In the Realm of *Feathers and Fur*

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Preface

My analysis ... [emphasizes] local negotiations ... . I feature stories, narratives of people and events, because these stories show sites of discursive contestation.¹

*Feathers and Fur* is a semiannual fashion magazine produced by Bryn Mawr and Haverford students. According to its editors, its title refers to the two schools’ respective mascots, the owl and the black squirrel. As *Feathers and Fur* is a fashion magazine, though, I cannot help but interpret its title in terms of clothing—the feathers and the fur, as discrete elements of luxury fashion, standing in as a synecdoche for the array of fashion in all its glamorous “color, mirth, and sensuality,”² as the magazine’s editors put it. This double meaning is significant for the way it ties the world of fashion to the specific context of the Bryn Mawr and Haverford community, plotting a path between the local and the general that I hope to follow in this paper.³ The title’s play on words also provides an entry point into a discussion of my paper’s methodological inspirations, which rely on a series of further double meanings.

Literally, “realm” refers to a kingdom. I do not mean to suggest that *Feathers and Fur* has any kind of “dominion” over the bi-college community, however; and neither do I use “realm” in its most common figurative sense—for example, as in “the realm of the sciences.” Here, my title is a pun—although perhaps not a very clever one—on the title of a book by Anna Lowenhaupt-Tsing, which is itself a pun (and a better one, at that). Tsing’s *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place* is an ethnographic study of the Meratus Dayak, an Indonesian minority group from the Meratus Mountains, on the island of Borneo.

³ There’s potential here for a completely different project, as well: one that might address this overlap between animal products (feathers, fur) and the fashion world, in which the glamour of fashion serves to mask the textile industry’s brutal treatment of animals.
The “Diamond Queen” is a mythical figure in Meratus Dayak culture, someone who brought prosperity in ancient times and who they see as the originator of many important cultural rites—thus, “the realm of the Diamond Queen” might be the physical land which is the home of the Meratus Dayak, the mountainous forests that Tsing visited in the 1980s for the fieldwork that became her book. The term might also refer to Uma Adang, a seer and holy woman who befriended Tsing, seeing herself as a kind of “diamond queen” for Tsing, someone who could share vast bodies of localized knowledge with her. Similarly, Uma Adang saw Tsing as a “diamond queen” in her own right, “an unusual woman with unknown powers, obscure cultural knowledge, and an insubordinate spirit.” But as Tsing explains, “the realm of the Diamond Queen” is more than any of these definitions—more, too, than their sum. It refers, above all, “to the conceptual space [Uma Adang and I] created in our ethnographic interaction.” This may seem a strange way to begin an art history paper that has nothing to do with the Meratus Dayak, nothing to do with Borneo, nothing to do with Indonesia—indeed, that does not directly engage with the results of Tsing’s research or fieldwork per se. And yet, from its inception, my project has been closely guided by Tsing’s particular understanding of fieldwork as outlined before: not as a researcher studying a subject, but as a researcher attempting to convey, in writing, a “conceptual space” that resulted from the interactions between researcher and subject.

For me, those interactions began in late September 2009, when I applied to be a photographer for *Feathers and Fur*. At first, I had no ambitions of doing any writing on the magazine. After reading essays on fashion by Roland Barthes during my sophomore year, I had begun to

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4 Tsing, 21.
5 Tsing, 22.
6 In John Muse’s class Roland Barthes and the Image, I had read Barthes’ essay “Blue Is in Fashion This Year” and selections from *The Fashion System*. I found much of his rigorous semiological analysis somewhat esoteric—simply in the sense that it seemed too far removed from the everyday life of wearing clothing—but his explanation of the myth of “comfort” or “functionality” made a deep impression on me. Suddenly, I realized that no one could “opt out” of fashion—those who professed not to care about it—to wear “only what’s comfortable,” for example—were, in fact, simply turning a blind eye to fashion’s system of signs, which never stopped operating, regardless of who was paying attention. “In order to find purely functional objects, it is necessary to imagine improvised objects: for example, the shapeless covering Roman soldiers threw over their shoulders to protect themselves from the rain,” Barthes writes. “But once this makeshift garment has been fabricated, and, we might say, institutionalized under the name *paenula*, [it] is ... set in opposition to other garments and has referred to the very idea
cultivate a mostly serious interest in the subject—as something worth thinking about, but maybe not too hard, or, perhaps, always in a somewhat playful manner. Even Barthes had once tried his hand at advertising, briefly advising the French advertising firm Publicis on an advertising campaign it had developed for the car company Renault during the 1960s. In his biography of Barthes, Louis-Jean Calvet writes that this situation “must have left a strange taste in Barthes’ mouth” given his critical writing on advertising, but that Barthes’ acceptance of the commission suggests a certain degree of fascination with the advertising world on his part. Similarly fascinated, I thought that I, too, might turn my attention from reading the myths of the fashion system to producing a few myths of my own.

At the same time, I was taking a class with Allison Hayes-Conroy called Feminism and Environment. One of Allison’s earliest goals was to provide us with a feminist critique of “objective” knowledge, which she did in our second week of class. It was then that I first encountered In the Realm of the Diamond Queen, as well as work by Donna Haraway. In her essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Haraway attempts to reconcile two strands of thought on the idea of objective knowledge: one that argues for the constructedness of all knowledge claims (and, subsequently, the nonexistence of objectivity), and another that “[holds] out for a feminist version of objectivity”—one that might account for “the radical historical contingency [of] all knowledge claims and knowing subjects” but also retain “a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world.” Haraway’s solution relies on an alternate model of knowledge based on embodied vision—literally, vision that comes from a body—that she calls “situated knowledges.”

