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Getting Located: Queer Semiotics in Dress

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GETTING LOCATED: QUEER SEMIOTICS IN DRESS

by

CALLEN ZIMMERMAN

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
GETTING LOCATED: Queer Semiotics in Dress
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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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ABSTRACT

Getting Located: Queer Semiotics in Dress

by Callen Zimmerman

Advisor: Christopher Schmidt

The body, a long contested site of identity construction, has been used by historically by queers to convey desire, build affinity and transgress norms. Looking at the fashioned queer body, this capstone takes the form of a proposal for an art exhibition at the Leslie Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Seeking to engage with objects, performance and film which approximate, provide proxy for or depart from the body as a site, it explores the social and political quagmire of getting dressed. Comprised of contemporary art that looks at the rupture of legible bodily semiotics, this show wonders what new modes of expression form in their wake. Cruising the archive, what legacies and genealogies do artists engage, which ones will they willingly forget? What does the embodiment of queerness through dress look like in our current historical moment? What do these practices say about the future of explorations of identity through dress? Overall, these works, and their curation, hope to question the traditional modes of identity construction and the supposedly stable categories of gender, sex, sexuality, race and ability. The following white paper takes a multivocal approach to examining the discursive practices, nuanced modes, and slight twists that fashioning has undergone historically in the hands of queers. Through a multivocal approach, it uses a bevy of forms (drawings, performance script, personal narrative) to refuse a singular neat and linear narrative, mirroring the ways that practices of queer self-fashioning grapple with and complicate dominant narratives and paradigms.
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Introduction

Much like the fraught, fun and disorienting practice of dressing myself everyday, this project is decidedly fragmented, and like its accompanying exhibition proposal, employs an almost anti-format. The pages that serve as a collection of different iterations this project has taken, including but not limited to historical explorations, theory drawings, a script for a performance, etc. This bricolage, much like the jumbled pile of clothes that one assembles in the midst of trying to find an outfit for the day, represents not one solidified idea, but a smattering of different approaches and turns. In my meta-collection process (curation of bits of work about my curation work) it is my hope that each parcel will have room to articulate itself, and in the process, will confuse and conflate singularity of narrative or voice.

Getting Located: Queer Semiotics of Dress, as an exhibition proposal, is a selection of contemporary artists practices and pieces that tackle, dismantle & explore how dressing and fashioning inform identity construction. From a diverse pool of young emerging artists—Craig Calderwood, Ricki Dwyer, Rose Nestler, Hope Wang, Deidrick Brackens, to the collective Bonanza, and the established K8 Hardy—this proposal hints at some of the ways the sartorial practices of dressing, and dealing with the complex and elusive body have been rich sites of exploration for queers. The show, much like the White Paper, works across disciplines and mediums, featuring performance, “paintings,” bodily sculptures and film, to name a few. Considering the fashioned body as an archive and a practice of display, this show looks at how embodiment of queerness can be understood as craft, and is itself a form of crafting. Outside of the dialectic of disclosure and concealment, these artistic practices engage with modes of refusal integral to queer self-presentation, all while making space for other forms of no; no to a singular authorship, to the linear historicization of desire, and the flattening of knowledge. The proposal goes in depth about each artist’s work, their process and features a blueprint of how the work could be laid out, as well as how the artists’ works engage each other.

Mirroring the workings of a group show itself, this capstone is a series of disparate pieces coming together. Just as a singular piece in a group show doesn’t speak to the entire breadth of the show itself, this document and collection will function similarly. Individual pieces that make up a group show might complicate each other, converse with one another, or even problematize one another. Exhibitions like "Is
Fashion Modern?” at the MoMA, which featured over 50 designers, artist and various artifacts, is a compelling example as it refuses to answer the singular question its title implies, instead opting to further deep questioning by sprinkling various forms of inquiry throughout the show. It’s this ability of a group show, and the multi-valence of its voices, that gives it such great capacity to interrogate concepts such as linearity, or a singular vantage point, thus queering, and hopefully producing different avenues and modes for exploration.

These lines of questioning have continuously evolved and shifted throughout this process: while I started thinking about how representation and visibility do not produce liberation for queers, in a material sense and through the lens of fashion, I am now thinking through:

- How and why does categorization (of bodies as queer, of queer fashion as a type) happen?
- Can something (some one, some look) present as queer, and not represent it?
- Can notions of presentation deconstruct our desire for a cohesive representation?

Fig. 1: Illegibility as Queering (After The Queer Art of Failure)
In thinking through the ways that style is exists on so many cognizant and subconscious levels of strata, I became interested in bringing a small adornment to the textual part of this project. Perhaps this little flourish helped remind me (and maybe you) that the style of the written page is itself an aesthetic space of constant social negotiation and repudiation, norms and rules (so many rules!) Maybe these minute choices in the craft of writing are not unlike those we make in dressing and self adornment. The way a page is structured, which types of punctuation are used when, the breaking point of a paragraph or chapter, all inherently subjective to the writer, can be thought of like a certain roll of a t-shirt sleeve, a button on a leather jacket, a series of piercings adorning an ear.

