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Reverse Tomboy: (re)definitions of gender fluidity through sensory engagement with material culture

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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Abstract

This narrative case study explores how material culture, in the form of dress, grooming and accessories, is utilized to establish a gender fluid presentation of the self. It focuses on Tim Mustoe, a forty-two-year-old heterosexual creative living and working in London, whose embodied practice contributes to the problematization of gender normativity through a disruption of culturally established links between appearance, gender and sex. The study considers how a particular form of non-spectacular cross dressing is used to integrate into a work environment and also operate within a non-queer social environment. The study explores the affective power of material culture in the reification of subject position and as a means of resilience and empowerment through every-day practice and also considers its significance on a social, intersubjective level. The methodology used for this case draws on sensory ethnography and includes a queer reflexive turn to consider parallels and contrasts between my own and Tim's experience and practice.

Conceptualisations of subjectivity, sex, gender are considered in relation to those on material culture and the study draws on scholarship related to cross dressing in the UK. Tim identifies as a man, as do I; however, his embodied practice and gender identification proffer a

particular response to culturally embedded norms relating to the binaries of sex and gender. Therefore, in relation to male femininity I propose the notion of feminising as an amendment to the concept of femaling, which assumes the identification with or transition to a cisgender position. This study explores the phenomenology of dress as an expressive tool of gratification and as a means of integration for which the imperatives of professionalism, age and respectability are key factors.

Key words: sensory ethnography, queer reflexivity, feminising, femaling, gender-fluidity, non-binary, material culture, non-spectacular

Introduction

This study started with a pair of heels. While waiting for a bus home on a late summer evening in 2018 in Central London, my eye was caught by some four-inch court shoes with a distinctly fifties' flavour. Worn by a smoker outside the Shakespeare's Head, they stood out amongst the trainers, loafers and lace-ups. Nowadays such shoes are usually reserved for social events and I imagined they had been donned to dress up workwear for an evening out. It later transpired I was right. In keeping with the brand identity of the JD Wetherspoons chain, this pub is an affordable British *bierkeller*, although that is somewhat disguised by the grandeur of its location in Africa House, a late-colonial, nine-storey building in Portland stone. According to the stall holder in the adjacent alley, it is also the scene of Hogarthian 'all sorts - that I wouldn't believe' and he had even heard reports of blind 'punters' converging for orgies.

However, that evening my interest was piqued by something less carnivalesque, less spectacular, but, nonetheless, quite unexpected; on closer inspection the unremarkable scene of smokers recast itself into an intriguing tableau in which the regular and irregular merged: the shoes belonged to a man in early middle age with a slightly thinning bob, in skinny jeans, a loose blouse and discreet make-up. He was engaged in an animated conversation with a group of younger men in black jeans and T shirts - technicians perhaps. The surprise was as much in the setting as the scene and I, a seasoned queer, was thrown off-guard as I felt that any Wetherspoons, owned by the prominent Brexiteer, Mike Ashley, epitomises the very antithesis of a queer space.

The focus of my attention and subject of this case study, Tim Mustoe (see Figs. 1-4), is unusual on several levels. Then, as now, his look did not convey cross dressing that seeks 'to pass', when an assumed sex is 'undetected' and 'cisgender aesthetics' are attained (Billard 2019: 467), and it was too casual for drag. I work at the London College of Fashion and see demonstratively gender-fluid dress on a daily basis; however, Tim presented a stark contrast to the innovative, high fashion androgyny that is not unusual amongst students and certain staff, or in and around queer venues. Nevertheless, this embodiment of gender fluidity was intriguing in its absence of theatricality and its nonchalant blend of established gendered codes. It is an aesthetic that I define as non-spectacular and is one practiced at work and for socializing after work, but seldom at home.

Therefore, before Christmas 2018, I approached Tim to discover more about his motivation, personal experience and self-identification. His appearance also prompted me to consider my own practice of feminine dress and grooming, with a view to exploring how an

emotional engagement with material culture on a quotidian basis contributes to re-conceptions of the normative.

Figure 1: Tim 2003
Figure 2: Tim and staff talking.
Figure 3: Tim walking down the street.
Figure 4: Tim sitting in the pub drinking.

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Methodology

This study, which constitutes qualitative research in the form of a narrative case study draws on sensory ethnography, which Sarah Pink outlines as 'a developing field of practice' (2015: 6). Drawing on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty ([1962]2003), sensory ethnography pays close attention to how the senses relate to embodiment and understands perception as contingent on contact with objects; in so doing, it emphasizes the 'sensory intersubjectivity of the research encounter' (Pink 2015: 64), an insight into which is gained through a focus on reflexivity, 'a turning back on oneself, a process of self reference' (Davies 2008: 4).

The study was conducted over nine months via semi-structured interviews, some of which were recorded at my place of work and some in local pubs frequented by Tim in central London: Shakespeare's Head on Kingsway and Penderel's Oak on High Holborn, where field notes were gathered manually (see Fig.5). Other encounters included walks in a local park and also telephone and email contact (see Fig.6). After each encounter I took notes, summarising that occasion and adding my impressions. The range of locations used for encounters allowed for a flexibility of interaction in keeping with Pink's view that interviews be 'social, sensorial, and affective encounters' (2009: 76), and with the intention of developing both trust and rapport (Heyl 2007: 369), which were prerequisites for discussing personal issues and experiences.

