaze moves,

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17 The world’s gaze towards women is often male and youth-based—creating additional standards of value that are expected, yet biologically impossible for women to achieve. (Sontag’s “The Double Standard of Aging”)
demonstrates that it is possible to experience both directional flows simultaneously. The shift between the two kinds of viewing directions represents a tension that is both continuously and simultaneously present for each woman. Over time, this wave-like movement between the idea of the self and the practice of the self as seen by the world, erodes and rebuilds each position, creating a process of becoming that is far from static. It becomes integral to each person’s individual narrative.

Related to the idea surrounding the weight of representation is the autobiographical idea of recognition. In Moi’s explanation surrounding Beauvoir’s metaphor of the relief, there are people who stand out and engage with the role of standing in for others. I want to invert the metaphor here and examine Beauvoir’s relief but from the standpoint of an individual in the background of others. Though we are all our individual selves, at times, we also reside, willingly or unwillingly within Beauvoir’s background as one of many, exploring paths to our foregrounded selves. We look for signs and symbols of identity bravery. We also might be full of longing for a sign without knowing precisely what we are internally hoping for, until with a perspective tilt to the landscape, we see it standing out in highlighted relief. Clothing possesses a semiotic quality that signifies to others who we are presenting as, but it can also function the way blazes\textsuperscript{18} on individual trees do—beckoning us and leading us along a trail through the woods.

\textsuperscript{18} Blazes are also referred to as reassurance or confidence markers, historically intended to reassure hikers they have not wandered off the trail (www.nps.gov/noco/learn/management/upload/NCT_CH7.REV.pdf).
The author and artist Alison Bechdel and the photographer and artist Hal Fischer both create work exemplifying the sign-posting power of specific clothing choices. Their work also generates a visceral sensation of the both/and simultaneity within the reader and the viewer. In her graphic memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Alison Bechdel’s autobiographical character experiences a moment of identity recognition that pierces her world of other-ness. The moment is precipitated through a clothing wearing and sighting. In a diner with her father, a young barrette-wearing Bechdel sees a woman being who she is and who she wants to be, dressed in men’s clothing, paying her bill at the counter. The woman with her short hair inspires envy. Throughout *Fun Home*, Bechdel and her father spar over her barrette. “Where’s your barrette?” (96), “What did you do with your barrette?” “Next time I see you without it, I’ll wale you” (97). For Bechdel’s father, the barrette is a clothing accessory visually coding the wearer as feminine. His character places a lot of faith in the barrette, perhaps thinking that the barrette’s own gender assignment will override Bechdel’s less-than-feminine-sensibility—one her cousins recognize as a “butch,” which is also their apt nickname for the young Bechdel on their basketball court. Though Bechdel’s father tries to sell his daughter on wearing the barrette purely as a functional hair accessory, “It keeps the hair out of your eyes” (96), it’s clear her father is forcing her to wear a barrette to conform to the style of gender appearance he has decided for her. The sailor dress, the “missionary” skirt, and the string of pearls her father assigns her to wear are

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19 Click to explore early barrette patents: 1910, 1916, 1953,
https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/95/5e/d1/0164eead165032/US1174531.pdf,
designed to keep Bechdel within a set of strict dress codes that fulfill traditional western standards of beauty and femininity. It’s not until she and her father are in the diner that the young Bechdel sees a woman freely wearing the kinds of clothes she’s only dreamed of for herself.

Within the context of culturally-specific gender identity expectations and within the background of the frame illustrating the diner scene, Bechdel’s eyes are drawn in wide circles of interior recognition. “I didn’t know there were women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts.” Bechdel clarifies her sensation as the deep relief of recognition one would feel when running into someone familiar when far from home. Throughout the graphic novel, Bechdel experiences a sense of dislocation that she articulates as “not right,” until her quest for a signpost pointing towards her longed-for identity is answered through the clothing semiotics of the woman in the diner. Her flash of recognition, or her projection of self from the background of other, to the person in the foreground, happens for Bechdel in a quicksilver moment, a small “hi” undercut with surprise and pleasure in the titanic sensation. The musical of Fun Home explodes this pivotal moment of recognition that is captured in the graphic drawing, into poignant joy through lyrics and music.

“Do you feel my heart saying hi?

In this whole luncheonette

Why am I the only one who sees you’re beautiful?