of its use, just as a sign is set in opposition to other signs and conveys a certain meaning” (Roland Barthes, The Fashion System [New York: Hill and Wang, 1983], 264-265).
7 Louis-Jean Calvet, Roland Barthes: A Biography (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 142-143
8 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (New York: Routledge, 1990), 187. The dual concern here is first, that historical and continued patriarchal control of knowledge be acknowledged; but also second, that the idea of objective knowledge not be abandoned altogether, so that feminists maintain a voice in the debate over what counts as knowledge.
9 Haraway, 188.
The embodied nature of all vision and thus all knowledge might seem obvious, but Haraway argues that over the past few centuries, new visualizing technologies have increasingly distanced the production of knowledge from the human subject, offering a laundry list of examples that include “sonography systems, magnetic resonance imaging, artificial intelligence-linked graphic manipulation systems, scanning electron microscopes, computer-aided tomography scanners, colour enhancement techniques, [and] satellite surveillance systems.” Haraway believes feminists must reclaim vision from these technological forces by emphasizing the necessarily personal and physical nature of all seeing— and therefore all knowledge production. Situated knowledge means “partial, locatable, critical knowledges”—knowledge that comes from somebody, that is situated somewhere, instead of the nowhere of constructivism or the everywhere of totalizing claims to objectivity.

It was at this point that I began thinking about how I could use Haraway and Tsing to support a possible “field study” of Feathers and Fur, taking a situated knowledge approach to writing about the magazine and paying close attention to my own personal relationships to models, editors, the magazine itself, and, more generally, to fashion. Two case studies Allison assigned a few weeks later offered further guidance. Juanita Sundberg’s reflections on her status as a participant observer for the Agrupación, a Guatemalan non-governmental organization, made me feel confident that I could both contribute to and study—work for in addition to working on—Feathers and Fur. “Several [NGO personnel] asked me if I was the Agrupación’s coordinator,” she writes, describing a series of encounters she had at a local fair for NGOs. “‘No,’ I replied, ‘I am here to observe and assist.’ ‘Right. But you are helping them run the project, no?’ was the response I received—over and over.” Sundberg and I share an interest in breaking down this dichotomy between observer and participant, the dichotomy that insists that someone “helping them run the project” could not possibly also be an observer. Andrea Nightingale expanded on

10 Haraway, 189. Harun Farocki offers his own roughly contemporaneous meditation on this idea in his film Images of the World and the Inscription of War. See also Jonathan Crary’s Techniques of the Observer for a historical gloss on this process.

11 Haraway, 191.

12 Juanita Sundberg, “Identities in the making: conservation, gender and race in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala,” Gender, Place and Culture 11.1 (2004), 56-57. Admittedly, Sundberg’s case is complicated by race and class differences between herself and the members of the Agrupación that are not present in my work here—at least certainly not to the same extent.
this concept, arguing not only that I could do both, but that it might actually enrich my project, preserving what she calls “the silences and incompatibilities that become evident when ... diverse methodologies are brought together.”

In other words, any conflicts between my work as a Feathers and Fur staffer and my work as a researcher would become valuable parts of the “conceptual space” between myself and the magazine. The nature of my fieldwork would be different, certainly—no one we were reading in Allison’s class was writing about student fashion magazines at small liberal arts colleges—but I nonetheless sensed that there was potential here for an interesting case study. Moreover, given what I’d read, it now seemed crucial to me that I not simply produce a typical piece of academic writing. The third-person “objective” tone of academia suddenly seemed tainted, too close to what Haraway calls “the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere.” Instead, I thought, why not seek to actually use the theories I’d studied? I came up with a group of concerns “in the realm of Feathers and Fur”—that is, located around my relationship to Feathers and Fur—that I thought I might be able to address using the methodologies outlined by Nightingale, Sundberg, Haraway, and Tsing.

*Feathers and Fur* produces not just fashion images but also gendered bodies. What is the relationship between the magazine’s photography, photo editing, and layout and this production of gendered bodies and images? As I wrote earlier, my engagement with the magazine is complicated, marred by a certain sense that fashion is somehow a frivolous pursuit, not completely worthy of serious attention. Here I hoped to take this “frivolity” seriously—to consider just what was at stake in such a classification, both for me personally and for broader understandings of fashion and *Feathers and Fur*. I had taken a documentary film class last spring, and so with these issues in mind, I decided to try filming as I worked for/on the magazine, relying on a mix of personal interviews and documentary footage of magazine meetings and events. I planned to supplement these investigations with analysis gleaned from critical scholarship on fashion, gender, and photography, in addition to writing on new media, as

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14 Haraway, 189.
Adobe InDesign and Photoshop figure prominently in the magazine’s layout process. Overall, my goal was not to offer any kind of complete or unified interpretation of *Feathers and Fur*, but rather to present a number of “partial yet powerful objectivities,”¹⁵ as Haraway describes them.

In the Realm of *Feathers and Fur*

In a world plagued by recessions, environmental crises, and the death of Michael Jackson, fashion and style have never been more necessary. Our second issue provides distraction in the form of color, mirth, and sensuality.\(^{16}\)

In October, the *Feathers and Fur* staff met at Haverford to discuss the shoots for the magazine’s second issue, which would be released in December. I’d attached myself to a shoot by Elizabeth Svokos, a *Feathers and Fur* editor who planned to photograph couples—models acting as couples—as they prepared for a night out. “They meet, they flirt, they fight—then an open ending,” Bee explained to everyone. Afterwards, we broke into smaller groups to refine our thoughts about the various shoots. “I really like the idea of seeing them getting ready first,” Bee said to our group. “Yeah, because that’s sort of the story,” someone added. “And then it goes from really personal to the big, wide Founders shot,” Bee continued. At the time, we’d planned for a final shot to take place in Founders Great Hall—a large, ornate event space at Haverford—anticipating that the models would stand out against the backdrop of its stark black-and-white checkered floor. “There’s a goal now,” Bee said. “The goal is to get to Founders, and that’s going to bring everything else together.”

