



INTERSECTIONALITY GETS FASHIONABLY FAT: ARTS-BASED APPROACHES TO GENDER, FAT AND FASHION

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Abstract: The authors' research project, *Sizing Up Gender*, explored the experiences of thirteen participants at the intersections of gender expression and fat. Through a series of photographs of participants and their garments, the project pushed the boundaries of art, identities, representations, and research. This article seeks to consider the ways in which innovative arts-based practice with a deep focus on justice and anti-oppression can allow for a thickening of intersectionality research. The blending of art and research practices, such as those under discussion here, can simultaneously maintain a commitment to the genesis of intersectionality's critical potential while allowing the term to evolve and consider heretofore undiscussed terrain.

Keywords: fat studies; arts-based research; fashion; gender identity; representation

As researchers, we know, on both academic and intuitive embodied levels, that we are committed to intersectional research. Our bodies require it; we see no pathway to justice without it. We likewise know that we use art to, in Eisner's (2008) words, "take a ride on the wings that art forms provide" (3). But what do we mean by intersectionality? How do we acknowledge the origins of this framework and seize upon key themes in its development to guide us in considering this research? And how do we employ the ways that "arts-based inquiry can explore multiple, new, and diverse ways of understanding and living in the world (Finley 2008, 72)? Unfortunately, some research which calls itself intersectional fails to substantively consider issues of justice (Rice, Harrison, and Friedman 2019) and may be altogether divorced from the origins of the term, rooted in Black feminist thought (Crenshaw 1989). Within this article we seek to consider the ways that innovative arts-based practice, that takes a deep focus on justice and anti-oppression, can allow for a thickening of intersectionality research. Following Leavy (2020), we consider the ways that "[arts-based research] offers ways to tap into what would otherwise be inaccessible, make connections and interconnections that are otherwise out of reach, ask and answer new research questions, explore old research questions in new ways, and represent research differently, often more effectively with respect to reaching broad audiences and non-academic stakeholders" (22). The blending of art and research practices such as those examined here, can simultaneously maintain a commitment to the genesis of intersectionality's critical potential while allowing the term to evolve to consider heretofore undiscussed terrain.

The project under discussion here, *Sizing Up Gender*, related the experiences of thirteen participants at the intersections of gender expression and fat. Through a series of photographs of participants and their garments, this project began to push the boundaries of art, identities, representations, and research, evoking the ways that, ". . . the emphasis is shifted from an ontological concern about *what the body is* to an ethological account about *what the body can do*. . ." (Ruggerone 2017, 579). Asked to bring a treasured garment, participants lit up and spoke with passion and excitement. *Sizing Up Gender* displayed the ways that art and research in relationship allow for a consideration of the materiality of intersectionality, and for thickened descriptions and experiences to emerge, providing a pathway to the ineffable.

This project allowed us to consider that, ". . . the way we feel *about* and *in* our clothes is a relevant phenomenon with a definite impact on our social behaviour and ultimately on our social life" (Ruggerone 2017, 573). In this article, we consider this idea with respect to three themes that explore the intersections of arts and research: the materiality of clothing as a means toward integral expression; the ways that an intersectional view of the clothed body allows for multiplicity to emerge; and the capacity

for clothing as resistance. We begin, however, by considering key themes of intersectionality, starting by situating ourselves in the scholarship.

Intersectionality: Possibilities and Problematics

Origins

To proceed with integrity in considering intersectionality as a framework, we must acknowledge the work of Black feminist scholars who established the term. We here explore several defining moments in the term's deployment to consider our own orientation to intersectionality as a critical framework, and the ways that using an arts approach can connect us back to the term's origins.

Black feminist thought redefined race, class, and gender as interlocking constellations of privilege and marginalization that are experienced together by individuals who exist at their intersections (Collins and Bilge 2016). This idea was articulated by Sojourner Truth in her speech, "Ain't I a Woman?" at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Ohio, and the idea has since been explored through the work of other activists and community leaders. For example, Marxist feminist Claudia Jones fought tirelessly to gain recognition of the inequality at the intersection of racism and class warfare. One of Jones' legacies was Britain's first Carnival event, in which a flamboyance of dress and culture functioned to reclaim space that had historically relegated Black bodies to the margins (Christian 2020). While the term has a long genealogy, the specific term *intersectionality* was first defined by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." Intersectionality centres the experiences of those who are multiply burdened under structures of power, including white supremacist, heteropatriarchal capitalism, and settler colonialism. Crenshaw's work quickly gained popularity and has been utilized in a range of settings and disciplines.

Intersectionality has been used by researchers across social sciences and humanities, but they have often failed to centre its intended objectives. Two substantive review articles by feminist scholars on intersectionality discuss problematics of how the concept has been used in academic research, while also offering direction on how to move forward when engaging with the concept. The first is the introduction to a special issue of *Signs* on intersectionality by guest editors Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall (2013), and the second is Carla Rice, Elizabeth Harrison and May Friedman's 2019 article, "Doing Justice to Intersectionality in Research." Despite the six-year gap between the publication of these works, the two articles

overlap in debates and questions at the heart of the topic, and in suggestions regarding future directions for research on intersectionality. Specifically, both articles asked for a deeply ethical engagement with themes of intersectionality that truly sits in the tensions and contradictions inherent in dressed embodiment, and in the nuances of daily life. In our findings, we explore central connections between these two articles to highlight the possibilities that intersectionality offers, and that engagement with arts practices—and dress and fashion in particular—help to realize. We take up Finley's (2008) suggestion that, "In the current historical moment, arts-based researchers have an opportunity to consciously reject research practices that are implicated in colonialist traditions of objectivity and that treat production of knowledge as a function of social privilege" (74). We aim to apply decolonizing principles to our work by rejecting positivist frames that centralize knowledge as concrete and fixed, and instead focus on interstices and connections that allow for more fluid interpretations.