[spoken] No, I mean,

[sung] Handsome!”
The enormity of the “hi” comes almost at the end of the song’s narrative. Lisa Kron, the lyricist for *Fun Home*, makes the listener feel the weight of the young Bechdel’s moment of recognition through the rich power of a simple clothing description.

“Your swagger and your bearing
And the just right clothes you’re wearing
Your short hair and your dungarees
And your lace-up boots.
And your keys, oh
Your ring of keys.”^20

The combination of how the woman was dressed and the effect the clothes had on her bearing creates an affect of what Nigel Thrift calls “glamour” (292). The affect the young Bechdel experiences in her moment of “hi” is expressed through the musical composition that pushes the lyrics past a mere recitation of a list of clothing into a full-throated acknowledgment of self-recognition. The music reveals the inspiring sensation Bechdel feels watching a woman fearlessly dressing as she wants—pleasing only herself, wearing her own identity, not someone else’s assumptions or expectations for her identity. In the graphic memoir, Bechdel’s drawing has a Beauvoirian landscape quality. The woman in her “just right clothes” is in the foreground of the

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^20 Click to listen to: “Ring of Keys” from The Drama Desk Awards for *Fun Home* in 2014. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMJvLTZOhpE&list=RDwMJvLTZOhpE&start_radio=1&t=6](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMJvLTZOhpE&list=RDwMJvLTZOhpE&start_radio=1&t=6))
frame with her eyes directly challenging the viewer with the young Bechdel in the background, eyes wide, focused on the woman standing out in relief, her ring of keys indenting the text box that describes Bechdel’s recognition in the bottom left of the frame. Her recognition is multi-layered. She sees that the woman is utterly comfortable in her attire, and Bechdel also sees and understands that her short hair and her dungarees visibly code her as masculine, as “old-school-butch.”


21 Click to watch a brief history of the word “butch.” From them magazine’s InQueery channel. The Bechdel mention is at approximately 5:40. (https://video.them.us/watch/what-does-butch-mean-inqueery-them?c=series)
Though the butch-femme dynamic for lesbians is represented differently for gay men, the visual codes for masculinity associated with the clothing accessory of the ring of keys works across both sexualities. A ring of keys is also central to several of Hal Fischer’s images from his photographic series Gay Semiotics. Originally printed in 1977 and shown at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 2018, the images emblematize ways specific clothing choices and the detailed way in which they are worn become internal and external signifiers. For Fischer’s subjects, the process of getting dressed and the narrative of being dressed both encompass conscious meaning. Their choice of clothing and the manner in which they self-style those choices, create a coded ensemble that defines themselves and invites others to read their clothing in a specific way—and thus, their subject as a sexed body. The overlap between Bechdel and Fischer is split between the two ideas of recognition and reproduction. Both the story of the Bechdel moment and the creation of the Fischer images are centered around the same mid-1970’s time period and they both center a ring of keys as a pivotal clothing accessory. Bechdel’s sensory experience during her moment of recognition is one of discovery. She moves from an intuitive state to a conscious state of attention during her assessment of the woman’s clothing from the diner. Unlike Fischer’s photography, where the meaning underlying the keys is precisely laid out for the viewer using directive text, the young Bechdel doesn’t read the ring of keys as a precise signifier. Her eyes read the swagger they grant to the wearer. “Objects must be understood as involved in multiple overlapping negotiations with human beings and not just as sets of passive and inanimate properties” (Thrift 292). The swagger is an affective force. It takes a substantive form generated by the objects she is dressed in: keys, the boots, the dungarees. The confident identity of self that Bechdel senses in the woman wearing the keys, is something she longs for her self,
and only in this pleasurable moment of discovery and recognition, is Bechdel able to begin consciously negotiating their aesthetic message. She senses and perceives a potential connection between herself and the woman through the affect of her clothing choices, whereas Fischer calls out the connection through visual diagramming and then confirms the precise association through specific text overlaid on top of the images. “Left aggressive, right passive. Keys.” The objects and text in Fischer’s photographs are prescriptive and designed to provoke. Because the text is almost instructional, I would argue that they are more than “connection machines, technologies that facilitate imaginary recognitions” (Thrift, 292). The affect they emit, is framed as a way to generate a specific response. The states of getting dressed and being dressed shift from sensations of affective recognition in Bechdel to direct response in Fischer. The keys as object, though symbolic, become a visual word that is translatable. They create a direct conversation between two Beauvoirian ideas present in Fischer’s images.