Although I am not bucking these structures entirely, I am offering a small accessory that although minute, might invite some aesthetic quirkiness to the ways that writing standards condition writing (and its requisite aesthetics) according to ideological ends.

As an ode to capacity of adornment and an admitted boredom with grammar rules and “best practices” that condition how and why people write the way they do (in the Academy especially), I’ve made the stylistic choice to use the ampersand throughout the text instead of the word ‘and’ in a hazard and fun-loving way.

Fig. 2: *Point (After Disidentifications)
**Conceptual Framework: Curatorial Premise**

The body is often cast as the site where identity constructions are articulated, understood and transgressed. These and other technologies of the body, specifically those related to conveying, concealing and covert displays of desire, make this a rich locale for queer folks self-expression. This crafting is of course a notably self-aware process, one that engages a certain amount of historiography, a skepticism and editorial decision-making process about what practices are not useful to us anymore and which tactics might be useful in the future. Simultaneously, these works themselves question the traditional modes of identity construction and the supposedly stable categories of gender, sex, sexuality, race and ability.

This show will explore the ways that practices of queer fashion refuse a neat linearity. Rather than assuming that the archive always either contains and captures or liberates and educates, it hopes to acknowledge this duality while also wondering what else practices of display can engender. Foregrounded by contemporary genre defying interdisciplinary practices, it wants to forgo traditional methodologies and modes of production, while still paying homage to their legacies.

Additionally, it will look at the way that the fashioned queer body and its manifestations are co-opted by the mainstream. Especially in our moment of Mass Queer Culture, where co-option is a continuous and seemingly never-ending, these articulations, nuanced modes and slight twists of “dressing” are as ever present, and potent as ever. The practices and voices collected here speak to the myriad of ways in which creative methodologies envision how practices of visibility and invisibility might afford us more nuanced avenues of self-assertion as queer folk.
Our current political moment makes legacy framing such as this as pressing as ever, this year (2019) marks the 50-year anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the momentous riot against police oppression of queer and trans bodies in NYC in 1969. This anniversary presents an opportunity to take stock of how far we have come, what we’ve done to get there and what we need to shift. Within this moment of reflection, we can perhaps appreciate and acknowledge the fruitful labors of artists like those featured here. Their explorations can open up room for continued freakiness, as well as new lines of questioning; what do these newly devised places of intersectionality say about what the future of queer expression will look like? Why does the body continue to be a site of exploration and articulation of deviance, abnormality, and the queering of gender and sex?

Within this reconfiguring, we can look more closely at the ways in which identity politics continue to inform and condition social and societal relationships. By examining the ways in which body politics and politics of the body are navigated by artists working right now, we can understand the temporal choices queer artists are making of utilizing our histories and shared struggles.

A center focus of this exhibition will be the refusal of a subjugation to a traditional linear model or trajectory. This refusal will take shape in a multitude of ways, as much as an exhibition of objects can resist falling privy to the archival impulse.

Fig. 3: The Self (After Trap Door)
While the Leslie Lohman, the only museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in the world, may seem like an obvious choice for a show that looks at queer fashioning, the Museum’s history itself speaks directly to the premise of the exhibition. Charles Leslie first began collecting ephemera that “gave him a certain frisson” from flea markets around Paris during his time at the Sorbonne (which he enrolled in under the GI Bill). The affective potential of these images, this frisson of his, was perhaps, a surge of recognition, itself an experience registered in the body. When he encountered Fritz Lohman, an interior designer who would become his lifelong partner, he discovered “early on that we’d both been discreet collectors of gay imagery.” As a denizen of SoHo from the 50’s on, Leslie was a quintessential part of efforts make to zoning changes to legalize artist residency. Like the bevy of artists featured in the exhibition proposal, he was an active part of the thriving queer community of artists and organizers. Lohman and Leslie held their first exhibition of Homoerotic art in their apartment in 1969, the same summer as Stonewall. After two similar shows, they decided to open up a gallery, which lasted just over a decade, from 1972 to 1983. As the AIDS Crisis subsumed queer communities nationwide, they started the Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation in 1987 to save the work of dying and displaced queer artists. Many of the works were rescued from homophobic families, collected by frantic partners, and saved in moments of crisis. That this body of work is itself a reliquary of those bodies lost during the AIDS crisis resonates deeply with the ways in which queer artists must reckon with the formation of our histories and our relationship to queer trauma. Their bodies in absentia, the work these lost artists becomes a valuable tool for recording, showing and historicizing what Leslie called “a part of human history that has been relentlessly destroyed, subdued and hidden.” The body as site and site as body configuration plays out in much of the Museum’s substantial collection spanning over 2,400 pieces. The contemporary practices of queer artists look at this historically absent body as well as dersion of the body, as a gendered, sexed and conditioned space, in new ways, calling forth histories of elders and imbuing new expressions with humor and camp. As a temporary body to house such explorations, the Leslie Lohman is as fitting a place as I could possibly imagine.