In our project, we aimed to take up an intersectional approach to dressed embodiment. Dressed embodiment seeks to move past surface analyses of the dressed body, and to move instead toward thinking through the multi-sensory and emotional engagement with the body and clothing in the affective dimension. Thinking through the many different points of decision and feeling that come from getting dressed acknowledges the multiple valences of clothing as experience, representation, identity, and beyond. As Hesselbein (2021) notes, "Shifting the focus from the 'dressed body' towards 'dressed embodiment' and from the surface of the body to the entire embodied self and its lived experience opens up a wide range of research possibilities for Fashion Studies" (368). While Hesselbein explores the politics of the catwalk, using the notion of dressed embodiment offers opportunities for thinking through engagements with fat bodies, and those interrogating gendered relations, by acknowledging the ways that body and mind are both implicated in how we see and are seen. Such a reading draws on Entwistle's (2014) positioning of fashion as a "situated bodily practice" (para. 3) that informs and constitutes self-making. This approach thus draws on theoretical models of intersectionality research while taking up arts-based approaches.

Situating ourselves

Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) urge scholars to explore their institutional and research contexts to amplify the ways in which their projects are received, narrated, and engaged with by audiences. As a way to test and consider the power structures that shape the production of knowledge, they encourage researchers to collaborate "across and within disciplines, sectors, and national contexts" (807) and fully utilize the possibilities that intersectionality opens up. Bearing this in mind, we reflect on our cross-disciplinary and dynamically diverse embodiments as researchers, friends, and

subjects. It is impossible for us to delve into the intersectional potential of arts and research, especially in this type of intimate application, without locating ourselves and the array of discourses, identities, and feelings we bring to this project:

May: I am a fat, racialized (Arab) woman from a working-class background, working in academia. Over the last few years, much of my work has used arts approaches to further understand how fat and fat stigma work in relation with other identities, aiming to de-centre whiteness in Fat Studies and in cultural studies more broadly. While I am cisgender, I parent around issues of gender nonconformity; part of my approach to this project draws from that experience as well as my own embodiment as a brown mid-fat woman.

This project came about through many heartfelt discussions with Ben and Calla considering the ways we represent ourselves, the risks posed by authentic representation, and the limits to finding what we need to be who we want to be. My orientation to this collaboration was inspired by my use of film and photography in other work that stretched my ability to think through issues of authentic representation. In particular, connecting with Mindy, the macro photographer, artist, and co-researcher who was a part of this project, stretched my thinking around the use of abstract imagery as a form of questioning and identity engagement. These conversations have continued throughout the project and have been humbling and inspiring.

Calla: I am a fat activist who has previously researched how *infinifat* people, those at the largest end of the fat spectrum, approach fashion and the practice of dressing. I have been fat since childhood and I currently consider myself mid-fat; while I am able to access clothing at most mainstream plus-size retailers, I often face access issues, particularly with seating, due to my size.

I am a white settler, cisgender queer woman. I came to this project with a long and winding past as a feminist photographer. I am also a digital storytelling facilitator at Re•Vision: The Centre for Art & Social Justice, where I work directly with researchers and participants to reimagine and re-vision their narratives through arts-informed digital storytelling methods. Much of my own research explores how communities visually perform their identities through photography. In this project, particularly in the beginning stages, I was the main point of contact for many of the participants. I have come to connect many of my day-to-day activities, particularly around how I dress and present my fat body, to my fat activism practice.

Ben: I am a thin, white, queer, disabled cisgender man from a middle-class background. I hold significant privilege in the fashion field as Dean of a well-known fashion school in New York City. I aim to intentionally use this position to expand

dominant understandings of fashion and center social justice through my teaching, research, and academic leadership work. The use of arts—specifically fashion arts—as a method of inquiry, analysis, and dissemination has shaped my scholarship for the past eight years. In my work, I have used collaborative clothing design and fashion show production to reclaim and open up fashion methods that have, in the past, been used to promote exclusion, to instead foster social justice.

For my entire life, I have had the privilege of easily finding clothing that fit my body and budget, as well as expressing my more femme and queer identities; if I can't find what I am looking for, my role as a fashion professor and Dean has given me access to friends and colleagues who can easily make clothing for me. I have been primarily protected by my white and thin positions as well as my career in fashion when I wear these pieces at my university and out for social events, yet I have also experienced random acts of verbal and physical violence for wearing them on public transit and when walking my dog. These experiences brought me to this project in the hope of amplifying the fashion experiences of people at the intersections of fat and gender in an effort to develop scholarship that expands fashion scholarship and advocates for change in the fashion field. I remain deeply conscious of how my embodiment and embodied experiences shape my engagement and understanding in the project, and I remain committed to constantly learning about experiences that differ from my own in order to advocate for change.

Methods

Our project undertook a multilayered method that rooted arts-based techniques in autoethnographic and self-referential modes of thinking (Kadar 1992; Kadar et al. 2005). Using techniques drawn from life writing allowed participants to attend to the self-in-the-making as they considered their own positionality and behaviours. Attending to a substantive view of intersectionality, and acknowledging, as Leavy (2020) notes, “Arts-based practices are often useful in studies involving identity work” (25), we sought to locate participants with a range of varied embodiments. We drew on Finley’s (2008) suggestion that “If the purpose of arts-based research is to unveil oppression and transform unjust social practices, then it needs to connect with the everyday lives of real people” (76). Specifically, we were frustrated by the additive approaches to intersectionality we were seeing in other research spaces (“add race and stir”), and saw an arts-based approach as a way of allowing the full complexity and messiness of identities to emerge.

Participants were recruited primarily through the social media channels of the research team. The recruitment materials directly named that we were looking to recruit

participants who “identify as fat (or curvy, thick, fluffy, plus-size, etc.)” and that were “trans, gender-fluid, non-binary, two spirit, cis-gender or any other gender identity or expression.” We also directly stated that we were “particularly interested in hearing from those who identify along the gender spectrum and from the BIPOC, LGBTQ2+ communities.” Interested participants were screened via email to confirm eligibility, as well as to answer open-ended demographic questions which were used by the research team to ensure that the selected participants embodied the widest variety of lived experiences as possible within the scope of this project. The resulting snowball sample of 17 participants was rich in diversity with respect to gender identities, sexualities, disabilities, ethnicities, and other embodied identity markers. The 17 selected participants all completed the initial long-form survey and were invited to participate in the photo shoot. In the end, thirteen went on to participate in the second stage.