This is a discrete study and Pink points out that while 'classic observational methods' often involve considerable fieldwork, this 'is often not viable in contemporary contexts' (2015: 6), in relation to time and respective work schedules. All interaction with Tim is an embodied process of reflexivity, in the sense of an integration of mind and body and operates on several sensory levels that go beyond verbal communication to tactile and visual engagement with dress.

My analysis of emplacement, 'the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind- environment' (Howes 2005: 7), which particularly relates to the aforementioned pubs, helped attune me to a social dynamic in which Tim is both acquainted and comfortable. Also, and regarding my own experience, Pink outlines the potential of researching 'practices that are already part of their lives, but that might be experienced and understood differently by others' (2015, 61). As mentioned, the research process is constantly monitored by reflexivity, the 'ongoing critique and critical reflection of […] biases and assumptions' (Begoray and Bannister 2010: 789).This relates to what Coffey describes as a position of '"knowing" – where the researcher already possesses some of the esoteric knowledge and an empathetic self' (1999: 33). However, as I am not privy to either

the scope or detail of Tim's entire life experience, I feel the notion of 'insider-outsider' (Rosenberg and Sharp 2018: 162) is a more balanced, and accurate, description of my position.

Figure 5: Tim putting on coat. | **Figure 6: Tim in park.**

Subject Position

By employing reflexivity, this study explores the relationship between dress and sense of self. Regarding this, I hold 'identity' to be an overly reductive term when used to explain 'who one is', as it fails to denote adequately the composite nature of subjectivity. Instead, Kaiser's more inclusive variant 'subject position' (2012), premised on an intersectional approach, allows for factors such as gender, sexuality and age as relational components of subjectivity. As such, one's subject position is dynamic and constantly updated by 'subject formation'; as Kaiser explains 'being and becoming are ongoing processes' that are 'especially compatible with processes of style-fashion-dress' (2012: 20). From a phenomenological perspective both perception and subjectivity are rooted in the body in which the mind is not autonomous (Merleau-Ponty ([1962] 2003)**.** In this way, significant, personal factors are experienced and also read through the body, which Attfield delineates with her contention that 'class, age, gender and sexuality are all inscribed on the body, contributing to the formation of self in terms of individuation, individuality and subjectivity' (2000: 238). Through an application of reflexivity, I ponder how the body is clothed 'as an active process […]for constructing and presenting a bodily self' (Craik 1993: 2), and this study looks at the embodied practice of dress by a male in female clothes, which I define as that designed and marketed for women and also that culturally assumed to belong to women.

Subjectivities and Definitional Positioning

I concur with Oakley's (2016) association of sex with the biological and gender with the cultural, in keeping with the policy statement issued by The World Health Organization (2017) which states, '"[s]ex" refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women… "gender" refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women'. Four decades ago, Goffman's insightful evaluation that gender represents 'the culturally established correlates of sex' (1979: 1) highlights the role of relative cultural norms in both categorising practice and the maintenance of said norms. This distinction, however, is not made on a broader socio-cultural level (Paechter 2006: 254), with the terms conflated and both used to identify the distinction between men and women. There is also an apparent preference to use gender, which then constitutes 'a Janus idea […] It is at once both one of the surest of all ideas in the modern world and also one of the most contested' (Plummer 1996: xiii).

Regarding reflexivity, knowing and rapport, one poignant realisation emerging from this research were distinct interpretations of key terms and concepts between Tim and myself. Both Tim and I identify as men with male bodies. I identify as gay and understand aspects of my subjectivity as queer. As to that, while I wear items of women's clothes, I do not stray from bifurcation, and though I have experimented with drag, I have never conducted daily life in full

female dress. I consider this as gender fluid rather than non-binary. Although Tim has had some same-sex experiences, the details of which were not discussed in interviews, he identifies as 'straight' and lives with his female partner and their two young daughters (Mustoe 2019b). While not using queer as a form of self-categorisation, he concedes this term can apply but contends that gender fluid is misleading as he understands this to refer to feeling variously male or female and so alternating between binary positions. Instead, he identifies as non-binary, which he understands as represented 'by the 'T' in LGBTIQ and [I] express that outwardly in the way I dress and act' (Mustoe 2019a) in the statement on diversity that he was asked to write for his company. Tim also clarifies he has never intended to transition medically on any level and does not have a female alter-ego.

Oakley points out that 'even sex can be in the eyes of the beholder' (2016: 6), and Tim plays with this, stating: 'I don't try to convince anyone else that I don't have a penis, but I don't try to convince them that I'm a male either' (Mustoe 2019d), which reveals his subjective and intersubjective positions as multi-layered. Returning to the issue of men and women, it is this conscious cultivation of a subject position that he defines as 'non-binary' that places Tim within the umbrella term of 'trans' (Beasley 2005; 152). Though the term transgender was initially associated with 'assimilationist transsexualism' (2005: 153) that sought to reinforce an essentialist binary (Prosser 1998: 174), since the 1990s the label has become increasingly conflated with 'a Postmodern-inflected Queer stance opposed to stable identity, promoting outlaw or ambiguous positionings' (Beasley 2005: 153), which are constantly on the move. In this sense, trans, queer and transqueer are applicable analytical tools with which to consider Tim's complex position regarding gender.