Fischer’s first photograph, Keys, demonstrates the ways in which the man in the image functions as Beauvoir’s foregrounded subject, a sexed body in a situation, wearing the keys to signify a sexual preference and identity to the others that occupy the background space. Fischer’s man foregrounded in the photograph is “continuously mak[ing] something of what the world makes of [him]” (Moi 9). Yet, Fischer’s second photograph, Signifiers for a Male Response, demonstrates that the men are aware that there is a second set of invisible others in the background of the world at large. The first two lines of overlaid text address the others occupying the background with a homosexual preference, and the last two lines of the text in image 2 acknowledge that there are others who also wear rings of keys that may not be sexual in relationship to the way the keys translate to others. “Keys are also worn by janitors, laborers, and other workers with no sexual signification intended.” With this second set of others, the affective qualities that belong to the ring of keys are visible to men with same-sex preferences, and invisible to men for whom the ring of keys are, just a ring of keys. Though the value assigned to

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22 Though Beauvoir was writing about women as the subject, I find her argument useful to apply to all subjects, regardless of gender.
the ring of keys in Fischer’s images are intangible between subject and viewer, the photograph as object, has a tangible value generated through the sale of each print, between artist and viewer. The art historian John Berger describes it as “images as commodities—artifacts which are bought and sold” (Kuhn, Power of the Image, 4). When considering the dislocation of time and space between Fischer’s original prints and the reprints, it raises questions concerning the value embedded in the photographs. Were they created as a record of a social gesture from a specific time period—allowing viewers in 2017 in London to experience ideas about sexual availability in San Francisco in 1977, or were they created as a commodity? When photographs or video are designed as records of a performance, they can function like a souvenir of the event, restricting access to the actual, live performance (Kuhn, Locating Memory, 11) thus acquiring a value of exclusivity. As with my performance video, Getting Dressed, when the video artifact becomes open-source through the accessible nature of the internet, does it change the value of the performance or the value of the video? From an autobiographical standpoint, the Getting Dressed video functions as a form of visual memory, it locates my memory of the event in the digital space of my website. It has value to me in that it represents a fragment of how my “I” is physically constructed every day, which leads to the question, how is autobiographical value assigned?

Defining the autobiographical “I” outside the genre of self-help writing requires a closer look at how theories surrounding the practice of life writing are discussed, advanced, shared,

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23 Click and scroll to watch “Getting Dressed and Being Dressed”: https://www.janajarosz.com/fragmentsofself
and deployed. It is an area of popular and academic culture rich in ever-evolving thinking. From a literary perspective tradition, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson situate the autobiographical “I” in four arenas: the narrating, the narrated, the ideological, and the historical “I.” They also look at how the self-presentation of each “I” overlaps in the visual and digital space. “Automediality” is a term used in “expanding the definition of how subjectivity is constructed in writing, image, or new media” (Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 168). Because I choose to write my autobiography through a multi-layered approach, each layer functions as a part of my atypical “writing” process: designing and building a garment, getting dressed in the sewn skirt or shirt, the multiple wearings of the garment, the singular wearing that sparks a deep-rooted memory, the sensations of affect kindled in the form of new memories that follow the spark—all influence my next subject-as-undressed moment in front of my closet. Each layer materializes as a garment, a document, a photograph, or a memory about choices made while getting dressed. Each medium I use to author my autobiography is “constitutive of the subjectivity rendered” (Smith and Watson, RA, 168); and each overlaps and propagates inside each other to define and redefine new geographies of my self.