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
While I struggled through a curatorial fellowship application centered on craft practices, I found this word, as verb and as noun, to be incredibly rich for informing how I was encountering contemporary art practices and their relationship to changing notions of identity construction. By approaching craft from a multivocal vantage point, this exhibition looks to the ways that practices with material output employ similar means to identity crafting and selfhood in our historical moment. Rather than assume a direct relationship that might assume a “tradition” or canon, these explorations of craft are themselves concerned with a kind of fashioning, a self-styled assemblage. By placing the emphasis on the verb *crafting*, this process is understood as a constant negotiation, decidedly untethered to definition itself. Crafting as a continuous process, a constant state of becomingness, models queer identity constructing and making today, encountering gender, sexuality, ability, race, relationships to land (settler, indigenous, ancestral enslavement, etc.) as parts of assembled, conveyed and lived identity that is continuously changing. These expectations and the procedures around crafting identity are evidenced in changing social spheres, such as entering a space and being asked about your preferred pronouns.

As the sartorial choices of dressing involve parsing through a self-selected historiography (read: closet), this is itself a form of creation, similar to the aesthetic and material choices made by these artists. By cruising the queer archive, they choose which elements, both aesthetic and political, to carry over. Rather than focusing on the traditional narratives around craft and production (and their loaded histories) through essentializing categorical notions (such as gender) craft in this sense becomes a space of play.
Here, the artists and makers can examine more closely how we craft our relationships to bodies; and how that process helps us understand their perceived value, their labor, their unnecessary gendering, their consumption, etc. Through a loaded toolkit of techniques, they also yield humor, theatrics, sarcasm, fantasy and extreme honesty to show up to the labor of reimagining how these bodily relationships are rendered.

Queer practices of fashion work to erode the hegemony of supposedly structurally sound categories. Minute decisions in dress have the capacity to dismantle adherence to such social norms, and to question the correlative relationship between visual signifiers and identity. In the absence of a 1:1 ratio between signifier and proclamation, a chasm opens up, where the slippery work of generating new associations can begin.

Looking to contemporary art practices that delve into this chasm, we might see crafting as a way of expanding the notions of identification itself.

**Crafting of Identity: a historical discontinuity**

Why the fashioned body? It gives us places to explore how articulations of gender and sexuality are tied to the body, in seemingly legible ways, and how obscuring their legibility might build new pockets of expansion. To foreground contemporary art practices in such historical and fashion specific examples might seem ill-fitting. However, it is in these historical antecedents that we discover just how rife with gender fuckery, imaginative combinations and debauchery our Queer elders experiments with self-presentation were.
Mostly, writing about queer fashion tends to focus on the practices of gay males, and of discernable transgressions. The most obvious starting point for this is usually gender traitors or practices of cross dressing as a sign of gayness.

Interestingly, the relationship between these practices of dress, and their supposed relationship to queerness is a fairly recent phenomenon. This practice, of observing the practices of the opposite gender, also situates itself nicely with an antiquated and old-fashioned theory about why gays are, once dubbed a problem of inversion.

One of the earliest (Western) gay rights activists, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, applied this idea of gender confusion to appeal to decriminalize gay behavior. He gave one the first recorded public appeals for rights for non-straight people, “on the 29th of August, 1867... he plead with the Congress of German Jurists, urging them to repeal anti-homosexual laws.”4 Although his term for queerness, Urings, never quite caught on, its core fundamental idea, that gay traits come from gender confusion, continued to be relevant. During Ulrichs’ lifetime, “the term homosexual was invented by the Hungarian psychiatrist Benkert in 1869, and terms like pervert and invert [also] came into use.”5 Although Ulrichs himself balked at the suffix of -sexual, and detested the clumsy paring of Greek and Latin within the word, it was the description that still sticks. Ulrich sought to humanize, explaining via gender confusion the spectrum of

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5 Kevin Jennings, Becoming Visible: A Reader in Gay and Lesbian History for High School and College Students (Boston, MA: Alyson, 1994), 155.
Urings; ranging from tender and sentimental towards members of the same sex, to sensual attraction, and a hybrid of these two. His aim was to humanize "the germ" which produced gay tendencies.

