

Arts are Basic (Too Basic to See?)

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I awoke this morning in a hotel room in Montreal. There was no need to decide what to wear because I had packed my clothes before boarding the train the day before. Even as someone who prides myself on not spending a lot of time or attention on what I wear (I often proclaim with considerable glee that I buy all of my clothes at *Value Village* and it is not uncommon for me to wear the same set of clothes several days running), it was a relief to slip into the dark brown sweater and olive green jeans I had laid out the night before. It didn't matter that there was still snow on the ground and that the sweater was probably not going to shield me from the last cold blasts of winter. In fact, it mattered more to me that I had remembered to pack a necklace to wear around the comfortable cowl neck. And earrings to match.

As I was pulling on my boots, I found myself thinking, once again, about the opening article of this issue. I read the draft of Fiona Blaikie's paper, "The Aesthetics of Female Scholarship" some six months ago, and it has stayed with me, popping up at the least expected moments (like when I am getting dressed in hotel rooms). It is not only because of the power of the visual images contained therein that the article stays with me. It is because Blaikie has made me profoundly aware that the simple act of choosing one's clothing is such a basic yet symbolic act. One that is

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rarely discussed in academic circles, as Blaikie points out, and one that communicates so much meaning. Because whether I like it or not, I admit that I *am* communicating meaning when I choose to wear the same comfortable clothes three days in succession (but always with funky jewellery). Or when I dress in an emerald velvet dress to go to the opera. As Blaikie writes:

The objects that one chooses to place on or near one's body have inherent significance. The relation of oneself to one's body and the presentation of one's body in clothing signifies a sense of ease or dis/ease, a sense of clothed bodily comfort or not, a sense of or a repression of the aesthetic, a sense of what is correct and appropriate for dress in relation to one's acceptance by a particular audience, a desire to belong or be accepted by a particular scholarly group, and most of all a sense of oneself.

Her piece then presents a series of poems and portraits of four women, that, in her words,

serve to examine, interpret and re/present multiple situated meanings of and spaces within scholarship. They draw attention to how bodies are formed, disciplined or neglected, situated, experienced, clothed, loved and hated in spaces and places that are receptive and/or hostile; they offer alternative possibilities.

Citing the works of such scholars as Bourdieu (1984), Levi-Strauss (1963), Lurie (1981), and Butler (1993), Blaikie makes the indisputable claim that clothing is a form of literacy—a form of non-verbal communication, that, like other communications, can be “constructed, read, mediated, interpreted and subverted.”

Our days, of course, only begin with the choice of clothing, however haphazardly or deliberately those choices are made. Yet another ubiquitous art form in most of our lives is the presence of music. Most of

us reading the articles in this journal will listen to music every day, sometimes by choice—from favourite radio programs on the CBC to carefully selected iPod collections—and sometimes not (coming down the elevator in Montreal I heard music that was not of my choice). The second article by Peter Gouzouasis is a delightfully recursive musical romp through arts-based research, aesthetics, music history, music theory and performance. At one point, he describes Ornette Coleman's (1960) spontaneous, double quartet improvisation as a piece that

seems to begin as a random morass of noise [and] eventually settles into a sensible 40-minute groove that demonstrates how musicians who start with even the most minimal plan intuitively and logically organize their music ideas to form a coherent, lyrical music composition.

He then suggests that research shares these characteristics—“metaphorically, research may be considered in the same manner” as he plays with issues of research design and musical forms, and always returning to patterns and connections.

The first of Carl Leggo's poems that appear in this issue, “Mac's Bookstore”—with its juxtaposed images of past and present moments, sweet sadness and quiet contentment, loneliness and company—sets us up for the third article, “The Pedagogy of Hinges”. The authors float the idea of “learning-in-the-making in which relationships are made between the past and present, the inner and outer, the self and others”—calling these hinges that prompt learning. The third article was co-authored by a group of doctoral students and their professor and explores what happens when “a learning self is intertwined with the time and space of our environment.” The class had been examining Ellsworth's (2005) book, *Places of learning: Media, architecture, pedagogy*. As a result they decided to “bring objects and tell oral stories revealing their connections to Ellsworth's text”. Rebecca Luce-Kapler, the professor for the course tells us that as a result of bringing in these objects (which could easily have been clothing or music, I thought to myself),

the discourse changed in unexpected ways. I noticed that the sense of collaborative meaning making deepened and that the connections among their respective ideas seemed easier to highlight. That activity became first an individual hinge where they brought their pasts to the present and realized a self in the making (Ellsworth, 2005) and then became a hinge for the group as our past work coalesced during that class and we realized our identity as a learning collective.

As Jennifer Davis, one of the doctoral students, later observes, “the power of art experienced as reality bound us to each other in a new way.”

Art experienced, then, is clothing, is music, is architecture, is place, is loved objects, is poetry. And it is dance. Of all of the art forms, we tend to see less scholarship in the field of dance, yet what could be more basic, more fundamental, than the ways in which we move our bodies through space? In the final article, Ann Dils asks hard-hitting questions about literacy, such as these:

What might be possible if we were prepared to consider fluency in nonverbal behavior and dance as other forms of literacy, equally important to our communication? Would this change our sense of who was succeeding in schooling and who was not?

Citing the classic works of such scholars as Grumet (1988), Giroux (1992), Eisner (1998), Dissanayake (1995), and Langer (1953), Dils explores issues of identity formation in teenagers, about how their views of their sexuality, class, and other categorizations are shaped by their readings of patterns of behaviors of family members, peers in schools, and the images and texts of films, television, music, and graphic novels, and about how dance literacy can serve to interrogate and shape identity and community. She then highlights the work of Feck (2005):

[T]hese kinds of connections between ... lived experience, previous bases of knowledge, and the dance [are] not only indicative of knowledge transfer, but ... begin to build community.

And so we come full circle, having danced through and around issues of identity, community, arts experiences, and literacies in the broadest sense. The issue ends fittingly with a poem by Rebecca Luce-Kapler. In contrast to her vibrant and startling “Summer Rhapsody” that appears earlier in the volume, “Winter Sky” seems to me to be something of a gentle grace, a grateful acknowledgement for the stars that appear in our winter skies as sisters and cousins, companions and lovers, serving us in all of those guises. Perhaps we, too, should say a quiet grace for the arts experiences that also serve us in these relational ways.

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