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24 Hereafter Reading Autobiography will be RA.
25 Click and scroll all the way down to see Fig. 10: Automediality Process, (https://www.janajarosz.com/theory-in-practice-maps)
Used by artists and thinkers, maps that track the exploration of identity share a language of discovery and mark collective intersections between individual theories and practice. They are one way that we can expand autobiographical ideas of visuality and textuality. Sontag’s self-making work encompasses her written ideas with her practice of being in life and being captured in photographs, by a wide range of fine art photographers. As an “exemplary witness to the fact that living a thinking life and thinking about the life one is living can be complementary [...] activities” (Cott), Sontag’s unapologetic “I” is a key example of the ways in which a living embodiment of the self demonstrates how those moments of being, aggregate over time into a persona. In direct contrast to Sontag, Simone Weil argues in “Self-Effacement” for the anonymity
of the self. “God gave me being in order that I should give it back to him […] The self is only the shadow which sin and error cast by stopping the light of God, and I take this shadow for a being” (40). Can my “I” step out of the shadow without fear of Godly reprisal? Why I am even “writing” about myself? Perhaps my self can be free of the shadow if I fearlessly illuminate who I really am. Reading Carson’s Flaubert Again, I hear her responding across time and space to Weil— “The rapt, hard, small beak of my self demanding to be me. My self finding the words for that. If I can find the words I can make it real” (77). Thus, if I can articulate my self, then I can step out of the shadows and onto the page, into the photograph, or simply locate my subject within feminist theory’s foreground.

The ways we theorize and embody our selves through our clothing within the context and situation of life can be viewed not only as live performance but as a way of practicing the daily “I” of one’s identity. Susan Bordo discusses how the epistemological body is a metaphor for our “locatedness” in time and space (Bordo 229). Merging the theoretical body with the practical and lived experience of the body creates a new way to consider how clothing and autobiography could be part of cultural theory and not relegated to nostalgia. Fixing the wearer of clothing as the knower of the self “in time and space situates and relativizes perception and thought—[it] requires transcendence” (Bordo 227). In other words, I am always fully my self when I am fully aware of who I am in the clothes that I know represent my “I.” My location of self in the daily moments of construction center around who I believe myself to be, who I want to be during

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26 I am separating the “our” and the “selves” as a way to emphasize the ownership of the self.
the activity I am getting dressed for, and who I will become throughout my day wearing the clothes I’ve chosen to enclose myself in. I am both Julia Kristeva’s subject-in-process and a body-as-object-in-process. I am transcending my body's experience, but simultaneously aware how I am endlessly creating and recreating my self. Taking the longer view of narrative, each day’s attire could be considered a fragment of the self that collects, fractures, re-collects and constructs a broader geography of individual identity that expands and contracts over linear time. I don’t wear the same kind of attire every day. Because, if during one week during the summer of 2018, Tuesday was cuffed-black pant layered with ten-year old Rick Owens grey tank top under sheer-nylon-pleated-shirt day; and Thursday was broken-in jeans with a softer-than-anything-t-shirt, paired with Dubonnet-red lipstick and gold leather loafer day; then Sunday is a peacock and pomegranate print skirt worn with my father-in-law’s mustard-yellow-radio-station-WMCA sweatshirt day.\(^{27}\) Mapping my moments of being over the course of this one week are situational to the time and space of my age and place in life. I’m financially flush enough to own a Rick Owens shirt, in love enough to have a father-in-law, and feel fancy enough to wear bright lipstick. “Sounds and spirits […] leave traces in a geography” writes Howe in The Birth-Mark (156). These 2018 wearings, visualized in a digital image created in 2019, will provide points of memory in my future. Whether I wear a piece of clothing I have designed and built, or I wear a purchased or inherited piece, when I compose my ensemble for the day, I construct a daily geography that pays homage to the roots of each garment. Each ensemble allows for an internal space to create a story-fragment of my autobiography. “Trust the place to form the voice” (Howe 156). The place

\(^{27}\) Click and scroll to view: Mapping Moments of Being in Linear Time, (https://www.janajarosz.com/wearings)
my identity exists on that Tuesday, is within a sheer silvery gray nylon shirt. The geography inside that moment of being is defined by the multiple seams used to construct the boundaries of the shirt. I sew the French seams that both hold and outline the geography of the garment on the outside, so their engineering function becomes part of the overall design of the shirt. I trust the clothing choices I made before I left my apartment. I know the visual rhetoric of my attire that I present to the world actively expresses and reveals the truth of my self. Kristeva in her book chapter Hannah Arendt, Life Is a Narrative, argues that for Arendt, “action, seeing, recollecting, completing the recollection through the narrative” (Crisis of the European Subject, 57) is part of the revelation of the “who.” My actions of getting dressed and being dressed establish meaning because it is I, who am deciding what and how to get and be dressed. Though my radio-station-mustard-yellow sweatshirt is inherited and not chosen ownership, it functions as a recollected item of clothing and it becomes something else entirely through my choice to wear it. My actions become my autobiography in real time. (Arendt, VA, 179).