The resulting project exemplified a range of diversities across size, gender identity, race and ethnicity, age, sexuality, class, and other subjectivities. Participants used thick descriptions to locate themselves in the midst of a range of complicated and dynamic markers. Beginning with the long-form survey, participants gave substantive self-authored responses to questions around gender identity, fat experience, and dress. They were then invited to join us in studio for conversation and a collaborative photo-shoot of participants in relation to a treasured garment. An important precursor to the photo sessions was the delivery of a detailed email outlining the photo session process, notes on the accessibility of the space, and short biographies of the research team. In constructing this research, we aimed to recognize that our identities as researchers would influence how comfortable participants would be sharing intimate stories and experiences around body size, gender, and sexuality. Staying attuned to the inherent power dynamics at play in traditional researcher/participant relationships, our goal with this pre-session email was to provide participants with an opportunity to consider how they would like to present themselves in our space and to the research team, or if they wished to participate at all.

Our time with participants led to beautiful and nuanced conversations between participants, the three of us, and fine art photographer and co-researcher Mindy Stricke. These conversations enriched the original survey responses and took up themes of identity and agency around weight and gender in intersection with a range of other topics. Importantly, this research was completed moments before the pandemic lockdowns would have made this method impossible; one avenue for further engagement is to consider how we would amend our method in relation to our new global realities.

The visual engagement with this project was engaging and explosive. Drawing on artist and co-researcher Mindy Stricke’s (2016) method of using macro photography

(i.e., to create images that are abstract and open to a range of interpretations to elicit a non-narrative engagement with difficult topics), participants were invited to work with Mindy to co-create macro photographs that engaged with garment and flesh in unexpected and sometimes unrecognizable ways. The photo sessions were divided into two parts, each beginning with a recorded conversation between the research team and the participant about their selected garment. This conversation picked up on themes or experiences mentioned by the participants in their survey responses.

Three photographs were taken during each photo session: a representational photograph which showed the garment in its entirety, a portrait photograph of the participant wearing the garment in some way, and a macro photograph which picked up on themes from both the participants' written work and their photo session interview to portray the garment in a different and non-representational way. In an effort to ensure representational agency, participants were invited to collaborate in the framing and construction of the images during the photo session, as well as to review the photographs during and after the session. Post-session, participants were offered a selection of images and could choose which they felt comfortable sharing publicly. The majority of the macro photographs were taken by Mindy, while the other images, including the macro images of two participants, were photographed by Calla. Final visual materials, as well as quotes from participants, can be viewed at <https://www.sizingupgender.com>

While the description of our technique—photos and conversations—is quite simple, the emotional impact of both the process and the resulting product has been incredibly powerful. Participants brought themselves fully, in words and bodies, and engaged in both emotional conversations and commitment to artmaking. Participants described the process as cathartic, and lines between participants and researchers were blurred in the collective engagement with art and practice. We were reminded of Loveless' (2013) push toward art-based practices which allow “the insertion of voices and practices into the academic everyday that work to trouble disciplinary relays of knowledge/power, allowing for more creative, sensually attuned modes of inhabiting the university as a vibrant location of pedagogical *mattering*” (3). The resulting intersection of process and product thickened our ideas about intersectionality, art, and justice. Looking through the visual materials as well as interview transcripts, we engaged in an organic process of thematic analysis through extensive dialogue as a research team and emotional engagement with primary materials. The resulting themes allowed us to consider the possibilities and pitfalls of living and dress in relation to gender and weight, sexism and fatphobia, as proscribed systems. The themes below were resonant across all participants. We could not have arrived at these themes and this nuanced dialogic engagement without using arts practices in our exploration. We reflect here on some of the learnings which emerged from this space.

Discussion of Key Themes

i: The Material is the Method: Self-conscious Art, Research, and Practice

Despite its grounding in literal materiality—the manipulation of material—fashion is sometimes excised from debates about the impacts of material realities on everyday life. This section considers the ways that specific garments may intercept relationships to representation in intense and meaningful ways. Such garments expand beyond their literal realities as combinations of fabric and thread, and assume much greater impact in their relationship with the body. Ruggerone suggests that the “preferred dimension isn’t the *being* but the *becoming*, that dynamic situation charged with potentiality for creativity and change, which is activated by the desire for transformation” (2017, 583). In the artistic materiality of particular clothing, participants conveyed a sense of bodies becoming—becoming gendered, becoming weighted, becoming invested in systems of signification such as sexism and fatphobia or, conversely, mounting a rejection of these systems, often all at the same time. Asked to bring in a singular object, participants eloquently conveyed the ways that specific clothing items allow for a deep and abiding relationship of representation that is not adequately understood in examining either the person or the garment in isolation. Carol Tulloch’s (2016) concept of “style narratives” recognizes that people tell stories of who they are through their fashioned bodies. Embodied dressing therefore enables (some) individuals’ agency—at least some agency—to express themselves, make art of their bodies, and challenge injustice.

Figure 1*Triptych of participant Peter*

Note: A row of three images. From left to right: A photo of Peter's black and red tunic hanging from a wooden clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid-air. The background is white. Photo by Calla Evans.

An extreme close-up photo of the red embroidery on the chest of Peter's tunic. The texture of the threads can be seen in the detailed curving lines. Photo by Mindy Stricke.

A photo by Calla Evans of Peter, a fat Southeast Asian man wearing a black, soft-looking tunic. The cuffs of the tunic have a satiny red band, and, on the chest, there are two embroidered red dragons surrounding a black geometric shape, all encompassed in a circle of red embroidery. Peter has short black hair and is looking directly at the camera with a straight expression. He has a relaxed posture, with his hands in his pockets.