This germ, this inversion, manifested itself physically. A particular garment, itself embroiled in a legal battle of sort, was seen as the lighting rod of this inversion, pants. Pants, as a particular example, are potent because they deal with the visibility of queerness, or its relationship to legibility of the dressed body. They also mark the beginning of a public consciousness that sexual deviancy 'might look like something.' Perhaps, the most indemnifying example of pants as queer is from the book A Well of Loneliness (1928) by Radclyffe Hall. In the novel, Hall describes Stephen, a masculine dressing lesbian, who identifies as a Sexual Invert. In the novel, Stephen, a prototypical soft butch, sees herself as doomed to fail her lover Mary as she cannot provide for her in the way a biological man could. The book’s vivid descriptions of clothing and the way it figures into Stephen’s identity are particularly telling. "How she hated the soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and small coral beads, and openwork stockings! Her legs felt so free and comfortable in breeches; she adored pockets too, and these were forbidden – at least really adequate pockets."⁶

Young Stephen is conscious of feeling "all wrong"—"If she dressed like a woman she looked like a man, and if she dressed like a man she looked like a woman,"⁷ wrote Hall. This inversion is not rectified through cross dressing, but rather, even through practices of dress it refuses to be resolve Stephen’s gender confusion. A queer moodiness, and general melancholy plague the character throughout the book.

The book, and its titular character Stephen, caused such a sensation and ruckus that it eventually became the subject of an obscenity trial and was banned in several countries mere months after its publication. In Fashioning Sapphism, Laura L. Doan describes how the dissemination of Hall’s photograph influenced the way that her look would be ascribed to Lesbian sexuality writ large:

Some of the styles and accoutrements we now associate unquestionably with lesbianism (short hair, monocles, highly tailored clothing, and so on) did not signal unequivocally something about sexuality.... Before public exposure, for the better part of a decade, masculine-style clothing for

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⁷ Ibid, 50.
women held diverse spectoral effects, with few signifiers giving the game away, and readings (whether of clothing, visual images, or stories about women living with other women in “close companionship”) varied accordingly among those who knew, those who knew nothing, and those who wished they didn’t know.\(^8\)

The queerness of pants comes not from their didactic relationship to a certain moody lesbian, and the public’s overdetermination of what they signify but actually in their ability to mean many different things; as Elizabeth Wilson writes in *A Queer History of Fashion*:  

[In the 19th century] for a woman to dress like a man was to invoke several different associations, all of which alarmed the dominant forces in society: feminism, socialism, sexual inversion which were each controversial. And although these were divergent, they represented one thing: a rejection of male domination, male authority, and “patriarchy.”...The wearing of trousers by women therefore merged and confused the reasons for doing so...what “mannish dress” signifies is a more general demand for the right to power and authority. The demand for sexual autonomy implied by lesbianism was part but not the whole of this.\(^9\)

Masculine dress was most prominent under the guise of the more dominant forces of society; the Patriotic Masculine bravado of World War Two. Hugh Ryan describes the lives of several queer-identified women and trans folks in *When Brooklyn Was Queer*, who found an unspoken freedom in the fashion avenues presented to them by their absorption into the workforce via WWII. One such person was Anne Moses. Anne found solace in “War work—a chance to get outside the house, meet other women, and wear pants-[which] must have seemed like an incredible opportunity.”\(^10\) From the scrapbooks she diligently kept, featured in an interesting exhibition at the Brooklyn Historical Society, there are “numerous photos of Moses wearing heavy coveralls and a welder’s mask...she would have been expected to wear a hodgepodge of retrofitted men’s protective gear; army cast-off pants and shirts, plastic helmets and breast covers, leather-sleeved coats, hairnets and goggles. [Which were] necessary to protect her from flying sparks, freezing weather, metal shrapnel, falling tools, and the thousands of hazards [she] faced

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\(^8\) Laura L. Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (United States: Columbia University Press, 2012), XII.


Before and during World War II it was in no way respectable for women to be dressed in such clothes, as this off-duty picture shows. However, their necessary adoption of utilitarian clothes would go on to influence actual fashion (street wear). “In part because of the uniforms of these working women—and in part because of the fabric shortage caused by the war, butch women…faced public scorn and possibly even violence for wearing pants in public, after [the war], trousers for women were suddenly fashionable.”