This complexity can be traced to the 'cluster concepts' of 'male' and 'female' to which various 'attributes' are associated (Paechter 2006: 258). These also operate as correlates for both sex and gender, and so as conceptual double agents. Tim (2019b) describes his position as that of a 'Reverse Tomboy'. As 'tomboy' describes a (young) female who avoids what is deemed, on a socio-cultural level, to be appropriately 'feminine', it follows, as a mirror image, that Tim feels his appearance does not conform to conventions of 'masculinity' expected of and for males, and so does not feel 'fully and 100% male' (Mustoe 2019c). The duality Tim feels regarding gender and subjectivity underpins his use of 'non-binary' as a self-defining term. This, of course, puts standards and ideals, and our own conditioned perceptions of those, at centre stage; normativity is not merely that which is usual, it is that which is culturally preferred, and this highlights the significance of intersubjectivity in embodied practice.

Queer Reflexivity

Given my own subjectivity regarding the nexus of sex, gender and sexuality, deploying a queer reflexivity provides percipient analysis and I turn to Rooke's (2009) deployment of queer reflexivity in her study of the everyday experience of lesbian and bisexual working-class women. The complex nature of Tim's management of material culture and presentation of the self is reflected in Rooke's definition of queer as something that 'problematizes the epistemological and ontological comfort and coherence of identity categories' (2009: 155), However, while a queer

perspective is appropriate, indeed, unavoidable, given the conditions of the study, these conditions also demand that 'queer' be applied with some care.

While queer theory is 'an exercise in discourse analysis' (Giffney 2016: 7) that can be utilized for the articulation of feelings, embodiment and practice, this study focuses on a phenomenological understanding of embodiment and is concerned with what it is like *to feel* or to be perceived as queer. Although queerness is inherently political and subversive, these are relative terms. Queer theory is both deconstructive and constructive and one aspect of queer theory, that of potentiality, is particularly apt as a contribution to subject position in this case; Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal anti-essentialist call for the recognition of 'the open mesh of possibilities' (1994: 8), inherent in human bodies in relation to sex, gender and sexuality, is how I propose queerness for this study.

Adams and Holman Jones (2011) make a convincing case with a holistic evaluation of similarities between queer theory and reflexivity in autoethnography. Despite differences of purpose, both are committed to exploring uncertainty, to innovation and to challenging orthodoxies. Moreover, the metaphor of queer reflexivity as a 'hinge' on which researchers can pivot allows for one to constantly reassess the significance and relationship between theory and practice. However, while sexuality and sexual practice are clearly deeply significant elements of queer discourse, for me - and I comment as a gay man – this default is unhelpfully reductive and actually restrictive; therefore, returning to Rooke and the queer reflexive turn, I diverge from her focus on sexuality to extend a definition of lived queerness in a broader sense.

Engaging with Materiality

Clothes rustle, fabric slides through fingers, heels click and feet ache. Dress provides what Merleau-Ponty defines as 'sense data' (Pink 2015: 28), through which sensoriality is engaged, beyond the 'exteroceptive senses: sight, hearing, sound, taste and touch', to internal muscle sense and those that mediate between the external and the internal: balance and movement (Vannini et al 2012:6). Dant's (1999) emphasis on the powerful link between material culture and embodied practice is also explored by Miller, who refers to Simmel's argument that the 'objectification of cultural forms' (1998: 19) relates to values and lifestyles. Dress helps place ourselves on a number of levels, and my interaction with Tim reveals a keen awareness of the sensory qualities of dress in the strategic management of inter-social relations; while there is no official dress code in the company in which he works, he is careful to conform to a sartorial *zeitgeist* he has identified; one that is relaxed but also 'professional' (Mustoe 2019c).

Dress can mask and reveal. Used as a form of 'denial', the disavowal of certain values and subject positions, it can also herald 'desire' (Bari 2019: 11). This is an impulse that is constructive but which comes in guises beyond the sexual. Moreover, with its somatic focus, dressing itself is an affective process and provides 'sensuous pleasures' (Negrin 2015: 122). Bari's states that 'our deepest internal life' (2019: 11) is expressed through dress and this, alongside Attfield's view that the intimacy of dress helps 'negotiate the inner self and the outside world' (2000: 12), is reflected in Tim's accounts of his practice. Dress is a means through which internal and external

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expectations are met or confounded and regarding the reading of femininity in relation to ageing (Laz, 1998; Twigg 2013). Tim's awareness of judgmental attitudes around age results in careful styling; however, this restraint also facilitates inclusion at his workplace, which constitutes the stage on which he can fully engage with materiality.

