

WRITING GOWN: THE CHALLENGES OF MAKING A NEW ARTWORK
ABOUT SEXISM WITHIN ACADEMIA

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First, a story

Purchasing an academic gown on her first day at University

She went together with her Mum to the university outfitters to buy an academic gown. At the college where she was enrolled as a student, ownership of a gown was required for everyday use to be worn at dinner, not just twice annually for the taking of examinations.

They entered the shop and felt the stuffy heaviness of tradition close down around them in contrast to the crisp autumnal air of outside. As was so often occasioned by sudden changes of temperature her spectacles steamed up instantly so that she was plunged into a fog and walked blindly across the shop guided by her Mother. The mist cleared as she grew aware of a balding, middle-aged man with a tape measure around his neck standing upright behind a long, dark, wooden counter.

“We’d like to buy an academic gown”, she said to him. “Are you a Scholar or an Exhibitioner?” he asked, his voice rising on the first and dropping on the second. She had no idea what he meant, not being familiar with these terms for honors awarded for achievement in the University’s entrance exams, so she just looked at him blankly. There was a short pause before he stared down his long, straight nose at her and, raising his voice for all to hear, exclaimed: “You’re a Commoner then!” not so much saying the ‘C’ word as coughing it out like something unpleasant that had got stuck in the back of his throat. Then he whipped his body round a half turn and disappeared into the back of the shop to look for the offensive item.

She was at once diminished, put in her place and told of her lowliest of positions in the ranks of University accomplishments. They accepted the black scrap

with various lengths of fluttering fabric that he proffered to them, nodded, paid and exited the shop as quickly as they could back out into the air, to breathe again.

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My aim with this piece of writing is to bring into being an understanding of an as-yet non-existent artwork. Devising, making and then exhibiting an artwork are powerful acts. As the work is shown and interplays with audiences so also does its author enter into engagement with public life. If the work's content seeks to change the world by challenging prevailing assumptions then the potential power of the act of making could be said to have multiplied infinitely. An artwork, conceived but not realized, is the equivalent of the artist remaining silent because the work is nothing more than a specter, and is kept back from its participation as agent. I am deciding to write about the project of needing to make 'Gown' before I am ready to embark upon its making so as to evoke the work into the world as it would be as a physical, material object. This is a strategy called into force by the urgency of the need for action, not waiting for the right set of emotional, social or political circumstances for the work to be made, but riding an act of will harnessed to the act of writing into the arena . . . just to see what will happen . . .

My project as it has developed coincides with Laurel Richardson's ideas about autoethnographic processes of writing bringing worlds into being, "writing is a method of discovery, a way of finding out about yourself and your world."¹ It was

¹ Laurel Richardson, "Getting Personal: Writing-Stories," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 14, no.1 (2001) : 35. doi : 10.1080/09518390010007647.

only in the research stages that I ‘discovered’ autoethnography for myself and so have been able to locate first person experience within an academically recognized set of practices. In addition to my own discoveries I must acknowledge the support and enlightening advice of my University of Brighton colleague Alec Grant, whose own texts on autoethnography as risk-taking have empowered me to see the merits and relevance of such an approach to my aims for this chapter.²

Alongside my academic activities my artist self thinks up and mentally develops artworks and brings them into being. I always was an artist but got diverted along the way into more academic pursuits then began a study of sculpture at the age of twenty-six. Now in my early fifties I have enjoyed a varied career as an exhibiting artist as well as earning my living teaching Fine Art. For the past three years this imagined artwork complete with its title ‘Gown’, has lived inside me, coming in and out of vision according to some logic or inner emotional rhythms. I have not logged its movements at all over this period but if I had, I might see some correlation between its strength of presence and the social vicissitudes I have experienced: a correlation which I would be able to use as critical evidence for connections between the personal and the cultural. As it is all I have is this phantom-gown, still not born but nevertheless insistent and I am now writing it into being.