Fig. 6: Visibility (After: Epistemology of the Closet)

Ryan also describes Rusty Brown, whose life reads like a rascal Lesbian adventure novel: she famously fled her family at the age of 7, got sent away to an all-girls boarding school (where she says she graduated “cum laude” in Lesbianism) and ended up performing as a Drag King on Coney Island. In the intermediary period, she describes her constant run-ins with the police. In a conversation with Len Evans she says, “I had been arrested in New York more times than I have fingers and toes, for wearing pants and a shirt, you had to have three pieces of female attire… At the time I was young, I had nothing on top so why the hell was I going to put in a brassiere? I’m not exactly the type for lace panties. And if I’m wearing pants, I sure as hell didn’t need a pretty coat. So there goes your three pieces of female attire.” So, no such law appears on the books but it seems to be a justification of the “appropriate gender” assumption of a cross-dressing arrest....Arrests were more frequent, in part because more women were wearing pants in general, giving gender-queer women slightly more room to express themselves on the

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11 Ibid, 217.
12 Ibid, 218.
street (and thus making them that much more visible to the police).” Thus visibility is a two edged sword, it allows for more freedom of self-expression and more retribution from the police.

Outside, alongside, around and in spite of the collapsing of sexual deviancy in a particular cache of physical attributes a la overt masculine dress, there are slight twists of dress through history that exist in the queer fashion lexicon. In a culture so reliant on visual representation of power dynamics, image causes and creates recognition. Image of oneself as a part of a group is and has historically been important for minority groups. Slight twists of fashion, perhaps invisible to a mass (hetero) public, connect communities and have existed to signal safety. “Fashion, dress, and style are so important for queers because of their role in constructing material identity, and its shaping of personal and social space.”

As dyke culture would have it, two of the most salient examples are flowers and keys.

An example of how affinity is built through visual cohesion is the carabiner key flag beloved by queers and originally used by working class men as a matter of convenience. So solidified in the queer fashion lexicon, this accessory (successory) was the main refrain in a number from the Tony-award winning musical Fun Home, based on the graphic novel by Alison Bechdel. The lyrics detail an encounter where a young Alison sees an old-school Butch, instantly feeling affinity, the chorus details the one specific item as being the centerpiece of her recognition, “your ring of keys, ohhh your ring of keys.” This clothed body imbues Alison with a sense of belonging. She sings “I think we’re alike in a certain way… I know you / I know you.”

This moment and its surge of reassurance is a cornerstone of the queer youth narrative in Western culture.

In fact the key ring is said to have predated the hanky code, according to the most delicious form of queer research, gossip, as a reporter for the Village Voice berated the (male) gays to broaden their horizons of expression. So one could say that working class Butches in the 1940s and ‘50s and their key rings were the true vanguard of flagging. The way that these stylistic choices generated community is documented explicitly in Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy’s book, Hidden from History: Reclaiming

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13 Valerie Steele, A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk (New York City: Museum at FIT, 2013), 195.
the Gay and Lesbian Past, where such choices helped to “create an authentic lesbian sexuality appropriate to the flourishing of an independent lesbian culture.”

This covert visibility, or signaling, through dress speaks to the affective power of fashion, and to demonstrative possibilities outside of societal expectations of normalcy. A more ancient example comes from the seminal queer poet Sappho, whose controversial legacy no doubt proceeds her but who we have to thank for both the words Lesbian and Sapphic. In reverence to line from Fragment #94, a violet flower pinned to a bosom could convey a queer proclivity.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Fragment 94:}
\begin{verbatim}
for many crowns of violets and roses
at my side you put on
and many woven garlands made of flowers
around your soft throat.
And with sweet oil costly
you anointed yourself
and on a soft bed
delicate
you would let loose your longing
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

This small gesture, invisible to the unacclimated, could help illegal liaisons blossom. Such a powerful indicator of Lesbian love, the flowers played a central role in Édouard Bourdet’s 1926 play \textit{La Prisonnière} or \textit{The Captive}. The play featured friends, Irene and Jacques, involved in a marriage ruse constructed to convince Irene’s father not to send her overseas for her lesbian tendencies. Irene’s love for Madame d’Aiguines is symbolized solely by the exchange of violets throughout the play, as the two are never seen together onstage. The play, met with wide acclaim in Paris, Vienna and Berlin, caused such an uproar when it premiered at the Empire Theatre in New York in September 1926, that it was raided after a run of only a few weeks and the entire cast was arrested. While violets are no longer such a potent symbol, one can imagine the delight in seeing a violet pinned to the chest of a crush and the rush of euphoria at the secret semiotics of desire exchanged at one time.

Perhaps it is these semiotic seismic shifts, as well as more subtle push back against a contingent legibility of bodies and histories that is the most juicy and rich part of queer fashion.

As Glenn Burger writes in \textit{Queering the Middle Ages}:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid, 59.
\end{flushleft}
Sexuality appears as style....One’s sexual style mobilizes the pleasure and the fear of non-sovereignty without dissipating, being out of control, or resolving it into a satisfying form. Sexual style involves practices that entrain, that pull oneself along, run across rhythm and form. If it seeks solution, the resolution in form also involves solution’s other sense, the loosening of the bonds of matter.¹⁸

For in the loosening bonds of matter, we see that there is, of course, as these examples show, “nothing about gay people’s [physical appearance] that declares them gay. There are, on the other hand, signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expression, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness.”