We proceeded to storyboard the shoot, figuring out the logistics of the narrative: how would we get these couples to Founders for the final shot? For the most part, these storyboards ended up being abandoned when it came time to do the actual photo shoot, but they remain illuminating. I quickly understood the importance of narrative for fashion photography—narrative in that peculiar, fashion-oriented sense of the word that Barthes describes in *The Fashion System*. For fashion, he writes, “to be in a particular place is to pass through it; i.e., travel is the great locus of Fashion: ‘sojourns’ themselves are merely the poles of a single itinerant function. ... [Fashion]  

\(^{16}\) Oliner, Reyes, Singh, Svokos, and White, 2.
In this way, the fashion narrative is always in place only as photographic support, propping up each image, lending it the reality of an ostensible “story” that, after all, exists only for the images themselves.

At one point, as were discussing a potential shot in which one of the couples would be getting dressed, Bee asked, “What could the guy be doing?” It was a seemingly simple question—likely purely descriptive, with no intended gendered undertones—and yet as she asked it, I began to realize that even in our initial storyboarding of the photo shoot, gender was a primary concern. To think about the narrative of the shoot, we had to think about what we wanted to happen in the photographs; to think about what we wanted to happen in the photographs, we had to think about what identities we wanted our models to have; and to think about identity, we had to start with gender, especially for a shoot about couples.

This link between gender, identity, and narrative was something that I’d thought about in other contexts before. In my application to work for Feathers and Fur, I’d provided a number of photographic samples from albums I’d made that addressed comparable issues. In my iPhone rephotographs of photographs from At the Rim: A Celebration of Women’s College Basketball, for instance, I’d highlighted those photographs in which gender seemed particularly significant for the players and coaches. In one, a player from Northwestern University sits on her bed, a poster of then-Boston Celtics star Larry Bird on her dorm room wall behind her [Figure 1]; in another, Purdue teammates stand in front of a mirror fixing their hair before a game [Figure 2]; in a third, Tennessee coach Pat Summitt writes game pointers on a chalkboard for her team, her baby son held in one arm [Figure 3]; and in a fourth, Louisiana State player Melissa Peay walks past the school’s drill team [Figure 4]. By rephotographing these specific photographs from At the Rim, I was recontextualizing them, providing them with a new narrative that made gender more explicit: women’s basketball players’ dependence on male role models like Larry Bird in the 1990s, before the start of the Women’s National Basketball Association in 1996; potentially uneasy ties between college sports and the traditional feminine value placed on maintaining one’s appearance in particular ways; the possible intersection of motherhood and career for

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female women’s basketball coaches; and the gender dynamics of a female basketball team with female cheerleaders. From the beginning, then, I’d wanted to do this kind of work with Feathers and Fur—using photography as a way of getting at issues of gender and identity, in this case as they might figure into the narrative of a fashion shoot. I thought maybe I could offer some kind of photographic counternarrative to Bee’s photographs, which, as we discussed during our meeting, would form the bulk of our shoot.

I was similarly interested in these issues from a critical perspective, of course. How did this process of contextualization work? How might a gendered identity emerge from a narrative context, even an exclusively imagined one, conceived before any models had entered the picture—before Bee or I had even shot a roll of film? In The Fashion System, Barthes describes the fashion photograph as one in which “the world is usually photographed as a décor, a background or a scene, in short, as a theater.” The model might then be said to be an actor in this scene, an actor whose character materializes via the power of narrative—for example, Barthes writes, “This blazer is for the girl who’s something of an Anglophile, perhaps smitten with Proust, who spends her vacations at the shore.” Vacation, shore, girl, Anglophile, Proust: “Thus is born an ensemble of objects and situations no longer linked to one another by a logic of uses and signs but by constraints of an entirely different order, i.e., those of narrative.” Inspired by this understanding of identity as “an ensemble of objects and situations” linked by a narrative,

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18 I use “shot a roll of film” only for the rhetorical flourish it provides—both Bee and I used digital cameras. This linguistic misnomer is perhaps somewhat appropriate, though, because when we began designing the pages for the shoot, I toyed with the idea of using the contact sheet as an organizational framework for my photographs. (Contact sheets, of course, do not exist in the world of digital photography.) I remember finding a huge JPEG of an old contact sheet online, and, in Adobe Photoshop, cutting all the photographs out of it and pasting in my own Feathers and Fur images. I didn’t save my work, unfortunately, but what I eventually came up with instead—filmstrip as framework [Figures 6, 8, 9, 11, and 14]—similarly toys with this confusion between digital and film photography, using the filmstrip as a physical and conceptual structure to effect the appearance of a “complete” and “natural” photographic narrative—a digital trick designed, paradoxically, to turn viewers’ attentions away from the trickery of digital photography and convince them to accept the narrative (and its subjects) as “real.” More on this later.
I turned to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, thinking its account of gender performativity might dovetail with Barthes’ references to theater.

For Butler, gender is precisely and nothing more than this “ensemble of objects and situations”—or, in her words, nothing more than the combined discursive effects of an individual’s “acts, gestures, and desires.” She argues that this interplay of acts, gestures, and desires produces the appearance of an internally located, coherent, and gendered identity when, in fact, none exists. “Consider gender ... as a corporeal style,” she writes, “an ‘act’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.”

Butler here responds to what she sees as the unfortunate tendency of feminist discourse to operate from the assumption that there are essential categories of “men” and “women.” She argues that this claim—often foundational for mainstream feminism—may be politically convenient but that it is flawed, as the separating of bodies on the basis of some essential, physical “sex” is itself a product of discourse; that is, “sex” is merely gender, propped up by scientific and historical discourses that falsely assume the pre-social existence of some pristine, sexed body. Therefore, gender is in no way an ontological category; it is only theater—the retrospectively constituted external results of an individual’s repeated performances of certain actions—beneath which lies nothing. Butler’s reading of the inherent drama of gender identity seemed to support Barthes’ explanation of the inherent theatricality of fashion photography. Here, planning a photo shoot involved creating a narrative and placing the models within that narrative—in the shoot, the models’ gendered bodies would literally be *staged* for the camera.

