



BSA Auto/Biography Study Group

Centre for Biography and Education

Dress and Undress

One Day Conference 15th December 2009

at

The British Library
Conference Rooms 3 and 4

Abstracts

'There is no great dark man' Fashioning the Masculine other in 'The Naked Civil Servant'

Mark Armstrong, University of Northumbria

In his autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant* Quentin Crisp wrote of the many guises of the 'great dark man', from the 1920s Soho 'rough' to the American GI in London during the Second World War. As the desired other of his fashioning, Elizabeth Wilson suggests that Crisp appropriated the effeminate with the intent of attracting such a 'real man'. This paper considers how Crisp's fashioning articulated that other as absence according to the lack that the queer body signified in a sexually authoritarian culture, thus each 'great dark man' belonging to a continuum of performative desire, a somewhat spectral figure for whom Crisp could occupy the permissive spaces of the 'feminised' that his writings suggest many women could not. The 'pseudo'-gendered binary that Crisp writes of – the 'ghetto' of heteronormative mimicry of his early life – and his fashioning of the 'orchidaceous woman' according to its strictures, reveal the 'great dark man' as a very material but transient presence, and ultimately illusory other of the desire evidenced in his fashioning.

‘Be careful how you dress, you might be mistaken for an American.’

An Englishwoman’s life in Washington, 1852-1854

Judith Chapman, University of Brighton

In 1852 Charlotte Corbett, then only 16, accompanied her newlywed husband, Edwin, to Washington and there she assumed the life of a diplomatic wife. This presentation will open a window on Washington society in the middle of the 19th century. It will attempt to show how clothes were a source of joy and anguish in a privileged society, focusing particularly on the frustrations of being endlessly clad in mourning dress, and the delights of clothing a first baby. The information for my presentation emerges from a rich primary source. A cache of letters, written by Charlotte, my great great grandmother, to her mother living in Paris, provides a rich tale of 19th century elite society. Backed by evidence from literature and expert sources, I will discuss how women’s clothes reflected the society in which they lived and how they portrayed themselves in 1850. Charlotte mixed with ease in the diplomatic circles and made several visits to the White House to meet the incumbent presidents and their wives. She was critical of the difference in American fashions; frustrated at the cost of clothing and valued the opinion on dress from her Parisian mother.

This presentation is a ‘work-in-progress’ on my journey towards the completion of my Doctorate in Education.

Twentieth Century Refugee Histories: embodying horror

Sue Davidson, Judy Dean and Gaby Weiner (in alphabetical order)

This presentation reports on a film project which aims to capture visually, as well as through text, what it means to have experienced and survived persecution and terror, and the human impact this has for succeeding generations. It follows on from the investigations of Gaby Weiner into the history of family members before, during and after the 2nd World War (a part of which was presented at an earlier conference of the Auto/biography study group). However, it does not follow the 'who do you think you are?' format that is familiar to most of us. Rather it explores different generational perspectives on what occurred. To accord with the conference theme of 'Dress and Undress', it will have a particular focus on the bodily manifestations and auto/biographical representations of the different generations, and what stills and film can offer to our understanding of human and historical events.

Keeping fit in 6” heels? Clothing in pole dancing classes

Samantha Holland, Carnegie Research Institute, Leeds Metropolitan University

Pole dancing/exercise classes are interesting because they fit into many current academic and cultural debates about shifts in society (particularly around sexualities) and changes in leisure, sport and exercise. For example, pole addresses issues about the sexualisation of culture; body image; gendered leisure time; and feelings of empowerment. I was a participant and/or observer at pole classes and conducted a total of 37 interviews with instructors and students of pole dancing in various places in the UK; and in Sydney and New York. The participants were aged between 18 and 60 years old. I also sent an online questionnaire to 9 pole schools worldwide which resulted in 135 responses. The questionnaire data provides an international overview of who is doing pole and why and where, and what pole means to the women who do it, alongside the more detailed stories gleaned during the interviews.

In this paper I will examine what the women wore in classes. Stripper shoes are of great interest to the media and in general discussions about pole classes and, indeed, in some classes such shoes are worn. I will discuss the different types of class where shoes are and are not worn, and what the women said about wearing (or not wearing) stripper shoes.

Naked Writing in the Academy

Elizabeth Hoult, Canterbury Christ Church University

W.B. Yeats suggests that “there’s more enterprise/in walking naked”¹, implying that it is more useful and honest to write without the security of protective clothing. For him this meant dispensing with the rich mythological framework he had previously adopted in order to write more directly about his own experience. For the academic researcher working within the auto/biographical tradition, it means agreeing to shed the “authority moves”² of conventional academic writing in order to get closer to the subject. Such divestment, for all its rewards, is highly perilous and it takes courage to enact the striptease.

Drawing on a completed doctoral study into representations of resilience in adult learning, this paper seeks to explore the risks and responsibilities involved in employing naked auto/biographical writing techniques within conventional academic texts. A piece of naked writing will be offered for discussion as illustration of these tensions. It is argued that although such writing has no stronger truth claim than the traditional academic text – the apparently naked autobiographical text actually employs as many disguises and rhetorical devices as the conventional academic one – the process of writing it forces the writer to confront what Laurel Richardson describes as the “ensorious hold of science writing on our consciousness as well as the arrogance it fosters in our psyche” (1997, p.89). As such, writing beyond what Derrida calls “the guardrail” (1976/1992, p.158) of academic conventions is a precarious, but potentially liberating, activity that ultimately has much to offer the subjects of research in terms of faithfully representing their/our experiences.