Gender Fluidity and Dress

Regarding the intersubjective significance of Tim's embodied practice, and my own, I draw on Richard Ekins's grounded theory of transgender practice in the UK in a study that conceptualises 'male cross-dressers and sex-changers as males who "female" in various ways' (1997: 2). However, it is necessary to clarify that since that study, two decades of changes in legal recognition, media coverage and social attitudes has resulted in less stigma attached to trans people and fewer socio-cultural sanctions against transgressions of the normative. Ekins approaches femaling as a process that constitutes 'a staged career path […] of five major phases', which he identifies as 'beginning', 'fantasying', 'doing', 'constituting' and 'consolidating' (1997: 2), while conceding these stages are experienced on a very individual level (1997: 130). Although Ekins shares my distinction regarding sex and gender, defining the latter as 'the socio-cultural correlates of the division of the sexes' (Ekins 1997: 55), he nevertheless predicates femaling on the 'desired, actual or simulated changes in both primary and secondary characteristics of "sex"'(1997: 55).

My study is concerned only with gender-fluid cross dressing of a specific kind, which makes no concerted effort to pass, to convinces an 'unknown audience' of an assumed sex (Herrmann 1995: 113). Although aspects of the career path as useful as notions to explore dressed practice, I amend the key concept to that of feminising as this captures more accurately the desire to amend gendered effects and pronounce a non-binary position. In line with the transfeminine activist and artist, Alok Vaid-Menon, who contends that men are able 'to be their own femininity' (Moore 2018: 49), I feel that femininity, as a cultural construct, is not solely the property of women; Also, and importantly, its adoption by men can move beyond the parodic. Halberstam points out 'definitional boundaries of male and female are so elastic' (1998: 20) and his call for a recognition of the historical empowerment that 'female masculinity' (1998) provides is a useful model for considering male femininity as it allows for the culturally mediated, relational nature and signification of both gender concepts to be interpreted in creative and agentic ways. Beyond a desired aesthetic outcome, Tim and I practice feminising as a process of self-affirmation, providing satisfaction that also signals our respective positions to the world.

In her autobiographical *Gender Outlaw*, first published in 1994, transgender performer and activist, Kate Bornstein denounces essentialist 'gender terrorists' who use 'gender to terrorize the rest of us' (2016: 91). Both Tim's and my own experience reveal, within the metropolitan protective shield in which we operate, levels of acceptance that runs counter to those experienced by Bornstein; however, we both recall a different story in the recent past. Bornstein draws a distinction between gender fluidity and gender ambiguity, as she conceptualises the first as a 'refusal to fall inside a prescribed gender code', while the latter is 'the refusal to remain one gender or another' (2016: 63); however, as gender is simply the embodiment of a code, ambiguity

is surely only a less demonstrative version of fluidity. Also, in creating this distinction, Bornstein's reliance on a binary, which assumes that polar opposites exist, is itself reductive.

As a performative statement, the avoidance of femaling by Tim, as a means of passing, contrasts starkly to a narrative case study by occupational therapists, Curtis and Morris (2015), which draws on 'interpretative phenomenological analysis' (2015: 706). Their research participant, anonymised through the pseudonym 'Sammie', is a senior citizen living in the North of England who only presents himself as unambiguously male or female, and manages 'to female' successfully (Ekins1997). This secretive duality, the embodied 'closet', is the converse of that lived by Tim, whose very public refusal to assume a normative gender position also highlights the disparities of transqueer realities in contemporary Britain, which are marked by geography, age and class. However, despite the difficulties Sammie has faced, Curtis and Morris conceptualise cross dressing as 'a meaningful occupation' (2015) that has ultimately sustained him on a psychological and emotional level, and this fundamental need to express oneself through the materials of dress is shared by Tim, who states that this desire for self-presentation 'has been dominating my emotional life for ages' (Tim 2019c).

In Southell's study of transnational cross dressing, she alludes to the link between intersubjectivity and dress, as an 'extension' of our bodies (2004:14) and also to it as 'an everyday part of the creation of an image' (2004: 17) that is read by others and monitored by ourselves. The normative 'rules' of dress (Kirkham and Attfield 1996), have been relaxed in the last twenty years, but 'the pervasiveness, persistence and power […]of binary oppositions' (1996: 4) are still very evident and Kirkham and Attfield's germane observation that 'to gender' is not only to code as male or female but also 'to generate' (1996: 4) is borne out by any perusal of fast fashion where, alongside silhouette, the use of colour, fabric and print is extremely gendered – in turn perpetuating an ossifying binary for dress and appearance generally.