The shoot was in early November. I met Bee—as well as *Feathers and Fur* editor Juliana Reyes, models Margaret Ernst and Riki Gifford-Ferguson, and an assortment of makeup artists—in Bryn Mawr’s Rockefeller Common Room, which had become the shoot’s makeshift headquarters, filled with clothing and makeup supplies. The pre-shoot arrangements seemed endless—makeup alone took hours, followed by extended discussions of what the models should actually wear. Despite what we’d storyboarded, it seemed that these decisions were mostly made

on the fly. I filmed a significant portion of it all, but I struggled to decide just what I should be filming and in what way, and what sorts of questions I should ask, if any. For the first time, I was facing the real-life ramifications of my decision to be a participant observer—to meld my creative and critical *Feathers and Fur* work—and it made me acutely uncomfortable. What purpose would this footage serve? Was it just “for me” or was it, in some way, for the magazine as well? Writing in a journal I was keeping, I reflected on the difficulties of filming while also trying to think critically and ask questions about what I was filming. “Should I ask about gender, the body, etc.—the kinds of issues I’d like to raise in my paper?” I wondered. If this footage was for *Feathers and Fur*, asking those kinds of questions might completely break the desired continuity of the video. “The rhetoric [of fashion] is a distance,”22 Barthes writes. I felt strange about asking questions because it would disrupt the coherence of the “reality” of the scene by calling attention to myself, invoking a nearer reality (I am there, filming) and undermining the more distant but less “real” “reality” of the fashion scene itself, which denies the presence of any documentarian. I concluded that the most productive approach might be instead to approach my filming with the goal of producing footage that would best serve the magazine’s purposes, giving into its mythology of fashion—a mythology I could then comment on in my writing. If the essential nature of fashion photography is theatrical, as Barthes argues, then perhaps my filmed fashion footage would share this theatricality.

I was intrigued by my discomfort here—discomfort both with asking questions during the shoot and simply with filming it. What was its source? At the time, I wasn’t sure, but in retrospect, I think I understand it somewhat better. As part of my research, I rewatched Harun Farocki’s 1983 film *An Image*, a 25-minute documentary about a German Playboy photo shoot that I’d first seen in my documentary film class. Structured around the construction and eventual destruction of the simple painted wooden set that serves as the site of the shoot, *An Image* forces us to pay attention to the most mundane aspects of pornographic photography. Even at just 25 minutes, *An Image* is boring, at times excruciatingly so. There is little dialogue and little action in the traditional sense of either word. The film’s drama arises in the model’s minute physical adjustments, made at the behest of the photographer, and the Playboy staffers’ meticulous evaluations of the test photographs of the model. Farocki problematizes this mundanity with incredibly smooth, precise

camerawork. Cinematically, he treats the circumstantial details of the shoot as carefully as the photographer within the film examines his own photographs. The metaphor is clear: Farocki’s film is like the photographs within the film, both apparently “documentary” in nature and yet both the products of determined rhetorical efforts. Thus, we are forced to rethink our understanding of pornography, one in which we likely do not think about the hours and hours that go into the production of a single image—the 25 minutes of *An Image*, for example, are condensed from four days of Playboy photography, as the film tells us in its opening intertitles. In this way, *An Image* works to destroy the mythology of pornographic photography, exposing the immense labor hidden just behind the surface of a seemingly “natural” image.

Watching through my iPhone camera as *Feathers and Fur* staffers worked on the models—combed their hair, did their makeup, assembled their outfits, etc.—I think I felt guilty for filming, as if my mere presence were disrupting the production of those “natural” fashion images. “I shouldn’t be filming this,” I thought to myself. “This isn’t fashion.” The hours I spent filming this part of the photo shoot (it easily outlasted the actual shoot itself) confirmed for me something I’d previously only understood on a theoretical level: that this process of preparation was itself “fashion,” in the sense that it was part of the totality of Barthes’ “fashion system”—that system of garments, models, photographs, writing, and meanings that constitute the world of fashion. Likewise, watching *An Image*, I saw the rhetorical power that this realization could wield in widening our understanding of terms like “fashion” or “pornography” to include that preparatory work that is largely effaced by the final product—the fashion image, the pornographic image. I now saw a critical role I could play for *Feathers and Fur*: to expose, both in my photographic and written work, that preparatory work to an audience that was likely only familiar with the end product of the fashion process.

Gender was significant here. Obviously, in *An Image*, Farocki chronicles not just the narrative of a Playboy photo shoot but also the production of femininity—femininity produced for the camera. Each adjustment of the model’s body was crucial, designed to produce as closely as possible a photographically visible subject who reflected certain expectations—Butler’s “corporeal style”—of what a nude woman should look like. The performative elements of this process appear only in Farocki’s *film*—in the final pornographic image itself, they are invisible,
masked by the photograph’s deceptively stable vision of gendered identity. Conversely, in Rockefeller, the drama of gender may have played out during this pre-photo shoot preparation, but to the models, it was, at the time, invisible. I asked Margaret—a close friend of mine—how this process of being made-up and dressed for the shoot made her feel in terms of gender and was surprised when she seemed not to find the question relevant or interesting. Watching An Image, I may have been able to see the production of gender—from the readjustments of the Playboy shoot to a final coherent image—but for Margaret, I realized, that production would likely become visible only after the fact, when she saw the finished product—saw what might have felt like her own “natural” behavior edited and condensed into photographic images that presented only a single, particular characterization of gender.

The rest of the photo shoot proceeded relatively smoothly. Although the overall narrative we’d devised while storyboarding—couples preparing for a night out—remained intact, the specific scenes we shot were all new. We started in a Rockefeller bathroom, shooting Margaret in front of a mirror [Figures 6 and 8]. We shot a similar scene of Riki in front of a large mirror in a Rockefeller hallway [Figure 7]. The final two shots show the couple—dressed up, made-up, and ready to go—leaving Rockefeller [Figure 9] and then, presumably, returning home at the end of the night [Figure 10]. Our other two models—Jillian Ferrara and Peter Sturtevant—arrived that evening. We first shot them getting ready in Juliana’s room [Figures 11 and 12], then outside the Rockefeller architecture studio [Figures 13, 14, and 16], and finally in the Cloisters in Thomas [Figure 15].