The emergence of new opportunities through art and dress was made evident in Peter's experiences. As a fat man of Southeast Asian descent, Peter struggles with the ways he is understood in the world as well as the way he understands himself. In his everyday life, Peter described his dress sense as underwhelming. Despite working in a fashion adjacent professional context, Peter limits himself to plaids and bland colours, in part as a result of the limited choices in flamboyant fashion for fat masculine identified people. Peter spoke about minimizing his visibility, allowing his bulk, ethnicity, and masculinity to take a back seat to his partner's more exuberant style. Yet the garment that Peter provided was the antithesis of his generally understated affect. Peter arrived with a black silk shirt with lavish red embroidery including a large dragon on the back of the garment. He discussed the pathway to achieving this garment—navigating the size politics of a market in Vietnam in which his size was literally indicated by a whale on the

label—but also the ways that this garment allows him access to an authentic self that is unavailable in other clothes:

If I couldn't speak and had to tell people who I was, the closest garment that would express who I was would be this garment. People can look in and see—yeah, he's a big guy, he's definitely influenced by Asian culture, maybe he likes martial arts. And he has a fire—there's a huge dragon in the back, right? So he may be Asian and—I know the stereotype of Asian is some kind of dude who is more polite—but there's definitely fire in me, right?

This garment, despite being antithetical to the rest of Peter's wardrobe, allows him to explore his identity and arts-based representation in ways that were difficult to access in the rest of his life. Peter's experiences resonate with Rice, Harrison, and Friedman's (2019) call to researchers of intersectionality to use the theory to interrogate their own histories and positionalities, ensuring that privileged social identities do not remain unnamed, under-theorized, and dominant. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) also note that intersectionality should be applied in the contexts of knowledge production because these sites and processes are structured by power systems. As they assert, "intersectionality neither travels outside nor is unmediated by the very field of race and gender power that it interrogates" (791). Arts- and practice-based work can resist static realities to provide fluid nuanced and dynamic approaches more in keeping with the term's political origins.

Intersectionality's analytic frame should not only be used to study research contexts but also to study the context of research itself. This awareness was especially fruitful in the context of this project. Rice, Harrison, and Friedman (2019) assert that intersectionality has been appropriated by white European scholars who re-narrate its origins as a European concept. These scholars fail to fully use intersectionality because it does not neatly explain their frameworks and paradigms. By contrast, in this project, colonial and positivist ways of knowing were interrupted in favour of the fluidity offered by artistic engagement and non-traditional approaches to knowledge. Tyler, for example, talked about navigating a path toward becoming comfortable with multiple layered identities as a non-binary person of Anishinaabe and settler descent. Tyler discussed the ways that playing dress-up as a young person provided a portal toward authenticity but also was the site of the first self-castigation on the basis of size: "My size was always on the foreground because, perceived under masculine rules and patriarchal standards, I was by and large the fat kid. Or the asthmatic kid. The soft kid. The kid in the corner no one really paid mind to."

Figure 2*Triptych of participant Tyler*

Note: A row of three images. From left to right: A photo of Tyler's cropped beige hoodie hanging from a wooden clothes hanger. The arms of the hoodie are attached to the drop shoulder with laces. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in midair. The background is white.

A photo of Tyler, a non-binary, Two-Spirit, fat, gay, anxiety-ridden, lower-class artist with mixed ancestry: Anishnabwe, Chinese, and Irish. They are wearing a cropped beige hoodie and faded black denim. They have the thumb of one hand hooked in their jeans pocket, and one hand raised above their head. Their hood is up, and the hoodie is pulled up so that their whole stomach and one side of their chest is visible. They are looking straight at the camera with a slight smile. They have a bit of facial stubble, and some of their blue-green hair is visible under their hood. An extreme close-up photo of the raw edge hem of Tyler's cropped beige hoodie, which appears to be floating around their skin. Their skin is visible beneath it.

Tyler explained the ways that they have begun to find peace in their body over time, through engagement with the arts, and through dress. The specific garment that Tyler brought had undergone a similar metamorphosis. Originally a full-sized hoodie, the garment was purchased by Tyler because it invoked for them a feeling of Indigeneity (despite originating in a mainstream clothing franchise). The beige hoodie with lacing throughout was a treasured garment for some time before Tyler recently amended it by chopping off the bottom half and altering it into a crop top. The choice to reveal their stomach was significant. The midsection is a powerful site of vulnerability in the context of both fat and gendered identities; the belly speaks volumes. Tyler sought authenticity

by playing with the juxtapositions between risk and safety, across genders, across identities:

I have always loved crop tops. I think crop tops are a very, very soft thing. And for me it feels like a non-binary thing . . . when I witness men and masculine folks in a crop top, it softens them up. And when I see a woman wear a crop top, it reminds me of both playing safe, being safe. And I think that has a lot to do with the women in my life who, when they feel the most safe, wear crop tops all the time. . . . I feel like a crop top is the most femme-y bro thing that I know to exist.

ii: All Becoming is All Becoming Together: Individuals and Structures

Fashion and dress work to animate the body in relation to the social order, and communicate symbolic and aesthetic meanings. For Entwistle (2014), dressing the body is “an on-going, daily and ordinary practice that connects the private, sensual and intimate experience of the body to wider social norms, moral codes and standards” (para. 13). Dress is therefore an everyday artistic and pragmatic practice that animates how bodies navigate and change physically and aesthetically within social contexts. These themes connect with a substantive understanding of intersectionality that is rooted in its original development.

The origins of intersectionality connected individual experiences to larger structures of inequality, but most research has focused on individual identities and subjectivities. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) assert that “what makes an analysis intersectional is . . . its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power.” (795). This focus on systems of power has often been obscured by a focus on identity in and of itself. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall encourage a renewed emphasis on structural power and inequality instead of a narrow focus on identity, yet they also recognize that identities are inevitably linked to power structures. Similarly, Rice, Harrison, and Friedman (2019) argue that scholars who use intersectionality should interrogate the workings of power and oppression that are the core of its origins in Black feminist thought and, as such, honour intersectionality’s founding purpose. Themes of power and inequality were thus central to our engagement with this project.

Thinking through art and dress, we sought to consider the ways that systems of sexism, racism, sizeism and their impacts on identities and experiences are intricately knit together. The nuances which allow for pride in a cherished fat roll cannot be understood outside the self-love painstakingly achieved through queer selfhood; painful comments about our size are made more painful when we are simultaneously misgendered and misunderstood through commentary on our weight. Our experiences

of racism, poverty, ableism, discrimination based on family composition and beyond further layer on top of our embodied understandings, understandings that are rooted in the dressed body and are always more than our individual experiences.