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Tim's Journey

Tim is a senior graphic designer at a corporate communications company in Canary Wharf. Since joining in March 2019 he has been able to wear what he defines as 'feminine' clothing (Mustoe 2019b). In his interview, conducted in men's clothing, he raised the issue of dress and was assured that his choice of 'gender-symbolic' dress (Eicher and Roach Higgins 1995: 102) would not be an issue. However, and with his full assent, exceptions are made for meetings with clients and for trips out of London to avoid a possible negative reception (Tim 2019c). He feels fully supported at this employment and was asked to outline the statement on diversity for the company website (Mustoe 2019a)

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Prior to this, Tim worked for eight years in a marketing agency in Covent Garden, and during that time, with the help of therapy and support from family and friends, he embraced an urgent need to wear women's clothing. This was derailed, however, by the Managing Director, who took exception to this and initiated a dress code that precluded use of dress identified as 'feminine' for men. While this breached the Equal Opportunities Act of 2010, which categorically guarantees trans rights (2015), Tim left this uncontested, due to a 'toxic environment' (Mustoe

2019b). A subtle androgyny was permitted, and this very discreet form of blending (Ekins and King 1996: 2) or 'ambiguity' (Bornstein 2016: 63) was replicated in his bobbed hair, worn in the style of Franz Liszt. Any feminising to his satisfaction was conducted when socialising in the evening, and he was obliged to make up and change his shoes either after the Managing Director had left, or in the building foyer.

Tim's embodiment of the non-binary and his attachment with material of femininity began around the age of seven when, alone, he discovered a pair of white stilettoes belonging to his stepmother, who had very small feet (2019d). Regarding this act, Ekins's notion of the first stage in the life career, the 'beginning', of trans subjectivity, rings true (Ekins 1996: 40). For Tim, this 'inchoate' experience (Ekins 1996: 40) nevertheless made him feel 'fabulous' (Tim 2019c), which is a recurring term to describe the sensory effects of dress in the research interaction. Confined to one item, this matches Ekins concept of 'partial femaling' (1997: 67), Tim makes no mention of sexual arousal but feels exhilarated by the sensoriality of the act, 'the tactile and the visual' impact (Ekins 1997: 62) and also the enjoyment of mastering the shoes for some minutes before being reprimanded for looking like a 'poof', and having to take them off (Mustoe 2019c). The account allows for a greater degree of 'knowing' from myself and I consider a photo of me aged about three, attempting to walk with feet drowning in a pair of my mother's mid-sixties kitten-heeled stilettoes, like a blond Minnie Mouse in an embroidered romper suit. Though not a memory, this photographic record prompted a reflexivity that exemplifies our interactions, in which I 'bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions' (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 744). I was certainly conscious of the imprint of materiality when playing with lame, chiffon, beading and satin kept in my grandmother's dressing-up cupboard, where such beautiful pre-war items had been consigned for two generations of children to destroy gradually.

Tim later experimented at university in Derby, indulging occasionally 'in drag' at the local gay bar, the only safe zone (Mustoe 2019c). After leaving university and moving to London he made a more concerted effort to develop a feminine wardrobe, which he used as an habitué at the gay-friendly club night 'Play Time', held weekly at the Egg in the early 2000s, but now closed like many other clubs (Café 2016). This constitutes a formative period as his present feminising and embodiment of gender through engagement with materiality is both an extension of his practice during this period, and also a reaction to it.

Playtime sought to combine the exhilarating hedonism of gay dance nights with less mainstream dance music (Mustoe 2019c) and Tim's initial interest was prompted by a flyer promising 'The club that smacks you on the arse and calls you princess' (Mustoe 2019c). While this wording is certainly problematic from a contemporary perspective, Tim found the suggestive, tactile validation of this laddish promise exciting. He soon became a part of the 'inner circle', designed promotion material and describes his position, perhaps role, as 'club trannie' (Mustoe 2019c). Items of dress worn at the time included a fetish-inspired black PVC dress but also more relaxed, practical clubwear to participate fully in what was apparently an 'oceanic' and 'ecstatic' atmosphere (Malbon 1999). At this time Tim wore wigs of different colours, and heavy makeup, including thick foundation to mask a shadow. This, alongside fake breasts, was intended to replicate a biological woman as closely as possible. This intention to pass, or *possibly* pass,

suggests femaling (Ekins 1997) and marks a shift from 'dyadic doing', in which occasional femaling is practiced amongst others who participate in what is a 'pretence awareness context' (Ekins 1997: 97), towards a 'constituting' stage in which this practice becomes more 'sustained' (Ekins 1997: 107).

Oddly perhaps, only one photo records this period: Tim is sitting in a wine bar in Putney, dressed in a wine-red polo neck over quite high false breasts. His hands appear manicured, the nails painted dark red, similar in tone to the jumper; he is wearing a long wig, reminiscent of a late version of the 'Rachel', the eponymous hairstyle popularised some years earlier by Jennifer Anniston's character in *Cheers*. However, the overall effect of the look, conveyed through the combination of wig, tight polo-neck, pale green frosted eyeshadow and heavy beige-tinted foundation, carries a distinctly mid-seventies retro style.

Heels and Empowerment

Figure 9: Tim's heels.

'It always starts with the shoes for me […] I build up from the feet' (Mustoe 2019b). The lynchpin of Tim's feminising is footwear and he becomes most animated when describing his shoes, exhibiting a palpable pleasure in the details of their material properties and their role in 'making' an outfit (Mustoe 2019b). His referential listing of styles from snakeskin, to animal print, to patent shoes recalls the somewhat Lacanian *jouissance* in the lyrics of 'Make-Up', Lou Reed's ode to performativity. Tim's description of shoes reveals the powerful level of affect and empowerment that they transmit for him and it echoes Suthrell's identification of a 'preoccupation' with clothes amongst her research participants (2004: 68).