The place where I store my autobiographical fragments that becomes Howe’s place that forms the voice is my closet. My closet contributes daily to forming the voice of my self and my identity. Small in square feet, its geography is boundless, accruing a range of clothing that deeply embodies my identity. Each person’s closet functions as an archive, an ever-expanding and contracting autobiographical container of thin layers of clothing, timestamped and stitched.

28 Click and scroll to view: Mapping Inside a Moment of Being, (https://www.janajarosz.com/wearings)
29 Click and scroll down to view: Mapping Recollected Moments, (https://www.janajarosz.com/wearings)
together with the voices of our gender, sexuality, and age. Using an overlapping time and space approach is useful in that it can create a locatedness for the subject or object within the larger collective identity we want to examine. Locatedness goes beyond merely timestamping the physical place and actual location of a “wearing” of a garment in a personal narrative arc. I would argue that it assigns value to two levels of affect—the affect of memory the subject experiences when wearing the garment and the affect that is generated by the object itself. Both overlap in a time and place and connect Beauvoir’s foregrounded individual with the backgrounded individuals. And because memories shape-shift over time, the idea of locatedness also helps to focus on the penumbra of the moment of wearing and being.

As a subject, I am perpetually transformed based on my actions of getting dressed in a series of garments that are individually considered objects. I am also transformed through being dressed, through my skin’s proximity to my garment-object. This body-skin connection generates tension between my self as the subject and the garment-as-object. Both are active while I am in the state of being dressed. “Objects, after all, are not only located in spaces such as archives and anthologies” (Castronovo, Gilman 4), they are also located in action, in the moment of being or process. Though my closet may be considered an archive which stores all the garments-as-objects which reveal myself-as-subject, there is a third object to consider in the equation. If I examine how my identity can be simultaneously my self as subject and also a separate object, then my individual identity can also be considered an object-in-process which is separate from my self in what Kristeva terms, “subject-in-process.” They can co-exist, both retaining a
locatedness, a sense that the subject and object-in-process are somewhere. Because my identity as the subject is acted upon by garments-as-objects, we are both located in a mutable state of becoming, neither has a fixed time or space location. If the object is the clothing itself, then it is time and place stamped in the closet, and in a memory. The black dress worn to the funeral for my adopted mother, Teresa, in November 2017, is connected to a date, a “wearing,” a specific moment and place in linear time outside the archive of the closet. Who I was then, wearing that dress may be different from me now, wearing the same black dress for a different event. As with Woolf who writes, “this past is as much affected by the present moment,” I know that the inverse is also true. My past and present selves overlap with each other over time. My memories relocate.

During the process of getting dressed—at the moment of actively choosing a garment, when one is undressed, one is reaching for the hanger with the black dress, but that fluid moment embodies two other choices. I am also choosing the past and the power of its affect associated with that article of clothing. There is a layered relationship between the memory itself and the affect of memory; both are attached to the garment being considered at the moment of getting dressed. There is deep potential in that moment of subject-being to subject-becoming. The fragrance of the past layered into sleeves, beckons. The affect of confidence, power, glamour, sadness hovers—ready to generate new memories. Every time I get dressed, I am presented