¹ Yeats, W.B. (1916). ‘A coat’

² Richardson, L. (1997, p.167)

Sheikha Mozah of Qatar: the visual biography of a Middle Eastern First Lady

Christina Lindholm, Virginia Commonwealth University

Until very recently, Arab Muslim women had no public roles and were seldom seen outside of their homes. That changed dramatically in 2002 with the appearance and televised speech of Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al Misned, consort of the Emir of Qatar. Although properly swathed in traditional black robes and head cover, the incident caused tremendous reaction as this was the first public appearance of a royal wife in that country.

In the ensuing years, Her Highness has become increasingly involved in UNESCO and serves as the Special Envoy for Basic and Higher Education as well as many other roles that promote education and community development. While in Qatar, she usually retains the shayla and abaya, but the chic attire worn when out of the Gulf region earned her a place on Vanity Fair magazine's 2009 Best Dressed List.

This paper explores the changes in Sheikha Mozah's dress choices as her role evolved from secluded 2nd wife of the Heir Apparent to the internationally recognized First Lady of Qatar and what those choices mean in light of Qatar's conservative social context. It delves into questions of modesty, modernity and the issues of culturally sanctioned attire.

Dressed until the end

Sybil Myerson

Sonja, my sister, died a few weeks ago and she made sure she was dressed until the last few days. Dressed meant with her earrings and broaches and scarves. The family responded in the end by each throwing a broach into the coffin with her. The grandchildren wore her scarves. Dressing was her therapy she said. Clothes are important to me too. We dress differently but the same importance is there. This essay began as my therapy -it helped me at this time.

I have a friend in the road who manages a GP practice. I have borrowed her clothes and every day she is dressed in a special way-- with special care-it is lovely and interesting to follow. So we talk often about dress-a medical sociologist and her friend from a GP practice!

'Frock consciousness': Virginia Woolf's complex relationship with clothing

Claire Nicholson, Anglia Ruskin University

"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."

(Virginia Woolf *Orlando* p.120)

Many comments by her contemporaries attest to the widely accepted notion that Virginia Woolf cared very little for her own appearance. Lady Oxford's recollection was that "no woman ever cared less about her appearance than the beautiful Virginia" (J.H. Stape *Interviews and Recollections* p.176). And yet, in her private diary, Woolf often expressed a desire to come to terms with her 'clothes complex', and her fiction, essays and autobiographical writing display a sustained focus upon clothes and their effect upon the wearer's consciousness. As a Modernist writer Woolf found clothing to be especially apt imagery with which to suggest the tensions of surface and depth, of reality and perception. This paper will explore Woolf's complicated relationship with clothing and fashion through a discussion of her use of clothing in her fiction, together with reference to her personal writing in diaries and letters. Particular reference will be made to the novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and a short story 'The New Dress' (1927).

Nude in the mirror: the artist and the model

Maria Tamboukou, Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London

In the context of her life as a young artist in Paris, Gwen John created a series of nude self-portraits. What is particularly significant with these self-portraits is that they create a forceful synthesis of the woman artist nude in the act of producing images, thus visualizing the dilemmas and ambivalences that many women artists would face in search of an identity at the turn of the nineteenth century. John's letters further carry signs of her difficulties in painting herself nude in the mirror, but how are these difficulties to be understood? Working in the interface of John's letters and nude self-portraits, in this paper I will look into the complex interrelations between, gender, class and culture, in the autobiographical constitution of the female self in art.

Dress and the narration of life: Women's reflections on clothing and age

Julia Twigg, University of Kent

Clothing, identity and the self are intimately linked; and this remains so throughout the life course. In this paper we look at the narrations of older women as they reflect on their lives, exploring the intersections between clothing, embodiment and identity. The paper centres on biographical interviews with four women. One is a Goth in her fifties, where the narrative centres on maintaining an alternative identity in the face of work pressures (she is an accountant), earlier demands to fit in (as a mother), and the current tensions of becoming older in a sub culture that valorises an alternative form of glamour. The second is a women who has made the journey from a secretarial college in South Kensington in the 1960s, via marriage to a hospital consultant, to the discovery of feminism and life on the music scene in Margate, each stage accompanied by a radical change of dress. The third is of someone who developed a distinctive style of dress as a young women and has remained true to this, despite the tensions that this can raise as she ages. The theme of the fourth is layers of privacy and the different meanings of inner, outer and public dress. The paper is based on an ESRC study: Clothing, the Body and Age that explores the role of clothing and dress in the cultural constitution of age.

Denim and the life-course: private stories and public narratives

Sophie Woodward, University of Manchester

The stories of the origins of denim jeans are well known and part of the popular imaginary, traced back to the interventions of Levi Strauss and the subsequent histories of American icons. These popularly told histories are often invoked to explain why denim jeans are so widely worn today. However, along with Daniel Miller, I have been involved in research which seeks instead to look at people's everyday experiences and stories of wearing jeans. As part of the much broader Global Denim Project, we have carried out an ethnography into jeans wearing in London, which is an exploration of ordinariness. One aspect of the research involved eliciting people's life histories, and stories of wearing jeans as this changes throughout the life-course. This paper will focus upon how people construct their biographies through wearing jeans, as part of a wider sartorial biography. It considers how personal life stories through clothing relate to wider fashion histories, as a means of anchoring experience, or as a rejection of this. It also builds upon my previous research into women's wardrobes as it considers the differences and disjunctures between an embodied clothing biography and how this is told through words.