Desire and the desire to be desired are clearly factors for many who feminise (Ekins 1997; Suthrell 2004; Curtis and Morris 2015); however, the practice invites curiosity, scrutiny and assumptions about embodied desire, often with the presumption of femaling as reducible merely to sexuality. Drag, in particular, pivots on this narrative, and even when performers are working irony, parody, the hyperbolic or even the grotesque, presentation is often sexualised. Another supposition takes feminising as an act of elective disempowerment, one often conflated with sexual passivity.

Beyond identifying as straight, Tim refers only obliquely to sexuality, choosing not to elucidate in any detail on either conceptual preferences or individual objects of desire. Furthermore, he insists his dress has no seductive intent and claims to avoid overtly sexualised clothing. However, his preferred footwear signifies sexualised hyper-femininity, an ideal type of embodied gender I have experienced, and enjoyed. Manoeuvring in heels is a profoundly self-conscious act; it requires careful management of weight, muscle and posture in relation to floors and pavements, and involves 'techniques of the body' that manifest 'dexterity' obtained through 'training' (Mauss 1973: 78). When living in Madrid, I recall the kinaesthetic pleasure of a controlled pelvic lunge in negotiating the city's pavements and cobbles in a pair of five-inch black

patent stilettoes, found previously on the dance floor of the iconic club Kinky Gerlinky. Agreeing on the somatic impact of heels, Tim notes with pleasure how for him a different corporeal impact 'pushes your bum out' (Mustoe 2019c), illustrating how sensations 'mediate between conditions in the external world and internal body' through our sense of 'balance' and 'movement' (Vannini et al 2012: 6). Tim's enthusiasm for shoes corresponds to the sense data of their material qualities; when explaining the appeal of a pair of high wedge cork sandals, he outlines, almost anthropomorphically, how he despises espadrilles of any kind - his aversion triggered by the rough, 'untidy' look of the jute rope (Mustoe 2019d).

Tim emphasises the impact of high shoes on his self-esteem (Bari 2019: 137), with which he has had issues, particularly during his previous employment when prohibited from feminising in any meaningful way. Variously, they make him feel 'pretty', but also 'great' 'brilliant' and 'fabulous'. However, despite repeated reference to how heels make a 'statement' (Mustoe 2019b) and their associations with self-confidence, their use falls within parameters that reflect a sense of professionalism. While 'fabulous' suggests transformative glamour often conflated with the exaggerated, the theatrical and the 'eccentric' (Moore 2019) Tim's embodiment of queer sensibility does not reflect that. The notion of the fabulous must be understood as meaningful in contexts that are not only spectacular.

Although high shoes are clearly wardrobe staples for Tim, he uses other forms of dress to manage their effect and create a look that conforms to the zeitgeist of dress he has identified amongst women at work, and he maintains 'I like dressing up but only as much as real girls do' (Mustoe 2019c). The summer of 2019 saw some very high temperatures, motivating him to wear lower shoes for the sake of comfort, and for one interview, he arrived in flat sandals; however, the jewelled embellishment provided gendered connotations that precluded any reading as unisex. Still conveying an ideal type of femininity, they prompted Tim to text images of his feet looking 'pretty' to friends when he noticed the effect on a tube escalator (Mustoe 2019d).

On a second meeting in the Shakespeare's Head, Tim arrived in an elegant and conservative outfit that included a pair of very high black court shoes, which he referred to later as similar to 'something Victoria Beckham would wear' (Mustoe 2019c), He refers on several occasion to Beckham as a style icon, which provides some insight into his own subject formation. Through his own scrutiny of Beckham's styling, Tim finds inspiration for a reification of a feminine ideal in role model who manages 'to always look stunning' (Mustoe 2019c), and who maintains a balance between understatement and glamour - aspects she calibrates depending on context. Similarly, when socializing in favourite pubs, Tim can 'glam up' (2019c) by changing shoes and applying makeup. Vivienne Westwood, when referring to her iconic platforms, speaks of elevation as sensory pleasure and psychological empowerment (Vivienne Westwood Talks to Kirsty Wark 2004), which are sentiments shared by Tim when explaining his rationale for wearing what many people might judge as impractical and uncomfortable footwear (Mustoe 2019b, 2019c). On an intersubjective level, his shoes also trigger responses from strangers who compliment his style to those who asked variations of 'why do look like a bird' (Mustoe 2019c) to those, invariably men, who admire how well he can manoeuvre in them. He explains that when

out drinking he offers his shoes to those (men) who are curious about the impact they have on posture, balance and muscle control (Mustoe 2019c).