30 Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, p. 229
31 Click to engage with a very short history of chaos theory. ([https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chaos/#DefChaDetNonSenDep](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chaos/#DefChaDetNonSenDep))
with a decision-making moment in the process of considering who I was before and who I will become in the clothes I am choosing to represent my “I.” It is a snapshot moment of pure being. I am my self, as my own subject, as it exists before I get dressed. Before one arm even begins to glide through a sleeve, I am free to accept or reject the past associated with the dress. I can re-embbody the affect and project it into the day. I can, (or not) dissolve my self a little and acquiesce to someone else’s expectations concerning my attire. The precise moment of choosing how to get dressed can be pinpointed in time and space the way my imagination’s camera would photograph the moment—freezing it into a memory that doesn’t exist outside the mind’s eye. What is left after the affect of choice evaporates is the photograph of myself wearing the outfit. The photograph can prompt questions. How do we know that the point of view experienced in the moment of dressing is accurate? Is it true? With time and space separating the event and the photograph viewing, the potential for disillusionment exists. Annette Kuhn writes, “As an aid to radicalised remembering, memory work can create new understandings of both past and present, while refusing a nostalgia that embalms the past in a perfect irretrievable moment” (14). It is active, unstable, forever moving. Not embalmed. “Memory work bridges the divide between inner and outer worlds” (Kuhn 14). Wearing a garment I’ve worn before is a way of re-embodying the work of memory. Each time I wear the black dress, its edges pierce the real world and connect my innermost self to a real-life context or a situation grounded in a personal chronology that becomes an autobiographical marker. It’s the black dress I wore to a wedding and then two years later, I wore it again to Teresa’s funeral. Though I am wearing the same dress, I am not the same as I was during the time in between the two drastically different types of life events. “the outer limits of personality are blurred and unstable because of the responsiveness of the self to the
forces of the present moment” (Schulkind 18). During my experience in the dress celebrating at the wedding and then mourning the deep loss of my adopted mother, I can feel the tension and negotiation of self and attire, “between transcendence and immanence, between subjectivity and being a mere object” (Young 32). This tension actively lives in the context where and how our bodies experience the ways our clothing interacts with the world, which then changes the way our selves inhabit the bodily experience. Much the way our bodies’ skin is the outermost layer between what coats our internal selves and connects with the gaze of our world, when getting dressed, the last layer of clothing we dress ourselves in is one that performs the same functions as does our skin. The final garment both encases our selves and presses our body up against the air of our world. It is the last line of protection and the first marker of identification between who we are and where we are at any given moment.

I locate my self in a particular way in that moment of being. Woolf writes of Mrs. Ramsey sinking into herself after everyone has gone to bed. “All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity to being oneself, a wedge-shaped cored of darkness, invisible to others” (Woolf 45). There are moments during a wearing, where inside the nacreous layers of affect, glittering experience and memory that are attached to my black dress, I can feel the small, hard, stone of my self. And “when the self merges with reality, all limits associated with the physical world cease to exist” (Schulkind 18), I am free.

Being dressed in those garments generates change both in theory and in practice. I practice being my self in real life and in memory. Woolf shows me the way. She demonstrates
and proves that two levels of being are possible—“the surface and the spreading depths […]”

“To tell the whole story of a life the autobiographer must devise some means by which the two levels of existence can be recorded—the rapid passage of events and actions; the slow opening up of single and solemn moments of concentrated emotion” (Schulkind 19). I need both the theory and the practice to “do” both levels of being. I can think about who I am and the ways I negotiate what I wear, but then I need to live in my clothing choices. I need to experience life wearing my “I.”

The construction, performance, doing, the wearing of my self as my subject functions not just as a form of automediality, but also as another method of “writing” feminist theory. By developing new visual and experiential ways to “write theory,” we can “transmit knowledge through embodied action” (Taylor XVI). When and how does a lived practice become embodied as a theory? In an effort to explore ways in which the self is continuously constructed over time, I want to explore other formal methods to visually record the physical nature of creation of the self. I am working to push the boundaries in ways that visual memories which constitute an integral part of the autobiographical process become the autobiography themselves. Diana Taylor asks “what tensions might performance behaviors show that would not be recognized in text and documents?” (Taylor XVII). How I feel wearing or performing my self is intangible. In that sense then, how do we represent for what we can’t see, but only feel? How do we represent a memory? Is it visuals? Is it text-based? Creating a visual language using the form of clothing-as-objects that is based on embodied action, is one way of “challenging hegemonic structures of thought production that are traditionally based on forms of writing. Writing has become the
guarantor of existence itself” (Taylor XIX). Perhaps there is room for new forms of critical thinking that can be applied to the ways in which theories surrounding the construction of gender identities overlap with the practice of gender identities.