There is robust literature on the process of coming out, including coming out as fat (Murray 2005). Without seeking to excise ideas of “coming out” from queer origins or flatten queer experiences, we note that across multiple non-normativities, the process of naming and claiming identity is essential to identity formation and the nurturing of healthy selfhood. At the same time, a singular focus on coming out fails to consider the many ways that our identities are always co-constituted, and the important ways that dress may be implicated in identity creation and the ruptures and discontinuities of power which follow. This was made very clear through the experiences of participants in this project.

Figure 3

Triptych of participant Noel



Note: A row of three images. From left to right: A photo of Noel’s red board shorts with white sea creatures on them, clipped to a wooden clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid air. The background is white. Photo by Calla Evans.

An extreme close-up photo of Noel’s outfit, with green fabric on top and orange fabric on the bottom. Photo by Mindy Stricke.

A photo by Calla Evans of Noel, a white, gay, genderqueer person, who is thick and athletic. They are wearing a black tank top and red board shorts with white sea creatures on them. They have a sleeve of tattoos on their left arm. They are standing with their hands on their hips, looking

straight at the camera and smiling. They have short grey hair and are wearing thick black glasses.

While acknowledging the deep emotional impact of buying swim shorts designed for masculine bodies for the first time, Noel referenced the shame and discomfort of being provided with feminine-oriented swimsuits as a young person and the ways that this heightened existing dissonances with their embodiment. As a white genderqueer individual, Noel brought the weight of expectations offered to their younger self; the selection of a desired garment was the exemplar of a great journey toward authentic representation and a way of disrupting systems of oppression.

While not oriented toward fashion as a key mode of representation, Noel acknowledged a deliberateness in their engagement with clothing and with the ways that different clothing had impacts on their experiences of the gendered body. At the same time, Noel acknowledged discomfort with size, and with the specific ways that shifts in curves and angles skewed responses to their body's gendered identity in different directions. They noted: "Not only is it hard to find male-like clothes that fit my thick, woman-ish body, but the experience of shopping makes me self-conscious (and almost apologetic) of my gender identity and reminds me I exist in a binary world." Noel's specific experience of *having* fat, or of fat being located in specific places was indistinguishable from their understanding of their body through binary gendered lenses. Noel referenced a wistfulness in their garments, discussing the ways that they wished they could feel comfortable with being topless at the beach or swimming pool in their non-op body.

Noel agreed to have their photo taken in swim shorts from behind, showing a broad expanse of their white back, using art to reference a body that felt reasonably authentic at the intersection of weight, race, and gender identities. Importantly, Noel's ambivalence and discomfort with aspects of their embodiment does not allow for a separation of ideas across gendered or weighted lines—coming out as genderqueer could not heal Noel's feelings of alienation from their rounder body, and neither could acknowledging their rounder status entirely dispel the ways that specific manifestations of fat, particularly in their chest, interrupted their experience of their body in the realm of gender.

Intersectionality research explores experiences like Noel's that contest the stability or fluidity of identities and structures. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) encourage scholars to consider identities as dynamic. For them, "This framing—conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power—emphasizes what intersectionality does rather than what intersectionality is" (795). Rice,

Harrison, and Friedman (2019) likewise argue for scholars to understand identities and structures as “working truths,” while also exposing the shifting power relations that make, unmake, and remake their boundaries. In this way, intersectionality focuses on the dynamics of inequality through identities, while recognizing that the boundaries of these systems and identities are always being constructed and reconstructed. These constructions and reconstructions were seen in our engagement with Jade.

Figure 4

Triptych of participant Jade



Note: A row of three images. From left to right: A photo of Jade’s faded blue jeans, with the hems cuffed and slight tearing underneath the front pockets, hanging from a wooden clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid air. The background is white. Photo by Calla Evans.

An extreme close-up photo of Jade’s blue denim jeans, with only the small tear in them in-focus in the foreground. Photo by Mindy Stricke.

A photo by Calla Evans of Jade, a mixed/Black (half white), pansexual, middle range thick, non-binary femme person. They are wearing a deep red velvet tank top tucked into high-waisted jeans with a black belt. Their hands are in their pockets, and you can see their metallic manicure on their thumb nails. The tattoo on their chest says “*this thing upon me howls like a beast*” in black text. They are wearing hoop earrings and black eyeliner, looking at the camera with a straight expression. They have short curly hair with an undercut.

Jade, a young non-binary femme who self-identifies as bi-racial (Black/white), also felt the impact of the connections between gendered and weighted embodiments

and the limitations this placed on their aesthetic choices. Jade noted, “I know if I were slim, I would not feel shy or insecure going for a shapeless androgynous look. I think it’s just as sexy and stylish, but my curves and size make me doubt that I could look good dressed that way.” While gender and size impact Jade’s choices of representation, race also played a role. Referencing their body image in high school, Jade reflected, “I think I blamed myself for looking the way I did (small boobs, thick thighs, big bushy hair).” Other intersections of their raced, gendered, and weighted experiences were brought together in their reflections, culminating in the selection of which garment to bring to their photo shoot: “I recently bought a pair of loose fitted mom jeans from American Eagle and have never felt more at home. I can make a feminine or butchey outfit with them and they give me the vintage feels I had only dreamed of exuding.” Jade’s experiences also brought class into focus. When asked about an idealized garment, Jade continually referenced clothes that would work between paid employment and leisure spaces, given income limitations and the need to shapeshift between working and non-working components of life. The primacy of work, referenced by several participants, speaks to the impossibility of any consideration of representation which does not acknowledge the material realities of lived experiences. There is no way to consider Jade’s experiences and choices without considering the full pantheon of their experiences living and surviving across a range of complex and intersectional identities and contexts.

Figure 5

Triptych of participant Dori



Note: A row of three images. From left to right: A photo of Dori's joyous yellow jacket, hanging from a wooden clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid air. The solid teal lining of the jacket can be seen. The background is white. Photo by Calla Evans.

An extreme close-up photo of Dori's bright yellow jacket, with the blue, black, and white lining visible on the inside. Photo by Mindy Stricke.