The photo shoot’s emphasis on “getting ready” as a fashion trope made the relationship between Bee’s photographs and my own work particularly interesting. I had intended to demythologize the shoot, using my photographs to provide a “behind the scenes” counternarrative to the narrative of Bee’s photographs. But Bee’s photographs were already “behind the scenes”—the shoot showed couples preparing for a night out but ignored the ostensible night out itself. In the words of the Feathers and Fur editors, the shoot was conceived to examine “the dynamic between couples when the camera is off, playing off the familiarity and comfort we find in one
another.” Of course, we had to photograph the models somehow, so our cameras had been on at all times during the shoot. What the editors wanted, then, was to use photography to give readers the impression that no photography had been used during our shoot—it was already the imagined “behind the scenes” counternarrative to a “real” shoot—one for which “the camera was on”—that didn’t actually exist. What might have started, within the world of fashion, as a project not unlike Farocki’s *An Image*—exposing the artifice of the seemingly “natural” fashion images we see everyday to reveal a more authentic and perhaps more dangerous fashion “reality” underneath—here had been co-opted by the very mythmaking machine responsible for that artifice. As Barthes suggests in his essay “Change the Object Itself,” this situation can arise once an audience becomes adept at reading a particular myth—at seeing the myth work, at seeing the material reality beneath it. “A mythological doxa [is] created,” Barthes explains: “denunciation, demystification (or demythification), becomes discourse, stock of phrases, catechistic declaration.” In this case, it was the idea of the “behind the scenes” photo shoot that had become catechistic, merely another “stock phrase” in the lexicon of the fashion photographer—as demythologization, it no longer functioned.

How could I resolve this dilemma? During the shoot, I responded the only way I could imagine: by going further behind the scenes, attempting to reveal, through my photography, the work that went into even a “behind the scenes” photo shoot. My photographs on the first page of the shoot’s spread in *Feathers and Fur* exemplify my response to this complicated rhetorical chain. We see Margaret, Juliana, and Bee walking down a Rockefeller hallway and into a bathroom, where, in later images, Bee and Juliana are reflected behind Margaret in the bathroom mirror [Figure 6]. There it is—the scene behind the “behind the scenes” scene. I continued these efforts throughout the rest of the spread, juxtaposing Bee’s photographs—intended to appear as if no camera had been present at the scene—with my own Photoshopped filmstrip images [Figures 8, 9 and 14], which gleefully trafficked in the obviousness of the fact that to do a photo shoot, you

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23 Oliner, Reyes, Singh, Svokos, and White, 2.
24 Barthes, “Change the Object Itself,” 166. Barthes uses “mystification” and “mythification” instead of “mythologization” to avoid associations with “myth” in the simplest sense of the word, as a mythological story or a folk tale. I’ve stuck with the more traditional wording, as I’ve tried to be clear about my use of “myth” so that readers won’t make that kind of a mistake in this paper.
have to take photographs. From a theoretical standpoint, though, this approach, while perhaps interesting, now seems somewhat unproductive. As I’d learned from the example of the “behind the scenes” shoot, one conceivably could go on exposing the material realities behind an ever increasingly and complexly layered narrative for an audience ever more skilled in demythologization—only to see each latest demythologizing effort become just another stock discursive trick, another piece of mythology. After all, contrary to appearances, my photographs were not revealing any “essential reality” of the photo shoot—they were entirely constructed, just like Bee’s.

I am not sure that there is a way beyond this impasse. As Barthes has argued, the photograph simply seems too susceptible to mythologization, the analogical link to the reality of its referent too strong, to the extent that this reality always appears to be a dominant feature of the photographic image, consistently overwhelming all traces of culture, society, or ideology. Critically, however, I believe Butler’s references to the cultural practice of drag in her argument for the performativity of gender offer a possible solution. “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself,” Butler writes. She describes this imitative structure as “parodic,” but it is a parody with no original: “Indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original … . [Gender] parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin.” In other words, and in terms of Barthes’ understanding of myth, demythologization could continue endlessly, as there is no reality, no original, at its root—each further step reveals only another discursive construction. These are the circumstances to which Haraway’s theory of situated knowledge responds: given the impossibility of making objective claims about “reality” or the “real world,” the best option is to be as personally “objective” as one can be—as honest as possible about one’s embodied (and thus discursive) knowledge of the world.

If fashion—fashion shoots, fashion photography—seems to dramatize gender as a parodic and performative act in this way, then how might we position masculinity in relation to this process?

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25 For more on this interplay between the reality of the photographic referent and the cultural aspects of photography, see Barthes’ “The Photographic Message” and “Rhetoric of the Image,” both published in Image Music Text (Barthes, Image Music Text, 15-51).

26 Butler, 175.
I ask this question because the examples I’ve considered so far have dealt exclusively with women and fashion, fashion and femininity, and indeed, as I worked with *Feathers and Fur*, I noticed a persistent difficulty on the part of its editors to imagine the masculine elements of their creative visions. As I stood in Juliana’s room, watching her and Bee try to pick clothes for Peter to wear, I recalled Bee’s question from our October meeting: “What could the guy be doing?” In October, they’d had trouble answering that question, and now, too, they seemed similarly unsure of how to dress Peter. They compensated for this uncertainty with a particular lack of attention: they weren’t exactly sure what to have Peter wear, but at the same time, it wasn’t really that important. For his part, Peter didn’t seem to mind, either. This situation reflects what seems to be one of fashion’s gendered truths: men, on the one hand, are generally minimally interested in “fashion” as an explicit topic; and, on the other hand, those people who are interested in “fashion” as a topic seem to devote less attention to men and men’s clothing.