Examining the connective tissue between writing on paper versus writing through space and time while wearing clothing I have designed and built, can change the way I work to produce new knowledge. The doing and making part of the creative process has always been a way to actively work out the meaning in ideas. Much the way the self becomes over time, ideas also become more truly themselves through “working them out” which in turn can generate theory. Both the practice and the form in which the theories physically manifest can fold in on themselves and become part of the actual theory. Joan Didion reflects on her own practice, “I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythm of words and sentences and paragraphs. […] the way I write is who I am or have become” (Didion 7). Her argument that the meaning of an idea may be expressed and understood through something that is not entirely material supports my argument that a sensorial method might be the purest way to express the true meaning of a self living in the motion and rhythm of the experience of one’s life. Sometimes identities need to be felt to be made real. They need to be swallowed and allowed to permeate into a visceral experience that can be expressed through the affect of attire. To re-paraphrase Young, the sensation of “I feel myself being seen” reflects Beauvoir’s idea back towards us—the way that the “I” stands in relief to others. The sensation of feeling the self, coming into focus, is the sound of theory and practice colliding during a lived body experience. Before I get dressed, I’m undressed. Kristeva writes in Arendt: Life as a Narrative, “the meaning of what […] is doing is to
be found in activity itself. Or, in other words: thinking and truly being in life are two identical things, which means that thought must always start over from zero” (179, emphasis added). Because moments of being happen live, not pre-recorded as with what passes for reality on TV, and they happen over and over, they create additional meaning in the unceasing action, the endless nature of rhythm’s activity. How do we visually name that meaning? How do we embody what that looks, sounds, and feels like in a meaningful way so that another person can share in the created meaning? Because “digital technologies will further ask us to reformulate our understanding of “presence” (Taylor 4), how I place my visual fragments of autobiography on my thesis website within the larger digital space underscores the unceasing nature of subject-in-process.

Embodied experience feels as if it lives both in and around the space between Woolf’s “it’s the being and the doing” (Woolf 45, emphasis added). When considering how Woolf’s writing encompasses the both/and, I propose we reconstitute the language supporting the idea of the embodied experience to that of re-embodiment. Rethinking the word expands the idea to shift subject construction from a static positioning to one of activity and movement. By shifting embodiment, which embraces a finite quality, to re-embodiment, the prefix “re” signifies energy, a beginning, a sense of movement, and Arendt’s essence of beginning at zero—again, and again, and again. The subject becomes and enters into a new state or experience of living. It is not static or stable, it is always in motion. The construction of the subject is re-embodied situationally over time and through its environment, both of which are endemic to the living experience. My daily performance in which I get dressed plays on loop, endlessly re-embodying the construction
of myself, my own subject, over and over. Taylor writes, “performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called “twice-behaved behavior” (Taylor 3). I both absorb and transfer the affects of memory, of the clothing, and of my daily self when I get dressed in the clothes I’ve chosen. I think about Woolf’s how I want be, and what I want to do. And I start at zero every day.

In examining the Getting Dressed and Being Dressed: Clothing as Autobiography of Identity video, the twice-behaved behavior sense of performance is embodied in the different methods of its filming, editing, and viewing. The video captured the live performance of my actions when putting on a series of coats. Each take was filmed in a one non-stop sequence.

[Action: I walk into frame, I take a transparent coat from the rack, I slide one arm through the right sleeve, I slide my left arm through the other sleeve as I shrug and settle the coat on over my shoulders. Cut.]
During the filming we captured two or three takes in multiple camera set ups and perspectives, resulting in a total of 7-10 completed “getting dressed” action sequences. Each take reifies my identity as I construct it again and again for the camera in connection to its wide shot, close up, or medium close up position. Though the original gestures are captured in the “body, which is a metaphor for our ‘locatedness’ in space and time,” (Bordo 229), they are not completely objective. Because elements of the “getting-dressed” gestures are extracted and reiterated in the editing process, they create a new situation, a new “locatedness” in which the embodied experience can now exist. The subject construction is re-embodied all over again through the editing, until it creates another object—a finished piece of film representing myself as the subject. Though the getting dressed performance can be watched endlessly with every click of the replay button, “the only access to the performance […] is through photographic images, or ‘photo-souvenirs’, which, as reproductions, can only be ‘betrayals of the original’ (Kuhn 11). Though the reality of my performative actions has disappeared, my getting dressed actions are recorded in the visual medium of photography, located both on a digital file and in my memory. I can recover that specific reality by re-watching the video, but which embodied experience is the real one?