Clothing: A Balancing Act

Tim's use of 'reverse Tomboy' hinges not only as a purely descriptive, self-defining term that offers some clue to his practice of feminising; it is also intended as a critique of firmly established double standards regarding dress and both sex and gender. Kessler and McKenna (1978) identify a western default to maleness as a standard from which femaleness is relative and so othered. Historically, the term 'tomboy', though connotative of unorthodox behaviour and appearance, did not carry the same stigma as 'sissy', its male equivalent; indeed, it was often taken as a badge of pride rather than shame. Tim is quite vociferous in pointing out that the reality of 'unisex' is essentially menswear adopted by or adapted for women, the most obvious example being the use of bifurcation for both sexes. Decrying this imbalance as 'not fair' (Mustoe 2019d), he also rues the loss of male finery evident in the court styles of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, in which ostentation was utilised as a guiding principle of status, and embroidery, prints, heeled shoes, wigs and cosmetics adorned certain male bodies. From his perspective, this has left men short-changed in terms of sartorial expression, a view reflected in Suthrell's research (2004: 68). In many ways I share this regret and on a reflexive level I consider my embodied response to socio-cultural expectations about appearance.

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In tune with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that 'the body is the vehicle of being in the world' ([1962]2003: 94), Tim's feminising is mediated by his subject position that accommodates taste, his sense of his own body and the environment in which it is practiced: his work. Clearly reflexive on the emplaced, intersubjective realities of his job, he refers to appropriacy throughout our interaction. However, this illustrates a very personal interpretation of compliance with codes (Kirkham and Attfield 1996) and in relation to his perception of menswear as restrictive, he asks 'why should I conform to this set of rules' (Mustoe 2019b). Yet, in terms of how femininity should be presented, his choice of clothing complies to standards and restrictions based on culturally widespread notions of professionalism and age, and a certain tension emerges between maintaining decorum while also indulging in the pleasure afforded by the visual, tactile and kinaesthetic qualities of fabric.

Figure 7: Tim on High Holborn.

Figure 8: Tim with skirt.

A black tabard dress and a pinstripe shirt dress with a belt provide structure that is not too 'figure hugging for a body that's been ravaged by booze and not enough exercise' (Mustoe 2019d)(see Fig. 7). Such self-deprecation is combined with a strategic honesty regarding dress, but one that acknowledges the role of affect when choosing clothes. He describes an accordion-pleated skirt as 'flattering (Mustoe 2019c), aware that the full skirt and movement of fabric, accentuate the illusion of a waist, which, to some extent, is already provided by a fitted waistband (see Fig.8). Indeed, fabric in motion is deeply attractive for him. The dress he wore out in Derby

was ‘a long dark red gown that flowed and moved in the breeze’ (Mustoe 2019e) and he describes his enjoyment of wearing blouses and skirts that have a ‘billowing’ quality, which is highlighted when outside, walking. Tim points to a general absence of this quality in contemporary menswear as even when garments are loose or voluminous the fabric itself is heavier than that used for much female dress. His animated accounts of sensorial enjoyment of ‘floaty’ and ‘sheer’ fabrics echo my own pleasure in experiencing the lightness of a pair of black, gold and green Chinese-print evening trousers in thin silk-effect nylon.

There is a subtle but identifiable distinction in the level of statement between Tim’s choice of footwear and his clothes. Hints of the spectacular can be detected in some shoes, especially in relation to heel height; however, his clothing conveys modesty and respectability and his makeup, when worn, is discreet. This ‘grown up’ (Mustoe 2019c) approach is also evidenced in his understated choice of palette; Tim prefers dark, neutral or autumnal colours, in keeping with an essentially conservative aesthetic, which also highlights how age as ‘performance […] an act’ (Laz 1998: 86) is embodied through dress and is also accomplished’ through ‘ongoing action that is ultimately social and public’ (Laz 1998: 87). On one level such sartorial discretion reinforces normativity while on another, as an expression of male femininity, it remains disruptive.

Pink refers to interviews as sensorial ‘events’ that offer ‘productive’ emplacement (2015: 74), For one interview, the clothes brought by Tim include a favourite dress in a seventies geometric print in white, ochre and navy-blue, which he feels is ‘loud’ (Mustoe 2019c). This description interests me as though bold in a retro sense, the pattern is not garish, and the length, cut and pussycat bow convey modest dressiness. Although Tim feels this is a daring purchase, he maintains respectability is ensured as it ‘harks back to when everything was slightly flamboyant […] you’re allowed to be a bit more out there with a retro style’ (Mustoe 2019c); he goes on to draw an analogy to Margot Leadbetter, icon of haute suburban chic from the mid-seventies sitcom *The Good Life*. Margot’s armoury of style, including signature turbans, designer kaftans and immaculate nails, epitomises glamour that avoids the overtly sexual and the parodic femininity of a Stepford Wife.

On another occasion, Tim presents a recently acquired evening blouse in synthetic chiffon in bottle green. This too channels a ‘Margot vibe’ (Mustoe 2019e) and its tactile appeal is intensified by a deep slit in the back that provides, through particular turns of the body, the ‘carnal sensation’ of air on skin (Vannini 2012: 19). Again, the design balances glamour and respectability and the sensuality of the ‘floaty’ fabric and slit is offset by a demure high pie-crust collar, buttoned at the back. Tim reiterates Twigg’s identification of ‘policing’ of dress to avoid ‘inappropriately youthful’ and sexualised dress (2013: 16), explaining: ‘I don’t want to look like mutton dressed as lamb because, actually, there’s a potential for that’ (Mustoe 2019c). He feels this perception is ‘amplified’ in other people’s minds, attributing this to ‘a tendency for what we might term transvestites or cross-dressers to go over the top’ (Mustoe 2019d).

