

Introduction: Academic Fashion

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Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we
have to alter it every six months.

Oscar Wilde

Fashion is not something that exists in dresses only.
Fashion is in the sky, in the street, fashion has to do
with ideas, the way we live, what is happening.

Coco Chanel

WHEN *ESC: English Studies in Canada* launched its fashionable new look some six volumes ago, it did so with a clear sense of the need to respond to shifts in the style of scholarly self-presentation and to reflect the discipline back to itself. One aspect of the journal's makeover was the introduction of this Readers' Forum section as a venue for dialogue and reflection on matters of current concern for our readership and for all of us working in the discipline of English studies. Some of the Readers' Forums in *ESC* have been developed from panel discussions at ACCUTE's annual conference: this, on "Academic Fashion," is one of them. The third in a series of *ESC* panels at ACCUTE interrogating the disciplinary in the discipline, this panel takes up the line of questioning posed by Stephen Slemon for ACCUTE 2007 ("Why Do I Have to Write Like That?" *ESC* 32.2–3, 2006,

ESC 35.2–3 (June/September 2009): 1–4

1–38) and one the following year (“Why Do I Have to Read Like That?” *ESC* 33.1–2, 2007, 1–28). Originally conceived in the same form—“Why Do I Have to Dress Like That?”—we shifted from the explicitly interrogative to something that, while in some stylish circles it might still have a question mark archly implicit (“Academic Fashion?” or, perhaps, “Academic Fashion?”), left the question of fashion open to reflections on academic trends, what’s hot, what’s not, how to understand shifts in academic styles of teaching, writing, and self-presentation, how we fashion the discipline, how it fashions us.

While the image of the tweedy, rumpled male professor with a pipe in one hand and a well-thumbed Everyman’s canonical somebody in the other has given way to or at least come together with other ideas of the professoriate, it is still the case that the workplace in the university, like any workplace, has its own complicated semiotics of performance, representation, and identity across a range of categories far more diverse than was the case for the academy for most of the twentieth century. How, we would like to know, do we read this stuff? Paratactically, as Roland Barthes suggests—“extend[ing] the power of metaphor by developing what could be called an ‘atmosphere’ from discontinuous situations and objects; *This blazer is for the girl who’s something of an Anglophile, perhaps smitten with Proust, who spends her vacations at the shore*” (247). Do we fashion such identificatory narratives? How is academic “identity” encoded? What distinguishes academic dress in the workplace? What does it undertake to mark or design? What boundaries does it draw? Does it delineate a community—or demonstrate division? What does gender have to do with it? Sexuality? Skin, in its configurations of age, ancestry, colour, nature, artifice? How do we make who we are? How does this make “us”? Georg Simmel suggested in 1904 that fashion “is merely a product of social demands, even though the individual object which it creates or recreates may represent a more or less individual need” (297). What are those “social demands”? How do they work on us in the workplace, and outside of it? How do they pertain to disciplinary self-fashioning in other ways than dress?

We put the topic of “Academic Fashion” before five scholars, inviting them to interpret that term however they might choose—as, for example, a style or mode of dress; as a manner of bearing or behaviour; as a passing intellectual trend or paradigmatic shift; as a discourse of the moment or a nest of buzzwords; as prevailing custom or current usage; as a process of making or a system of formulation. The result is the Readers’ Forum that follows. What we have learned from these presentations and these papers

is that this topic is anything but a matter of superficial style. This is not simply a function of the increasing attention to fashion as a cultural problematic in academic study, what the academic fashion blog threadbared observes as the rapid recent expansion of “institutionalized sites of fashion and consumerism scholarship” (3 August 2009) or, for that matter, of the gradual increase in the numbers of online sites devoted to questions of academic fashion (at least three ...), but of an increased attention to and critique of the ways in which academic fashion is itself both indexical and productive of the institution as a workplace and a defining habitus.

Heather Zwicker focuses on questions of embodiment and gender, tracing the impossible countermands of academic culture for female scholars and providing an elegantly ironic set of guidelines for women in this workplace. Chris Keep historicizes the term “academic fashion” by displacing our current assumptions about its meaning (a governing code of intellectual relevance, a set of campus-bound sartorial practices) and returning us to its Victorian usage as either a mode of highly abstract thought or a manner of meticulously investigation. By considering the nineteenth-century’s admiration and disdain for treating things “in an academic fashion,” Keep reminds us that the slow and painstaking investigation of a complex subject should resist, in particular, the rushing whims of fashion itself. From the perspective of a recently completed doctorate, Ben Lefebvre is equally resistant to the fickleness of intellectual fashion, in his case invoking the plaid shirt as a trope for navigating, with some assurance of surviving, the shifting patterns of institutional hiring practices. Addressing matters of non-normative bodies, Lucas Crawford takes on the supposed neutrality of the white dress shirt, throwing into question the presumption of any degree-zero, and unpacking the idea that only some forms of academic inquiry are subject to fashion, while others enjoy an unquestioned stability. Neutral style—the supposed dress code best suited to the life of the mind—comes under scrutiny in Nicola Nixon’s concluding piece, as she measures what we might understand as the political inseam of the chino-clad and ubiquitously comfortable neoliberalism of the globally-marketed academic superstar, and invites us to consider exactly what is being sold to the world in the beige guise of online open universities.

Not, as Jane Austen suggests in *Northanger Abbey*, “at all time a frivolous distinction” (92), dress is a cultural practice, a performance of embodiment, a system for marking categories of identification. This, then, is a forum that is not itself frivolous in its consideration of academic fashion, but offers ways of thinking about what we wear in terms of the disciplinary

and the institutional, and opens what we hope will be productive conversations about the politics and ideology of dressing for work.

Works Cited

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