

Hi Stuart!

I have chosen to do this précis in a nontraditional format—after our great class discussion I have decided to see this project as a space to tell the story of me as a scholar. Given my classical roots, it seems appropriate to start in medias res. I plan to treat this as a living document, updating it after (or perhaps during) each semester. If/when I need to send this to someone for a job or a scholarship application, I will adjust it to fit the audience/purpose.

Present (who I am today)*The Woman*

At my heaviest, I was 80 pounds overweight. Currently, I am half way to being the size I was when I was “healthy”. This journey—this physical journey of putting on and getting rid of body mass—has influenced who I am as both a human being and a scholar more than perhaps anything else in my life. I am a woman who: lives in our visual-obsessed society; is married to a man who is very concerned with health; who shops for all of the clothes that she owns; who gets up every morning and has to decide what is “flattering” instead of “comfortable”—this is the woman behind the researcher that I am today. I have a deep-seated personal desire to understand why the world around me both condemns me for not looking like I could while at the same time making it difficult to attain my personal best.

And it’s not just me: obesity is on the rise in America. Ads for weight loss can be seen on TV right next to ads for fast food. If we are supposed to be healthy people, why is the cheapest food bad for you? If all we need to do are diet and exercise, why are most programs confusing and expensive? If we are supposed to make the most out of our current size, why are most clothing options for “plus-sized” women a far cry from what is trendy (or even flattering)?

The Scholar

I will spend the rest of my life finding answers to these questions. I believe that the answers can be found in the **intersections of rhetoric and feminism** (the female body), **consumerism, visual culture** (how we see women’s clothing and bodies as a rhetorical act), **material culture** (how women’s clothing constructs meaning rhetorically), and **apparel and textile design**. In order to learn more about these things, I have chosen the self-designed concentration for my PhD in rhetoric and writing at Michigan State University. I have also recently completed a course in the apparel and textile department about sustainable fashion design. This is my first official foray into fashion design and the course has helped me add to my list of questions surrounding clothing, consumerism, and the female body.

Past Research

It wasn’t until the end of my second year of my master’s degree that I realized that my personal interests could be an impetus for scholarly research. My interest

in the rhetorical uses of clothing began somewhat anecdotally. I have been a long time fan of the show *What Not to Wear* and was puzzled by how the hosts told participants who were going into academia to dress. The advice to “look like a professor” seemed worthwhile, but the end result was not what I saw when I went to school. This led me to investigate the rhetorical uses of clothing and feminism. Feminism has traditionally been concerned with issues of women’s bodies; however, an examination of women’s bodies in clothing has been largely overlooked, especially in relation to feminists themselves. Constructing identity for professional feminists in the context of clothing calls into question the traditional feminist binary of privileging the mind over the body. While many feminist writers discuss a rift between second and third wave feminists concerning views on clothing, no one has produced data to show that these views are still held. My master’s thesis investigated how second and third wave professional feminists view clothing in relation to the mind/body binary using the classical rhetorical notions of *ethos* and *terpsis*. The data revealed that even among professional feminists, the mind/body binary still privileges those qualities associated with the mind—and that dressing as a professional feminist means dressing for authority and the political expression of feminist values, specifically economy and comfort. While this initial study provided valuable data (and gave me a chance to learn about feminism, visual culture, and apparel and textiles methodology), there is still a lot that I want to know.

Future Research

Immediate future

I have found some great resources at Michigan State University. I am enrolled to take Malea Powell’s cultural rhetoric class for the spring and am looking forward to learning more about material and cultural rhetorics. I have also talked with Theresa Winge, an assistant professor in the apparel and textile design department about developing an independent study around popular culture, the media, and dress. Both of these courses will help me grow as a scholar and a researcher. As I get ready to start my second semester as a PhD student, I have some research questions that I hope to find answers to as I continue my coursework:

1. *Why should clothing be important to rhetoric?*
2. *What has rhetoric said about clothing so far?*
3. *How does rhetoric talk about clothing when we do?*
4. *How can the field benefit from learning from apparel and textile design?*
5. *How can material methodologies help rhetoric?*

Over the next semester I plan to investigate my research questions further through two projects that I have already began. The first project is a scholarly paper that will be co-authored by Dr. Winge and submitted to the premiere scholarly journal in apparel and textiles, *Fashion Theory*. The paper is currently titled “Feeling the Feminine Folds of Fur: Exploring the Material Culture of the

Fur Coat,” and is a chance for me to explore the intersections of material culture, the female body, and eco-fashion under the guidance of an expert. The second project I am working on is a paper also intended for *Fashion Theory* that deals with the theoretical intersections of visual rhetoric and two theories in apparel and textiles: symbolic self-completion and the contextual approach to clothing. This paper will be one step towards helping the disciplines of rhetoric and apparel and textiles talk to each other.

Long term

I have approximately 98,902,348,902,384,098 ideas for my dissertation. Here are some of the highlights (I will add to this list as I progress in my coursework):

- Size-ism and the apparel industry
 - If clothing is a rhetorical act, we need to have a sartorial vocabulary—many people just don’t have access because of their size
- The lexicon surrounding eco-fashion
 - Everyone wants to be “green” but there are no standards for what this term means
- Online identity construction through “What I Wore Today” blogs by female academics
- The definition of “beauty” in our society
 - The discrepancy between how the media says we should look and how people actually look
 - You don’t have to be thin to be beautiful—but you do have to purchase the right things (or at least they want you to)

Obviously I have a lot of questions and I am sure that I will have more as I go further along I go down this path of scholarship. I look forward to the journey.