Malcolm Gladwell addresses this state of affairs in his essay “Listening to Khakis: What America’s most popular pants tell us about the way guys think.” Gladwell’s opening question is compelling: how did Levi’s grow its Dockers brand into a $600-million business—the fourth-largest clothing brand in the world—by the early 1990s, only a few years after the brand’s debut in 1987? Gladwell attributes much of this success to its first advertising campaign, a series of national television commercials in which groups of men, all wearing Dockers, speak casually about their lives. The handheld camera, focusing not on the men themselves but instead on their pants, jumps quickly from pair to pair, matching the rapid cutting of the dialogue, which is edited together in overlapping non sequiturs. Here is a sample of the dialogue from one of the ads:

“‘And that makes me safe, because with my wife, I’ll never be that way.’ ‘It’s like your career, and you’re frustrated. I mean that, that’s what you want.’ ‘Of course, that’s just my opinion.’ ‘So money’s no object.’ ‘Yeah money’s no object.’ ‘What are we going to do with our lives now?’”27 Advertisers had figured out how to sell fashion to men, Gladwell asserts. Men didn’t want to be “fashionable”—didn’t want to stand out, didn’t want to look different—they wanted to conform,

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27 Quoted in Malcolm Gladwell, “Listening to Khakis: What America’s most popular pants tell us about the way guys think,” *The New Yorker*, 28 July 1997, <http://gladwell.com/pdf/khaki.pdf>, 1. Unfortunately, I have not seen the actual advertisement, so I had to rely on Gladwell’s transcript. You’d think this would be the kind of thing they’d have on YouTube, but it’s not, and I couldn’t track it down anywhere else...
so Levi’s took them to a safe, masculine space where they would feel comfortable going shopping for a pair of pants—as long as everyone bought the same brand, of course. The ad’s anonymity (the camera’s disinterest in the men’s faces) and vagueness (the disorienting non-linear editing of the dialogue) was crucial, providing the ad with a near-universal masculine identity uncompromised by any variations between specific men or the specifics of their lives.

To explain why this technique might be so effective, Gladwell cites a host of psychological experiments, although he thankfully stops short of making any overly essentialist claims about masculinity or femininity based on their findings. For my purposes, however, Gladwell’s article is more interesting as read through Butler, who, after all, is quite critical of scientific discourses on gender. The way Gladwell ties male fashion habits to a desire for conformity seems linked to Butler’s writing on gender. For Butler, both masculinity and femininity are

28 In one, men and women, told they will be participating in an academic study, were asked to wait in an office free of reading materials or other distractions. After two minutes, they were taken out of the room and told that the real experiment was designed to find out how many of the objects in the office they could remember. Gladwell argues that this was not a memory test per se, but rather a “test of awareness”—of how much attention people pay to the world around them. “If you think about it, it was really a test of fashion sense,” he continues, “because, at its root, this is what fashion sense really is—the ability to register and appreciate and remember the details of the way those around you look and dress, and then reinterpret those details and memories yourself.” In the end, women recalled the names and locations of 70 percent more of the objects than men, leading Gladwell to conclude that from an advertising perspective, selling men clothes in the same way that clothes are sold to women doesn’t make sense, as men appear uninterested in the kind of detail-oriented thinking that apparently makes fashion’s “endless number of subtle combinations and variations” so interesting to women (Gladwell, 2).

29 In a subsection of Gender Trouble titled “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” Butler faults cell biology for its insistent search for a biologically rooted determinant of “gender identity,” and cites an article by David Page in which he claims to have discovered a “master gene”—a specific DNA sequence on the Y chromosome—that is “the binary switch upon which hinges all sexually dimorphic characteristics” (quoted in Butler, 136). Page’s DNA samples were taken from a diverse and unusual group of people—some with XX chromosomes who had been medically declared male, and some with XY chromosomes who had been medically declared female, all on the basis, presumably, of primary and secondary sex characteristics. Butler goes on to show how Page’s research was from the beginning framed by cultural assumptions about gender—“the discourse that takes external genitalia to be the sure signs of sex, ... the discourse that seeks to establish the male principle as active and monocausal”—to the extent that his conclusion could not possibly contradict his foundational belief that such a “binary switch” existed (Butler, 140-141). For more on the ways cultural assumptions regulate scientific discourses on gender, see Emily Martin, “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles,” Signs 16.3 (Spring 1991), 485-501.
performative, nothing more than the reiterations of specific behaviors, day after day. And yet, to me, masculinity seems to place a certain premium on stability, which discourages the kind of playful engagement with variety and combination that, Gladwell suggests, characterizes a typically feminine approach to fashion.

My experiences with *Feathers and Fur* lead me to agree. As I watched the photo shoot with Peter and Jillian, I began to believe that his only function in the shoot was to serve as a stable, nonfluctuating body against which Jillian could define herself. Some photographs of the couple show Peter picking out jewelry for Jillian to wear [Figures 11 and 12]; in others, Peter seems to fade into the background, just another part of the scenery [Figures 14 and 15].

Likewise, consider the magazine’s cover, in which model Alex Hudak sits next to the ankles and high-heel-shoed feet of model Rebecca Salvo [Figure 5]. In this image, paradoxically, Alex’s body is almost completely present, yet he has been relegated to the background and avoids the camera’s gaze; whereas Rebecca’s ankles and feet have been detached from their corporeal context, yet they occupy the image’s foreground and seem to be its focal point. Thus, Alex serves as a mere accessory for Rachel’s disembodied ankles and feet, themselves literally accessorized with heels.

There was none of this strange positioning in our photographs of Margaret and Riki, two women—a disparity that seems consistent with Monique Wittig’s argument, articulated by Butler, that “masculine” and “feminine” “exist only within the heterosexual matrix; indeed, they are the naturalized terms that keep the matrix concealed.”

Regarding fashion, this quotation suggests that “feminine” fashion (freedom, experimentation, variation) and “masculine” fashion (simplified, stable) are not oppositional, as Gladwell contends, but are instead mutually supportive, serving to naturalize the gender binary and mask its status as a construction of discourse.

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30 In *The Fashion System*, Barthes presents another example of this relation, one that is somewhat commonsensical but nonetheless worth nothing here: “feminine clothing can absorb nearly all masculine clothing, which is content to ‘reject’ certain features of feminine clothing (a man may not wear a skirt, while a woman may wear pants)” (Barthes, *The Fashion System*, 257).
(Masculine clothing, masculine fashion, must be a closed, consistent field; whereas feminine fashion has no similar boundaries.)