So fashion in the hands of queers shows not that there is some particular style that is queer, but rather shows that all identity stylizing is in fact masquerade, a la Judith Butler. How does one delve into this messy pile and begin to assemble a “self”? As a queer fashion obsessive with a healthy dose of late stage capitalism exhaustion (desion fatigue) and a desire to be read as queer, I struggle with this constantly. In my research, I find beacons of hope, such as the elusive and glamorous Madge Garland,

¹⁸ Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, Queering the Middle Ages (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 12.
who worked at British Vogue in 1922 and infamously dated its editor Dorothy Todd. Together they transformed the magazine, and frankly our understanding of fashion, by hiring such talent as Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell and imbuing this “materialistic” discipline with the arts and intellectual dialogue. My association with Garland, is manifold; she defied categorization, was decidedly problematic, and started the first Fashion Studies program at the Royal College of Art in 1948, so I have her to thank for my current job.

[Madge Garland] was just one woman in the international circle of independent, artistic and creative women, many of whom were lesbians, in the interwar period. She is of particular interest in the context of lesbian style precisely because she was equally at the heart of the “straight” fashion world, that is to say, she was recognized and promoted the idea of dress and fashion, and the art of creating the perfect appearance: the very masquerade that might be said to be at the heart of presentation of self, and which is so especially important to the individual in search of a deviant or “queer” style.19

In the words of the singular Valerie Steele: “That such an iconic fashion leader (Madge Garland) should have been a lesbian paradoxically suggests how very queer it can be to seem straight, and that for a transgressive woman extreme elegance could be the queerest thing of all.”20 Madge’s charm semms to be about side-stepping the dressed disclosure we assume of queerness, that it must of should look like something, which in order to do so, means it is legible, tangible. Instead, here, transgression is only ascribed in the affect: you can’t see it, but you know it’s there. It is through her lived experience; thus Madge’s queerness is a doing, not a looking.

In a world of self-revelation such as ours it may seem there is little need for these historical examples of sumptuous subtext. However, when the Supreme Court meets in the Fall of 2019 to discuss whether or not the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects Queer and Transgender workers from being fired due to their identity, they will hear the case of Ms. Stephens of Georgia who was fired after transitioning. Although she won her case, the words of her former boss are damning, if not illustrative of fashion’s

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19 Valerie Steele, A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk (New York City: Museum at FIT, 2013), 184.
20 Ibid, 194.
affective power. When asked why she was let go, Thomas Rost said simply, "Well, because he was no longer going to represent himself as a man. He wanted to dress as a woman."\(^{21}\)

It seems we must consider the precedent of dressed bodies and their looming possibilities. How does bodily presentation and its sartorial codes impact the very crafting of our conceptions of each other and ourselves?

![Identity](image)

*Fig. 8: Identity (After Disidentifications)*

**Archive**

It's been useful for me to think of the body not just as a site (à la Gloria Anzaldua) but also as an archive, and as a site (cite) of cultural memory. The fashioned body is a particularly positioned place through which to understand the construction of the self. The act of getting dressed is itself a way of making an archive of self or identity, as, each time you dress yourself, it is an act of invention that is inherently tied to conceptions of self and to desire(s) for specific reception from a public. The archive can be made and remade continually, which makes me wonder if in some sense we are always remaking the archive. In fashion this feels inherent, as each item of clothing is itself an archive; the black t-shirt I am wearing while writing this is an archive of other t-shirt forms that have come before it, its soft jersey cotton

is grown from seeds that are themselves genetic archives of plants that have grown before them. Temporally, as long as there is a present we are remaking the archive as embodied self, in clothing, even if we are not aware of it as such.

The thought processes I underwent when choosing to wear it is an archive of feeling and identity; for instance, as a tomboy-femme person with a penchant for banal items, this black t-shirt felt perfectly nonchalant when I stuffed it into my bag for a post-gym outfit this morning.

These are levels and types of archives that are those which are visceral or just below the surface; however the archive often functions as something within you that cannot speak, which relates to this process of identity translation and its being rendered physically on the body. Barthes and many other fashion scholars have asserted that fashion is identity construction writ large on the body. In this way, fashion might be understood as the archive that speaks for us.

This fashion archive is a personal construction consisting also of public memory, which imprints itself on the next generation with the invisible present. For each item of clothing is itself a product of a certain set of historical factors, and at once a compounding of all other garments that have come before, working as the archive does, in the temporal, ordering our sense of self and world. Fashion perpetuates many societal norms and ideas about behavior, making it also a great place to transcend these notions, as queers are wont to do. Transgressions of bodies that question the stability of history which claims certain truths to be self-evident; straightness as natural, gender and sex as bound together, etc., are common in the queer fashion lexicon. As George Haggerty writes in Gay Histories and Cultures: An Encyclopedia:

The potentially dire, even life-threatening, consequences of such transgressions mean that the myriad stylizations composing queer fashionability have often represented perilous and profound political acts. Queers have used clothing and other elements of personal style to communicate sexual tastes and gender styles; to reform, augment, or minimize various parts of the body; to produce or heighten sexual desirability; and to visualize potentially invisible (and hide potentially visible) sexual and gender identities.  