As Young and Moi agree, “the lived body is a unified idea of the physical body acting and experiencing in a specific socio-cultural context; it is body-in-situation” (Young 16). In this instance, the video also becomes the body-in-situation. The physical body of myself is portrayed
getting dressed over and over within the video which also represents myself. The video then becomes subject to the bigger situation of my thesis website. My website in turn constructs a digital self or subject in the object of the online world. “To claim that the body is the situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman’s body is bound up with the way she uses her freedom” (Moi, “Woman,” 65). I choose to reveal the construction of myself within the situation of a lived body experience both in semi-private context of filming a “getting-dressed” video and in the larger public space of the internet. “Performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze the events as performance. […] Gender […] is rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere. To understand these as performance suggests that performance also functions as epistemology. Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing” (Taylor 3). This experience of knowing happens in different places where the act of creativity is both practiced and embodied. Using the metaphor of nesting dolls, my self is located within my body, within the clothes I design, build, and wear, and I am bringing the full force of my creative-practicing self to full knowledge within my performance in front of the camera; and within the memory of that performance, which is re-located on video in the larger digital space, lies the everyday action of putting on a layer of clothing, and another layer, and yet another layer. Stacking up my different selves situationally over time and place, I can compose my “who” and author my autobiography.32

32 Click and scroll down to view The Body in Situation, (https://www.janajarosz.com/fragmentsofself)
Because the material culture that creates “my past is piling up, as [Walter] Benjamin might have put it, in an overwhelming mass of debris” (Kuhn and McAllister 15); my past exists as an ever-expanding closet and as a cloud of digital images providing visual proof that my subject is
embodied and re-embodied through events unfolding in a narrative arc. It is a story that is unstable, fluid, and always in flux. Just as when a garment is in motion, the swinging edges of each piece of clothing I wear visually and physically perform as a blur between the ways in which my successive selves, undressed or dressed in their gender, age, or cultural identity for the day, embrace the past and respond to the context of the present. The situation that surrounds each moment of being is ever-moving each time I stand naked in front of my closet and each time I get dressed. The state of being dressed—living dressed as my “who” is an embodied method of identity construction as a theory performed live—every day. It is a state of active assumption of identity based on the negotiation triangulated between my self, the meaning of the clothing and the meaning I, as the wearer, assign to each garment.

The becoming state of getting dressed bleeds and overlaps into the state of being dressed, a fully embodied experience that exists throughout my physical space and backwards and forwards through my emotional identity space. This active experience then shifts into the next state of becoming my self through wearings. The membranes between the states are porous, enabling a fluid stream of both the aimless and conscious mind to coexist. This stream permeates the physical lived experience of the construction of my self and my identity as the subject. Only by deconstructing the ways in which the self is felt as it enters the process of becoming fully embodied, can I concept new ways to visually and verbally articulate the sensorial elements of subjectivity. The creative process itself creates new ways for “writing” feminist theory. I would push Taylor’s claim about “transmit[ting] knowledge through embodied action” (Taylor XVI) to
further claim, that by developing visual and experiential ways to “write theory,” we may transcend how we practice our own subject and thus, through its very embodiment, become the theory itself. Using automediality as a framework for recording and documenting the ways we embody and live the answers to questions around how subjectivity is constructed, we can formalize and codify the process for the future. Someone else reading the automediality of my material culture, my charts, and my photographs will be obliged to decide who I am after I am gone. “Uncertainty instills hope, an openness to what is yet to come: that the future is not determined by the past” (Kuhn and McAllister 15). Clothes are more than inheritance,\(^{33}\) they are material pieces of culture embedded with narrative that mark moments of being. They exist as “outcomes of action” for the previous owner and as an “intent of action” for the new owner. They can generate new authorship during new wearings because they are situational to the wearer’s subjectivity. And they are deeply glazed with the texture of memory. The niece or nephew who inherits my wardrobe or the stranger who finds my faux zebra fur coat at a vintage store will experience the embodied affect of the garment’s potential embedded in its seams. They will assume the affect’s power for their own practice as they wear it, writing their own identity theory into their own subjective future.

\(^{33}\) Thank you to Nancy K. Miller for the inheritance idea.
A SHORT NOTE REGARDING PROJECT CONTINUATION:

Because of the fluid nature of constructing a subject-in-process narrative through the framework of automediality, I will continue to develop The Notebooks project as a way to further expand my creative exploration into the shifting space between feminist theory and a lived body experience.

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