31 Butler, 141.
Now I think I can finally begin to understand my own discomfort about fashion’s status as a “serious subject.” First, regarding fashion as frivolous likely helps sublimate personal anxieties about the stability of my masculine identity. As much as I accept the performativity of gender on an intellectual level, in my daily life, I find myself still quite attached to the concept of a stable, essential identity that I must express through my clothing, and the idea of dressing differently—of truly taking advantage of fashion’s experimental potential—scares me, as I worry about some kind of disjunction between my appearance and that essential identity—an essential identity that, after all, doesn’t actually exist, as Butler convincingly argues. Second, and related to my previous point, is a simple question: why does something have to be “serious”—solemn, sober—to be serious? Fashion’s playfulness, its ability to blur, invert, and perhaps even transcend traditional categories of masculinity and femininity, is precisely what gives it power—and what makes it so threatening to notions of stable masculine identity. It literalizes Butler’s use of drag as a metaphor for gender: the clothes we wear, no matter how “frivolous” they may appear, become part of our performance of our gender and our identity. In that sense, its frivolity is precisely what makes it serious, in the most literal sense—that is, worth taking seriously.

After the shoot, I didn’t do much for Feathers and Fur until early December, when the editors contacted me about helping them with layout. I’ve designed pages for The Bi-College News, Bryn Mawr and Haverford’s student newspaper, for nearly four years now—it’s something that feels familiar to me and that I tend to enjoy—but my experience doing layout for Feathers and Fur was different than any I’d had before. In addition to designing pages and photo spreads, I helped edit photographs, at the editors’ request. I’ve used Adobe Photoshop to adjust the light levels of photographs and change their brightness and contrast before, but now I was being asked to go much further, to eliminate facial blemishes, improve models’ complexions, and generally do minor Photoshop touch-up work. At the time, I felt—and even now, attempting to describe the experience, I feel—quite uncomfortable. At first, I didn’t want to help them. It felt too

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32 Even vocabulary seems to present a problem here. As I wrote “eliminate,” I immediately wondered why I’d written it. I thought of “zapping” zits. This alignment between cosmetic improvements—“improvements?” “enhancements?”—and violent or militaristic language is something that could itself be explored in great depth. I think Haraway’s narrative of the development of increasingly isolated visual technologies, which in turn promote increasingly violent uses of those technologies, would be useful here. I’m also reminded again of the Farocki...
weird to me, to alter the faces of students I knew. But even scarier was what happened once I
gave in—after a certain point, without immediately realizing it, I began to enjoy myself. In
retrospect, I think the feeling was akin to Haraway’s “god trick of seeing everything from
nowhere”:33 I had total command over these models’ bodies, and I was simply sitting in front of
my computer screen—none of them could see me. Was this an example of Haraway’s pejorative
vision of non-situated “objectivity?”

Gender made this experience worse. As someone who grew up with all the trappings of
masculine privilege, I felt guilty. Not only did I feel like a misogynist for being so powerfully in
control of these female models’ bodies, but I felt that by “improving” their appearances, I was
promoting standards of beauty that I wouldn’t have supported otherwise. Jacqueline Bush
Hitchon, Sung-Yeon Park, and Gi Woong Yun explore this issue in their article “‘You Can
Never Be Too Thin’—or Can You? A Pilot Study on the Effects of Digital Manipulation of
Fashion Models’ Body Size, Leg Length and Skin Color.” Hitchon, Park, and Yun found that
although women profess to find tall, thin, tan models attractive—the kinds of models that often
appear in fashion advertising—they prefer advertising images that appear “natural.” Or, more
precisely, “Readers only enjoy a model’s thinness to the extent that they believe that what they
see is real.”34 In fact, as Hitchon, Park, and Yun explain, women who were shown digitally
manipulated images and unretouched images of models side by side felt significantly happier
with their bodies. It was then, I think, that I realized for the first time the significance of my
decision to work for Feathers and Fur. Producing myths might be fun, but on some level, it had
real consequences: in editing these models’ appearances in Photoshop, I was potentially creating
images that would make people unhappy with their own bodies. Moreover, how was I to square
this kind of work with my efforts to, with Barthes’ and Farocki’s help, demythologize Bee’s
photo shoot? I was creating images that would appear to be “natural” to most Feathers and Fur

film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, in which Farocki juxtaposes a scene of a
woman being heavily made-up with scenes of various visual and military technological
apparatuses.

33 Haraway, 58.
34 Jacqueline Bush Hitchon, Sung-Yeon Park, and Gi Woong Yun, “‘You Can Never Be Too
Thin’—or Can You? A Pilot Study on the Effects of Digital Manipulation of Fashion Models’
Body Size, Leg Length and Skin Color,” *Race, Gender and Class* 11.2 (30 April 2004), 7.
readers, and yet these images had been subjected to a serious digital editing regime in Adobe Photoshop.

Additionally, at the same time as I was feeling politically culpable for my actions, I was beginning to question the whole interpretive framework in which I’d situated my *Feathers and Fur* work. What was the difference, after all, between removing someone’s zits in a photograph and something more radical, like “fixing” their nose? This was a project in which I somehow became embroiled while I was briefly enjoying my Photoshop editing, but I soon stopped, once the *Feathers and Fur* editors found out about it. For them, there was a clear line between touch-up work and complete cosmetic restructuring. But wasn’t any kind of manipulation of images, and even the act of photography itself, this same kind of mythologizing project? Perhaps, given that there was no escaping the production of myths, what I was doing wasn’t so bad.

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35 The photo was eventually published with the nose left untouched, of course. I feel so weird about the whole experience that I don’t even feel comfortable noting which specific photograph in *Feathers and Fur* I’m describing. For this reason, it does not appear in my list of images.
Conclusion

Many students were, I realized, narrating their own discomfort. Without my intending it to, the ... feminist classroom ... had become the site of an uncomfortable negotiation between the students’ identities as consuming, fashionable subjects and as ardent, impassioned, and articulate feminists.  

