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**Dress Practices as Embodied
Multimodal Rhetorics**

Trans* Embodiment, Rhetoricity, and That Which Clothes Them¹

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

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

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

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

Non- (female) binary

Mascu (girl) line-presenting

AF (CHICK) AB²

(WOMAN) person.

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

¹ Includes essay and video transcript.

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

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

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

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

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



Figure 1: A mirror selfie of the author.

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

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

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

What do you see?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Video transcript:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Fellow scholar and trans* individual Jay McClintock notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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