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Additionally, there is an interesting historical relationship between Modernity, the archive and fashion, which are all seemingly situated to erupt out of the 20th century. From Modernity, we get the type of fragmentation (that Virginia Woolf so masterfully employs) which gives way to the hyper individualization that so much of fashion and Identity politics relies on. If the self is invented, if it has to be made, is it always made in a series of fragments, bits from the archive? And as the archive can never be understood in its totality, and is always described in layers and levels, is it itself constructed and understood in fragments?

![Diagram of an offering from Linear Archive](image)

**Fig. 9**

**Performance Script**

This performance script below was presented in the context of an event called *Performing Knowledge*, held at the Graduate Center in December 2019, which sought to explore the performative potentiality of the academic conference. For my part, I used the performance space to engage modes of refusal that are integral to queer self-presentation: a refusal of a singular authorship, the linear historicization of desire, and the flattening of knowledge. This translation process, which was itself a collaboration between myself and the performers, was itself an immensely challenging and rewarding. This decidedly interdisciplinary approach melds my two concentrations within MALs (Fashion Studies and Urban Education) while allowing for the experimental inquiry of an art practice that I am continuously drawn to.

**Cast:**

(M) morgi
(S) I was at an Herbalism Conference, and a middle aged leather dyke told me that the pinkie ring on my left hand was once used to serve as a signal of queerness to other dykes. I was immediately struck by this delicious fact, that there was a whole lexicon of queer signaling that I, a queer fashion obsessive, was unacclimated to. My imagination ran wild, considering all the ways that desire was coded in the not so distant past, and a hazy nostalgia overtook me, replete with secret liaisons and semiotic codes.

© Most often I’d considered my visibility as a queer person as a weapon; arming me against the vicious patriarchy, against normalcy, precluding me from the shackles of progeny I so detested of my comfortable upper middle class upbringing. Recently, I’ve been interested in the ways that Fashion and Style are subsumed by queerness and sexual deviancy, using traditional or sometimes more subverted visual clues; short hair, copious piercings, androgynous clothing.

(ALL SPEAK softly) If, as queers, we are constantly attempting to re imagine what life outside of heteronormative culture looks like,

(N) why do we continue to rely on the dressed body,

(M) the mythologized body,

(S) the body in space,

© to understand who constitutes our community as a whole?

(M) quote “There is nothing about gay people’s [physical appearance] that declares them gay. There are, on the other hand,

(ALL SPEAK) “signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expression, stances, clothing, and even environments
(M) that bespeak gayness.” unquote

(REPEAT OVER THE TOP OF EACH OTHER, each person starts after signs of gayness): (M start, S, then C, then N) signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness.”

(S) In the past year or so, I’ve noticed that I’ve gravitated away from overtly public displays of queerness. I’m more Femme presenting than I’ve been in almost a decade, © proudly wearing makeup,

(S) sporting a relatively normie bob haircut

(M) and accessorizing with what can only be described as punk light jewelry.

(M) Although I’m deeply invested in the theorizing around how and why we choose to navigate the social and political quagmire of getting dressed, I’ve had a difficult time parsing through my personal style evolution.

(N) I often come back to Halberstam’s notion of queer refusal, and wonder if in the hyper saturated world of queer visibility, my choices to subdue my sexual identity come from a deep seated desire to fuck with the notion that queerness fits within a certain subset of visual signifiers; alternative lifestyle haircut, a smart oxford buttoned to the top, etc.

(S) Of course, I understand that my more subtle physical appearance is as much of a declaration and choice as my also gay brother’s donning of a “Sun’s Out I’m Out!!” T-shirt, but I wonder what wild possibilities exist between or outside of this binary of disclosure versus concealment.

(N) Can there be a kind of passing that refuses complicity in the power structures of oppression? Have we crossed a threshold where the ability to dress outside of needing to signal some kind of sexual desire, has become more radical than out, loud and proud disclosure?

(ALL REPEAT x 3 softly) more radical than out, loud and proud disclosure.

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(M) quote “The close proximity of clothing to the surface of the body has often engaged it with issues of gender and sexuality and therefore makes it especially meaningful for queer folk.

(N) Outward appearance has long been the subject of social regulations enforcing sexual and gender norms, but also a favored place for articulating challenges to gender conformity and the very idea of sexual normality.”