Accessories, Cosmetics and Change

Figures 10 & 11: Tim in a new wig.

On a September night I waited for Tim in the Shakespeare's Head, feeling extremely self-conscious in a combination of men's and women's clothing, including pale blue flares, floral shirt, blue patterned jumper and strawberry pink patent trainers from an Adidas-J.W. Anderson collaboration. What had seemed quite discreet, or at least unnoteworthy, at work and on the street, was suddenly in stark contrast to every man there, and that evening was especially male as an England-Kosovo football match was about to start. Relieved when Tim arrived, I was also immediately alerted to a change in his appearance; beyond an elegant outfit of long pale pink cardigan and tabard dress, Tim had accessorised with high block-heeled snakeskin shoes, silver ethnic jewellery, full make-up, new glasses – and for the first time, a wig (see Figures10-11). That day Tim had spent some time at a salon having the wig cut and styled by a hairdresser, who had asked if this represented one step toward transitioning and Tim had clarified with the simple analogical reference to his self-definition as Reverse Tomboy that it was not. However, although there was still no use of breast enhancers or padding, the wig had a transformative effect that shifted his signature feminising to a position more representative of femaling (Ekins 1996; 1997), and I wondered whether this suggested an attempt to pass and so a profound development in Tim's subject position.

Prior to this point, Tim's careful maintenance of essentially normative femininity through clothing and accessories was often not replicated on his actual body. In several of our interactions he was unshaven. and chest hair, a clear signifier of masculinity, was also evident. The liminal gender positioning of his bob, underscored by his receding hairline, also reaffirmed the corporeal maleness within its encasement of female attire. Equally significant was an absence of make-up and the effect was a very particular variant of genderfuck, only one that inverts a dependence on the dramatic. I found a bare face particularly intriguing as I have worn make-up on a near daily basis for over forty years, at least when interacting socially or professionally, and it has become completely naturalized. My (discreet) makeup is not simply an improvement on nature but also a cathartic daily ritual. This is at odds with Tim, who only applies it to 'finish' an outfit, and only when fully shaved as, otherwise, 'it looks a mess' (Mustoe 2019d). Tim views shaving as 'uncomfortable' but touches of makeup as mere enhancement is not considered an option. Regarding the relationship between the embodiment of gender and practice, an overall low-key aesthetic is maintained; however, Tim imposes particular standards and conditions to his face that are not applied to his body, which illustrates the subjective conceptualization of femininity and the subjective rationalization of its use.

Conclusion

This is a study of small acts, the significance of which lie in their mundane enactment. My interest in non-spectacular feminising is not only prompted by individual style and the negotiation of normativity to forge and maintain a subject position as 'a meaningful occupation' (Curtis and Morris 2015: 706), but also to record what is often overlooked: a man operating in a demonstratively mainstream environment with no recourse to the privileges accorded by celebrity. As such, it stands in contrast to most coverage of non-binary dress in fashion and popular culture in the last half century, and one that has grown exponentially in the last decade with the meta-narrative of the 'celebritization' of feminising and the 'celebrification' of many

who practice it (Driessens 2012). In the socio-cultural context covered in this study, the non-binary , although niche and not sanctioned universally, is no longer marginal in the sense of Bornstein's 'gender outlaws' (2016); however, its historical value lies in how its variety, exposure, and reception contribute to evolving conceptions of sex and gender. This is exemplified by an update of Halberstam's 'bathroom problem', in which butch women were challenged for using the wrong toilets (1998: 22), and which contrasts with the experience of Tim, who uses the male toilets at work, but who was offered the option to use the female ones. Significant also, are the pubs he frequents, where several of my preconceptions have been challenged: at the Shakespeare's Head, ready protection is offered by staff, several of whom identify as queer, if harassment arises. Returning to Tim's position, he recently informed me he now has 'days off from the wig', explaining that '[M]y position is evolving as I have more confidence', which highlights his growing self-assurance in selective feminizing through a use of material culture imbued with sensorial import. This sustained attempt to normalize what is still unusual practice requires resilience, and through this Tim has 'consolidated' his feminizing in tune with his subject position (Ekins 1997: 130); however, while it has become a constituent part of his 'new "everyday life"' (Ekins 1997: 135), he is content to put it aside when he deems it inappropriate, which also reflects his emplaced 'sociality' (Pink 2015: 64). Tim's self-classification as Reverse Tomboy captures succinctly a refusal to be placed in a gender or sexuality box and it articulates a determination to find one's own way through the terrain of gender identification, which for some is a difficult path. The non-spectacular should not of course be confused with the insignificant. Tim's ambiguous relationship with normativity and his employment of restraint not only remains disruptive of gender binaries, assumptions and norms, it also illustrates how the practice of those who are often overlooked can contribute to a record of cultural shifts.

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