A photo by Calla Evans of Dori, an African American woman wearing a yellow jacket with dramatic cape-like sleeves, and a teal, black, and white patterned lining that continues down the front of the jacket. It is a yellow silk and Ghanaian wax print suit made by Hoax Couture. The jacket is single-button with quadruple-sized shoulder pads. It has kimono-style sleeves with the vintage Ghanaian wax print lining, which is an homage to African liberation. Dori's right hand is on her hip, and she is looking down and to her left. She is wearing a bold necklace, bracelet, and earrings, and berry-coloured lipstick. She has short curly hair.

Class provided a different lens onto the stability of the singular subject in considering Dori's experiences as a Black woman who is a high-ranking academic leader. As an influential academic in a creative field, Dori has more freedom to play with aesthetic and discursive choices than many professional women, many Black people, and many academics. She gleefully acknowledges this freedom, leaning into it by making connections with designers and other creators. Unlike everyone else who participated in this project, Dori routinely had clothes custom made for her. While this choice signals access to a type of creative and financial privilege that is not readily available to most people, the outputs from this process were nonetheless held in a complex nexus of identity formation and decision making. For example, the garment that Dori chose to share, a custom made bright yellow suit, was lined with wax print cloth from Ghana that Dori had collected many years prior during research visits to the continent. Dori stated,

The jacket is single button with quadruple sized shoulder pads, which oddly de-emphasizes my large breast. It has kimono sleeves with the vintage Ghanaian wax print lining, which is an homage to African liberation. The sleeves zip up with invisible zippers. The pants are flared with a side split on each leg to just below the knees to show off my legs and as an homage to Blaxploitation films.

The influences that guided the construction of her garment included both artistic and emotional traces, such as her wish for the opulent shoulder pads that she viewed watching the show *Dynasty* as a young child, but also practical considerations, in the context of wanting to minimize attention to her ample chest. Talking about her breasts, Dori referenced the sexism and racism she experienced while developing as a young Black teenager, and the ways that the ghosts of that shame now inform her engagement with designers who make her clothes. To understand Dori's relationship with her garments, even garments made with such intention and joy, is to expose a buffet of

artistic and discursive elements, a convoluted and knotty arrangement of threads around racism and sexism, professionalism and "success," joy and fear.

iii: Wearing Clothes as an Act of Resistance: Contesting Power

A truly intersectional analysis must be in motion, endlessly attentive to the slippages and nuances of a complex and intermingled experience of engaging with an ever-changing dynamic world. Intersectionality, taken as a verb, as a command, requires that we attend to difference in concrete ways: through, for example, an assertion that Black Lives Matter, but also by acknowledging that Blackness is complex, variegated, and contested—a movement that is always moving. Attending to clothing as resistance requires a similar engagement. Clothing, as noun, is static and concrete, a mere utility to avoid frostbite or public nudity. Clothing, as verb, is dynamic, interpretive, informed by complex decision-making matrices and artistic, social, and physical requirements. As such, clothing ourselves may be understood as an endlessly political act, one with the potential for art as embedded resistance. Such an analysis suggests that, “resistance is not something that belongs to the individual (as a deficit), but is a method for negotiating the ambivalent experience of coming to know the self and the world, and of representing that experience with and for others” (Brushwood Rose, 2019, 858).

Devon W. Carbado (2013) argues that intersectional analysis needs to frame whiteness within an intersectional lens in order to expose subordinated histories and struggles and, as a result, it can support the formation of coalitions and foster broad impact. Similarly, Rice, Harrison, and Friedman (2019) assert that intersectionality was first theorized to achieve social transformation based on Black’s women lived experiences of both racism and sexism, but that it has been depoliticized and not used in the service of social justice within research. Rice, Harrison, and Friedman call on scholars who use intersectionality to honour its origins by interrogating workings of power and ensuring that their intersectional research works to advance social justice.

As the above scholars encourage us to stretch intersectionality, we contribute to this dialogue by considering how dressed embodiment can expand intersectional analyses as a new axis in the consideration of subjectivity, power, and inequality. How we dress our bodies and move through the social world is shaped by art in relation to our lived experiences of physicality, which intersects with our other positions including race, class, and gender, which are all produced in relation to structures of white supremacy, anti-Black racism, heteropatriarchy, and other configurations of power and inequity. In this way, dressed embodiment influences how our bodies move through the world and how we are treated.

Figure 6*Triptych of participant Anshuman*

Note: A row of three images. From left to right: A photo of Anshuman's leopard-print pants and bright orange suspenders, hanging from a wooden clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid air. The background is white. Photo by Calla Evans.

An extreme close-up photo of Anshuman's brown skin. The bright orange of their suspenders is out of focus on the left third of the image, and almost looks like it could be a light leak on a film photo. The angled crease of what might be their elbow fills most of the frame. Photo by Mindy Stricke.

A photo by Calla Evans of Anshuman, a short fat South Asian person wearing leopard-print pants held up by bright orange suspenders. They are holding their belly and looking confidently straight at the camera, with their lips slightly pursed below their mustache. They have large tattoos, a nipple ring, and are wearing wire-framed glasses. They are bald, with a single pearl earring visible in their left earlobe.

Anshuman exemplified the need for self-conscious and politically aware dressing. As a short fat brown person who has historically worked in the tech industry, Anshuman shared a deep reflexivity about their relationship with their body and their body's relationship with the larger world. Anshuman displayed a gorgeous pride in their form while simultaneously acknowledging the hatred that a body like theirs can inspire in its non-conformity to expected Western aesthetic standards. Anshuman connected the negativity directed at their specific racialized fat body with a broader politic of dehumanization toward people of colour, including the people who produce many of the fast fashion garments that are worn, and often quickly discarded, in Western nations. They ruminated on the cruelty of the world we inhabit, in both its specificity to their current embodiment and in the broader social context.

Meaningfully, Anshuman named dressing their body with love and care and joy as a specific and important act of resistance. The garment they brought to their photo shoot was a pair of suspenders, one of several pairs that they currently wear. Anshuman references the thought process that led to their decision to eschew belts:

If I'm not constantly worrying about the searing pain cutting into my belly as I sit down or desperately holding on to that one belt that is the only belt that fits—that's frayed everywhere, because of course it was a fast fashion buy and the thing is held together by sheer psychic will . . . I couldn't see a path for myself where I was still putting myself through what was pain.