In my mind’s eye: a black academic gown, hip-length, simply cut, no sleeves, the only adornment being a black strip of fabric sewn into each shoulder that gets

² Alec Grant and Laetitia Zeeman, “Whose Story is it? An Autoethnography Concerning Narrative Identity,” *The Qualitative Report*, 17, no. 72 (2012) : 1-12. Accessed 1/1/2016. <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/grant.pdf>. And Alec Grant, Nigel P. Short and Lydia Turner, introduction to *Contemporary British Autoethnography*, eds. Alec Grant, Nigel P. Short and Lydia Turner (Rotterdam : Sense Publishers, 2013), 11.

caught by the wind or streams out behind the wearer as she hurries down a draughty cloister, late for a tutorial.³

* * *

Tuesday 27 October 2015

I could write this piece in fragments, construct paragraphs in isolation and then assemble them. Such an experimental approach appeals because it feels quite like making a piece of work, where you try something out, allow yourself to be led by pleasure and follow the drift of what is occurring. It is less head-driven and more ludic, which, to my mind, makes it more creative.

The idea is to embroider an academic gown with a motif consisting of words or images or a combination of these. Embroidery is suggestive of beauty, richness of texture and finish and of loving care in its making. The motifs could be repeated across the whole garment with space around each one so that they stand out and are legible.

A stumbling block of the work, which has stopped me more than anything else in making it, is not knowing what the motif is. I have carried out research to assist my imagination to ‘see’ what it looks like and what it should ‘say’: I visited the embroidery displays at the Victoria and Albert museum in London and read through a book about heraldry.

³ The commoner’s gown, when new, has the appearance of being worn to shreds: “What happened was that as the student went through his daily life, the gown became ripped and torn ... Eventually ... tailors started to make them in this abbreviated form. (Footnote: Modern parallels may be drawn with ‘distressed’ denim jeans, sold with ready-made tears ...)”, Nicolas Groves, *Shaw’s Academical Dress of Great Britain and Ireland* (The Burgon Society, 2011): 12.

I could vary the motif to include hidden messages, slight differences, across the spread of the whole gown, which would only come to light if someone were to study it really carefully. I like this possibility, which allows for a few safe hiding places, from which to speak about what is best said from the sidelines, some 'home truths'. I know that the motif is in cream-colored thread on black. Some decisions about work are already made, already clear and it would not do to go questioning them.

I am writing 'in the dark' as if in a pitch-black room, an unlit space with no light coming in at all, not so much as a chink. I am entering that room with a small torch, which I use to cast a beam of limited range around the space as I grope about. In each new place where the light falls a small detail of the whole appears, comes to mind, becomes visible. I am discovering more about the work as I write about it, by writing about it.

* * *

My primary aim is to unpick this unmade 'Gown' for any understanding it might yield of my own psychosocial make-up within and through academic contexts. I recognize the particular difficulties of making 'Gown' the artwork and acknowledge that I have not even got moving on making it, despite the idea refusing to leave my mind. I have come to understand that the ethical issues as they affect me, as artist, author, academic and woman are centrally placed in the knot of threads that this writing seeks to unpick. I wish to expose ways in which I have been affected by derogatory messages about my intellectual abilities via institutionalized sexism, internalized and manifesting as symptoms of what has been identified as Imposter

Syndrome: a feeling of being a fraud despite actual achievements⁴. I will be shining a light on vulnerabilities, which in the course of a working life usually remain hidden or which I do my best to keep covered up.

Making a visual artwork about this subject matter and exhibiting it within academic settings where I am employed would be a making-visual, a making-evident, of those issues. To take the matter one stage further into the public realm by writing about them for publication would be to consign the problematic to a longevity which the working through of such issues (in the making, in the writing) might mitigate against. So it is that this research towards a piece of writing and the publication of that research constitute alternative, perhaps less visible, forms for the ideas which at the same time allow for a more personal, more *confessional* aspect of the work to come about than ‘Gown’ the artwork’ would be able to demonstrate.