In her essay “Teaching Fashion and Feminist Theory: The Pedagogical Promise of Ambivalence,” Ilya Parkins, a professor at Trent University in Ontario, reflects on her and her students’ experiences in a course she taught on fashion and feminist theory. In one assignment, she had students spend at least an hour observing some site of fashion, in order to reflect on the gendered nature of that space. One student, Parkins explains, after visiting an H&M store in Toronto and noticing its attempts to hide its largely female custodial force from store patrons, described her own difficult relationship to the chain, “consistently acknowledg[ing] her own investment in the discourses of fashion that she critiqued”. “As a consumer and a follower of H&M fashions, I can ... say that H&M is a difficult addiction to quit.”

In this paper, I have tried, like Parkins’ students, to narrate my own discomfort with fashion, gender, and the body. I began this case study hoping to learn more about Feathers and Fur, and I think that I did, but as I progressed, I also realized that Feathers and Fur was only a specific point from which I could explore any number of related issues. I saw my initial research project grow to include a paper, a photo shoot, the magazine itself, and a series of documentary videos. Now, in the end, I find myself overwhelmed by these diverse points of contact with the magazine. I have certainly not given every point as exhaustive an analysis as it could support, but

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37 Parkins, 70.
38 Quoted in Parkins, 70.
I have tried to touch on all of them, moving from point to point as it has seemed appropriate. Throughout it all, I’ve been interested not in the *what* of gender and *Feather and Fur*—that is, the status, or place, or role of gender in the magazine—but rather in the *how*: how gender is enacted in the production of models, of photographs, and, ultimately, of the magazine itself. Relying on a mixed methodological approach guided by the idea of situated knowledge, I’ve tried to map that enactment of gender, navigating between the personal and the sociopolitical and combining “academic” writing with more free-flowing meditations and reflections to produce a text that is not, I hope, “complete” in any sense, but that does offer a few partial—and maybe even powerful—objectivities.
Images

Figure 1: iPhone rephotograph of a photograph of Northwestern basketball player Maureen Holohan in her dorm room before a game. Mary Schroeder, *At the Rim: A Celebration of Women’s Collegiate Basketball* (Charlottesville: Thomasson-Grant, Inc., 1991), 36.
Figure 2: iPhone rephotograph of a photograph of Purdue basketball players fixing their hair in the locker room before a game. Pauline Lubens, *At the Rim*, 44.
Figure 3: iPhone rephotograph of a photograph of Tennessee women’s basketball coach Pam Summitt in the locker room with her son Tyler before a game. Pam Spaulding, *At the Rim*, 53.
Figure 4: iPhone rephotograph of a photograph of Louisiana State player Melissa Peay walking past her school’s drill team on the way to the locker room. Cindy Yamanaka, *At the Rim*, 30-31.
Figure 5: Magazine’s cover featuring models Alex Hudak and Rebecca Salvo. Darren White, *Feathers and Fur* 2.1 (Fall/Winter 2009), 1.
Figures 6: Model Margaret Ernst in a Rockefeller bathroom with editors Juliana Reyes and Elizabeth Svokos. My photographs, *Feathers and Fur*, 45.
Figure 7: Model Riki Gifford-Ferguson putting on lipstick in a Rockefeller hallway. Elizabeth Svokos, *Feathers and Fur*, 46.
Figure 8: Model Margaret Ernst in a Rockefeller bathroom. Top photograph by Elizabeth Svokos, bottom photographs mine, *Feathers and Fur*, 47.
Figure 9: Models Margaret Ernst and Riki Gifford-Ferguson leaving Rockefeller. Top photograph by Elizabeth Svokos, bottom photographs mine, *Feathers and Fur*, 48.
Figure 10: Models Margaret Ernst and Riki Gifford-Ferguson walking back through Rockefeller.
Elizabeth Svokos, *Feathers and Fur*, 49.
Figure 11: Models Jillian Ferrara and Peter Sturtevant in editor Juliana Reyes’ room. My photographs, *Feathers and Fur*, 50.
Figure 12: Models Jillian Ferrara and Peter Sturtevant in editor Juliana Reyes’ room. Elizabeth Svokos, *Feathers and Fur*, 51.
Figure 13: Models Jillian Ferrara and Peter Sturtevant outside Rockefeller. Elizabeth Svokos, *Feathers and Fur*, 52.
Figure 14: Models Jillian Ferrara and Peter Sturtevant outside Rockefeller. Top photograph by Elizabeth Svokos, bottom photographs mine, *Feathers and Fur*, 53.
Piccadilly Court, located on Bryn Mawr Ave. in Bryn Mawr, Pa., is a little gem of a vintage store on the Main Line. You have to be in on the secret or you’ll miss it, hidden under Parvin’s Pharmacy. It’s almost overwhelming inside – in such a little space, there’s so much to explore, from the stack of fur hats to the overflowing rack of slip dresses and costume jackets to the treasure trove of tiny trinkets behind the glass counter, like a pair of sterling silver tennis racket earrings. Charming owner Lyell Mahoney is always eager to help. But she’s also great to chat with, so even if you don’t find anything on your sporadic Piccadilly stop, you still leave with a smile on your face.

www.piccadillycourt.net

Josh Brody is a contemporary women’s clothing line based in New York City. These inviting garments are designed use clean colors and prints, which allows the unique and asymmetrical designs to be appreciated. These dainty pieces can be dressed up or down and with the choices of grey, black and bright pink from the Holiday 2009 line, there is a dress for every event.

www.joshbrodynyc.com

Figure 15: Models Jillian Ferrara and Peter Sturtevant in the Cloisters. Elizabeth Svokos, *Feathers and Fur*, 54.
Figure 16: Model Jillian Ferrara outside Rockefeller. Elizabeth Svokos, Feathers and Fur, 55.
Bibliography


*Feathers and Fur 2.1 (Fall/Winter 2009).*