Instead, Anshuman named the desire to wear suspenders as an act of liberation for both their waistband and their psyche, a small way to contest the cruelty which characterizes their existence. They noted, "Suspenders were the best option. I mean—they only look good on fat people, honestly. So . . . I bought my first pair. You really change your relationship with your own body. Like what you're actually sensing in any given time, or what we're taught to ignore—ignore the pain, make yourself feel really small. So, even if it seems like a tiny gesture towards my body, it's helped reclaim that which the world takes and takes and takes from me." Anshuman was one of two participants who identified as a *gainer*, as a person who deliberately seeks to gain weight, and this desire, like the choice to wear suspenders, was similarly described in the context of providing love and care to a body that has been dismissed, rejected, and abused. Anshuman's choice to view their body as a canvas was obvious in the visual materials which emerged in which their pride in their garments, their tattoos, their round belly, are presented as a gallery of joy.

Figure 7
Triptych of participant Joshna



Note: A row of three images. From left to right: A photo of Joshna's multi-coloured, multi-patterned dress hanging from a wooden clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid air. The background is white. Photo by Calla Evans.

An extreme close-up photo of Joshna's dress. One of the green floral-like shapes is in focus on the left of the frame, and the black and speckled pattern is completely faded out of focus in the rest of the image. Photo by Mindy Stricke.

A photo by Calla Evans of Joshna, a racialized fat woman wearing a patterned tunic-style dress. The top and bottom of the dress have a green floral pattern on a black background, and a wide horizontal stripe across the middle has an abstract pattern that almost looks like confetti, with flecks of pink, green, and black. Joshna looks content with a closed-mouth smile and closed eyes. She has straight, shoulder-length brunette hair.

Joshna, a racialized woman who works as a chef, came to the project with a type of flowy dress that she had never anticipated wearing. She notes,

Being pretty and girly are things that I didn't feel for a long time. The messages from the world had me so far on the outside of those things, it became easier to dislike them, and act as though I was rejecting them, not the other way around. I've done a lot of work to unpack this 'pretty girl' idea, take the bits that felt valuable, toss the rest, and then work on finding her inside of me. She's definitely my own kind of pretty girl, but I kinda think that's the point. In this dress, that pretty girl shows up immediately.

In speaking about the ways that this garment allowed her inner "pretty girl" to emerge, Joshna referenced systems of racism and sexism, as well as the ways that her tall and strong body resisted Western aesthetic expectations of femininity. Art wasn't obviously available to Joshna—instead utility was meant to be her currency. Going further, Joshna spoke at length about the ways that her professional attire, the white chef's coat, stood in for a complex array of colonial discourses, binding her chest and constraining her arms, suggesting with every limited movement that someone like her could not rise to this type of work. Joshna articulated a range of strategies of resistance: when forced to wear the chef's coat, she would meet with designers in advance to ensure that the fit and cut were able to cover her body adequately. Meaningfully, however, when asked about the context in which she wore her pretty "girly" dress, Joshna spoke about her television appearance as an expert judge on a cooking show. In this context, Joshna was able to reject the colonial discourses of what a chef is "supposed" to look like, how a strong woman should look, and how to reject ideas of which aesthetics constitute expertise, re-embracing art as necessary to her embodiment.

These acts of resistance cannot be broken down into their constituent parts. Joshna is strong and brown and female and a chef and an activist; Anshuman is brown and an activist and artist and raconteur. While these narratives and engagements with garments, both adored and reviled, touched on art, identity and embodiment across many different axes, experiences of resistance cannot be easily siloed into an acknowledgment of racism or Western beauty ideals, or merely an unpacking of the discourses of high culture in the kitchen or the cubicle. Instead, the layers of complexity of race, gender identity, weight, and desire, the impact of each participants' understanding of self, as well as the ways they are seen and constructed in the world, are threaded together.

Figure 8*Triptych of participant Aisha*

Note: A row of three images. From left to right: A photo of Aisha's sparkly silver jumpsuit hanging from a wooden clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid air. The background is white. Photo by Calla Evans.

An extreme close-up photo of Aisha's outfit, with metallic gold and black fabric filling the bottom-right of the frame on a diagonal. Photo by Mindy Stricke.

A photo by Calla Evans of Aisha, a cisgender, Black, queer, mid-fat woman. She is wearing a sparkly silver jumpsuit with her hands in her pockets, looking at the camera and smiling.

Aisha, a Black queer woman, came to the photo shoot with a sparkling jumpsuit that was a hand-me-down from her very stylish mother. She referenced the internal work that had to occur before she felt comfortable displaying such a flamboyant garment. As a fat Black woman, Aisha experienced sanctions for taking up space, and as a result, aimed to ensure that her style was well put together but non-threatening. Aisha spoke to the rage that precedes resistance, stating that "It makes me feel angry and frustrated that I can't experience the same joy that everyone else does. The sad thing is that most fat people don't actually know what their style is because we've never been able to find clothes in our size. We wear what fits and what looks 'good' or what's good enough." Meaningfully, Aisha has built a career as a fat activist and advocate for fat fashion. Her resistance exemplifies the parallel work of large-scale resistance paired with the act of dress as a form of self-love and rejection of normative schemes.

Our dressed embodiment illuminates the specific structural power of the production, marketing, and retail of the fashion system. Fashion works to produce normative bodies through categorization of clothing through the gender binary and hierarchical body sizes. Sizing systems place the body in relation to other sized bodies through a number, while gendered clothing organizes bodies in relation to the labels of men and women; meanwhile, the availability of clothing for “plus-size” bodies has been characterized by a dearth of choice and supply historically which continues today (Keist 2017). Real bodies are denied the art of fashion. As a system, fashion has fostered fat stigma and has roots in body ideals that were produced through the violence of anti-Black racism. According to Sabrina Strings (2019), a pro-thin and anti-fat bias in Western religion and race science, constructed diet and fat as moral, class, and racial issues that have been used to construct and justify racial injustice. Intersecting fashion, fat, and gender, there is a lack of availability of clothing for fat men and non-binary people. The clothing that is available conforms to narrow, white, masculine norms while the few non-binary options are very high in price (Barry 2019). These stories contest the intrinsic racism, colonialism, and fatphobia that dog the fashion industry, and speak back to norms and limits. By contrast, our project allowed the artistry of fashion to re-emerge to allow for dynamic and inspired engagement with body and dress as a form of rebellion and joy.