(S) I’ve been out for half a decade, and still worry sometimes that “I don’t look gay enough,” a refrain I have heard echoed in many conversations with other queers. I am wont to think of the act of passing and my interest in the playing with desire, signaling and dress, stems not from some idealistic longing or internalized homophobia, but rather © erupts from the subversive capacity of secret languages, dialogues of subtext, and the sumptuous nature of illegibility.

(M) Have the bevy of discursive practices of queer embodiment through dress helped them escape the archive because their instability makes them so difficult to categorize?

(N) How does one archive something that is such a fraught practice in the first place?

© Also, does the practice of archiving, cataloging, and collecting carry with it colonialist inklings of containment and capture?

(ALL AT ONCE at different speeds) Does the archive liberate or capture?

(M) I’m bored everytime I go to Lesbian bars, seeing homonormative presentation played out with tired regularity; dapper butches in snapback hats, femmes in red lipstick.

(N) In our desirous gaze, we might create (PAUSE)new narratives, (PAUSE) which emerge out of the space between the historical structures, hopefully dismantling our current conceptions of identity as it relates to sexual preference and ‘deviance.’

Queer historiography might “aim to show how history is constructed according to present-day concerns as much as past ones; [PAUSE] looking at the evidence behind different perspectives in [queer] history and think[ing] about the theoretical and political standpoints on which our history is based.”

Looking forward, how will the identities, conditions and movements of the past inform our search for liberation? Which stories, which subjectivities will we make visible? What will we remember, what will we willingly forget?

(ALL WHISPER) What will we remember, what will we willingly forget?

As Sappho said:

(ALL AT ONCE) “You may forget but let me tell you this: someone in some future time will think of us.”

(First M, then S, then C, then N) “You may forget but let me tell you this: someone in some future time will think of us.”

Travelling across the country, visiting small towns full of American Flags and Republican bumper stickers, I myself have found solace in the upside down pink triangle affixed to the jean vest of a stranger, an ode to the iconic Silence=Death logo created by the queer activist group Grand Fury in NYC in the 1980’s

(M whisper) How do we make sense of the “cognitive binding of the subject to the world of its representations?”

(ALL different speeds) Can queer histories be wretched from the limitations of gender configuration, the dialectical opposition to straightness, and its reliance on visibility?

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I have a crystal clear memory of one of my Mom’s coworkers Sharon, whose “swagger” in her suits, cropped hair cut and artsy glasses remains one of my first moments of recognition of butch queer realness.

© This moment, of seeing an elder reflect an identity through dress, and the surge of reassurance is a cornerstone of the queer youth narrative in Western culture.

(N) That

[ALL SPEAK] this

(N) visibility would be a cataclysmic moment of recognition speaks to the affective power of fashion.

(BREATHE) Which demonstrates alternatives to normative societal expressions of dress.

(M) As such, it's a practice of how visibility relies on assimilation, even violence, for understanding. Is aesthetics the place where power is consolidated?

(ALL SPEAK whisper) Can it also be the place of powers fracturing?

(C) With the invisible, or the undisclosed, there is a refusal to translate. Here is the distinction

(M) between public

(N) and private,

(S) the self and

(ALL) the other.

© Within this refusal is an element of discretion, which might be understood here as

(ALL) “power that masquerades as politeness.”

(S) The practice of encoding meaning (or identity) onto or into bodies is itself the process of fashion. With fashion, all trends repeat, and there is no “new,” every item of clothing references a style, a period,

another item of clothing. In this way, fashion functions as a self selected historiography, I wear histories when I wear clothes,
© you wear histories when you wear clothes,
(N+M) we wear histories when we wear clothes.
(S) I make choices,
© you make choices,
(N+M) we make choices,
(S) deciding what parts of ourselves, and our identities we choose to disclose and conceal.

(ALL SPEAK) If modernity creates the identity of queerness, what happens when modernity’s supposed stability is questioned?

(S) I glance down at my small pinky ring. I consider again my interaction with the leather dyke, my interest in queer fashion and as always, am left wondering what comes next, or what to do now. I think of my friends,
(ALL) my queer family,
(M) the vibrant mix of discursive bodies and wild undiscovered identities that strut through this city everyday.
© What once was a quiet symbol of liberation, a small piece of jewelry demarcating possible safety and illegal desire, was co opted, commodified, contained in a neat narrative, flattened into a trend only to be shuffled away by the vicious superficiality of late stage capitalism.

(M) How do we, as young queers trying to disrupt these systems, dismantle the idea that liberation comes from visibility?

[PAUSE]

[ALL] dismantle the idea that liberation comes from visibility.
ALL x 3: every inscription inscribes a loss, every inscription inscribes a loss, every inscription inscribes a loss.

Fig. 10