Conclusions

In examining this project, we find that our engagement with the arts allow it to be persuasively, wholeheartedly intersectional. What about this specific work, however, allows it to meet the criteria for intersectionality? To begin with, we view this work as extending Crenshaw’s analysis by using art to consider the ways that multiple identities are simultaneously always at play. It is impossible to consider the impact of weight stigma or gender identity on participants without considering them in relation to each other, and further, in relation to a multitude of other factors, suggesting that “The more we understand about human cognition, the clearer it becomes that narrative, stories, and the arts can play a major role in teaching diverse subjects and getting through to people on deep levels” (Leavy 2020, 15). For example, as participant Alexei stated about a floral blouse offered for the project: “I’m not sure why it spoke to me. I love floral patterns and mixing feminine aspects with masculine aspects and not focusing on fitting into a specific gender with my clothing, and just trying to express who I am in that way. I think, for so long, growing up, it was really hard for me to know who I was—whether that was being queer, or dealing with mental health or my relationship with fat and stuff like that, too.” Alexei’s words evoke Eisner’s (2008) idea that “What we have here is a radical idea that the life of feeling is best revealed through those forms of feeling we call

the arts; that is their special province, which is the function that they serve best” (7). Alexei’s experiences cannot be considered without a deeply accountable negotiation of the interplay of multiple lived experiences, a negotiation that an artistic engagement allows to emerge. While Alexei was unable to join us for the in-person photo shoot due to geographical constraints, they nonetheless experienced the joy of representation offered by engagement with arts-based methods.

Figure 9

Diptych of Alexei's top



Note: From left to right: A photo of Alexei’s floral and striped shirt hanging from a wooden clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid air. The background is white. An extreme close-up photo of Alexei’s outfit, with multicoloured flowers printed on a black background, cascading down the right side of the frame. Both photos by Calla Evans. A blank white space is where a portrait of Alexei would appear as they were not able to attend an in-person photo session.

The project further connected participants, as individuals with specific garments, to broader structures, reminding us, in the words of Langdon Winner (1980), that “artifacts have politics” (title). Anshuman’s suspenders can’t be understood outside of the broader politic of exploitative labour structures or systemic cruelty toward racialized bodies. Dori’s gorgeous suit connects her own deeply affective experience of her own body with broader politics of Black liberation in both African and diasporic contexts. We found that it was impossible to ask people about the experience of getting dressed

without referencing complex systems of artistic signification alongside politics of oppression and privilege. Examining people with their garments thus automatically led to an intersectional focus.

Finally, intersectionality is about contesting power, a theme that ran through every story. Participant Sookie spoke about the deliberateness of their choices as a form of engagement with art, audience, and community, noting, “I have really appreciated the overwhelmingly positive reactions that I get to my sartorial choices in queer + trans-centred spaces—especially since being a flamboyant, visibly gender-non-conforming and queer fat femme isn’t always so well-received in the cis-het world.”

Figure 10

Triptych of participant Sookie



Note: From left to right: A photo of Sookie’s sequined jumper hanging from a white clothes hanger. The hanger is attached to clear fishing line beneath a silver metal rod, so it appears to be levitating in mid air. The background is white.

An extreme close-up photo of the sequins on Sookie’s outfit. Individual sequins are in focus in the foreground, and a warm-toned reflection can be seen on their skin in the out-of-focus background.

A portrait of Sookie, a queer, white settler, mid-sized fat, invisibly disabled, non-binary femme woman wearing a sequined, multicoloured, deep v-neck jumper with black pants. One hand is on their hip, and they are looking at the camera with a big smile, eyes squinting with happiness. They have short hair with a side shave and are wearing thick multicoloured glasses and a gold necklace with a pendant of what appears to be a golden animal or bird skull. All photos by Calla Evans.

Sookie's fabulous "sparkle-motion jumpsuit" was thus presented as a form of joyfully clothing their own body while simultaneously and deliberately contesting normativity. We follow Finley's (2008) note that "By calling upon artful ways of knowing and being in the world, arts-based researchers make a rather audacious challenge to the dominant, entrenched academic community and its claims to scientific ways of knowing. In addition, arts-based methodologies bring both arts and social inquiry out of the elitist institutions of academe and art museums, and relocate inquiry within the realm of local, personal, everyday places and events" (72). Each participant reminded us of the ways that dressing is never a benign choice, that an engagement with garments always holds power between the threads. As a result, Noel's swim shorts or Peter's dragon shirt, for example, infuse intersectionality into artistry and materiality.

While revelling in materiality, to understand garments as intersectional on their own merits would miss a critical component of this research. In contrast to fashion photography—which, in Shinkle's (2012) words, "is said to treat the body as a semantic surface rather than a sensual object" (84), or "a non-body that only exists as a constantly updated simulacrum" (Lehmann, "Fashion Photography": 14, quoted in Shinkle 2012, 84)—it is precisely the interplay between art, garment, and body, between aesthetic, body, and structures, that allows for an interrogation of power dynamics enabling a deeply accountable and complex view of intersectionality to come into focus.

The images which emerge from this project allow for something more than an intersection to emerge. Borrowing from Seremetakis (1994), we suggest that this project, and its visual outputs ". . . *is not 'performative'*—the instantiation of a pre-existing code. It is a *poesis*, the making of something out of that which was previously experientially and culturally unmarked . . ." (7). The images from this project displayed on the website, along with the accompanying participant quotes, use art to disrupt many dominant narratives around fat bodies and fashion and introduce a joyfulness to the story of dressing fat bodies that has been sorely neglected. It is important that this work is accessible, and we look forward to further public engagement and response to the project. We also look forward to using art to continue to explore the intersectional potential of fashion and the dressed body as a site for revolutionary engagement.

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