A concern is therefore how voluntary exposure of my vulnerabilities – even if experienced as empowering to me - could be construed as weakness in the increasingly highly competitive setting of contemporary academia and whether such weakness could be used against me? I am willing to take that risk because I recognize the potential value of being honest about the personal cost of managing a career to those who are younger and just starting out on theirs. I hope that the insights this writing yields will give others courage and make them feel less alone in those difficult moments of work that they are bound to encounter. Naming and articulating a set of difficulties can illuminate as well as diminish those obstacles and might move myself

⁴ Pauline R Clance, and Suzanne A. Imes, “The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention,” *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 15, no. 3 (1978) : 241-247. Accessed October 20, 2015. http://www.paulinroseclance.com/pdf/ip_high_achieving_women.pdf.

and readers of this on to the next stage. This makes of my writing an emancipatory act of resistance, a feminist strategy where I am in charge.

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Excerpts from an email exchange with Rosalind Gill, 2012⁵

SD: “I am currently holding off making a piece of artwork about the internalized feelings of inferiority felt by academics within the university ... One reason I have held back is a fear that if I am honest about the levels of my own internalized oppression then I will be, in effect, showing myself in a 'weak' light and this will not do anything to improve the situation. But I am experienced enough as an artist, actually, to let the work play its part to convince and separate an issue from my personal experience into an expression of broader, more humanly shared, concerns.”

RG: “Your experience really struck a chord with me... It sounds a great idea to make an artwork 'about' this - I'd love to see it. Please do let me know what you do or create around these ideas - maybe we could offer you a space to exhibit it or something like that in the future?”

SD: “The offer of perhaps exhibiting the work at a future date not quite so close to home seems really appealing, easier somehow, depersonalizing it and opening up the subject to a broader context. I am going through a long, slow process with this piece of grounding it properly, creating a safe and good place in which it can exist. And that feels right.”

* * *

⁵ In the early stages of thinking up ‘Gown’ I read Gill’s article ‘Breaking the Silence: the hidden injuries of the neoliberal university’, 2009. Gill is Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at Kings College, London.

When internalized sexism and institutionalized sexism work together they can keep you down.⁶

Time to indulge the self

In this year, 2016, I will have been teaching in Higher Education for thirty years. Always part-time contractually but by no means always part-time if you add up all the hours spent on the job. And in those 30 years, which see me only a decade and a half away from retirement age, I have climbed to the glorious heights of Senior Lecturer on a fractional contract. For much of that time I have been forging a moderately successful career as a visual artist alongside teaching in HE so I have not totally devoted myself to the academic cause, have not been ‘single’- minded in that respect. However, despite this reasonable explanation for the lack in advancement, inside me a voice cries out ‘What happened?’

It is the voice of someone who looks back at her schoolgirl self, whom a Headmaster once described as “the cleverest girl he had ever taught”.

If cleverness doesn’t lead to success then what goes wrong?

Why does my salary run out two thirds of the way through the month?

Why am I teaching more hours than the growing coterie of male professors appointed for the REF,⁷ who earn at least four times as much as me?⁸

⁶ Alec Grant, “Neoliberal Higher Education and Nursing Scholarship: Power, Subjectification, Threats and Resistance,” *Nurse Education Today* 34, no. 10 (2014) : 1280 – 1282. doi : <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2014.06.004>.

⁷ Research Excellence Framework, current name for the government quality-measuring exercise within UK HE.

This kind of silent howl I carry around inside me most days.

* * *

20/10/15

Reading Bearman, Korobov and Thorne on internalized sexism who speak of the ‘threads out of which conversations are woven’⁹. I imagine reversing the weave of the gown until it is entirely gone, creating a mass of tangled undoneness. That way madness lies.

Does madness lie even as it points towards the truth?

* * *

I did think about creating anagrams from the word ‘imposter’ and designing the motif from them. In fact, I am still fond of that idea. I ran ‘imposter’ through an online anagram generator and it came up with a very long list some of which were most evocative and surprisingly revealing of my situation (emboldened and underlined are those options which I could possibly consider using):

merits op, smite pro, emits pro, **ripe mots**, **ire stomp**, me ripost, **poem stir**,
 moper sit, more tips, **more spit**, some trip, tomes RIP, smote rip, **trope ism**,
 store imp, ire ms top, ire ms pot, tie ms pro, **me I strop**, me sir top, me sit pro,

⁸ Miriam David, *Feminism, Gender and Universities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 40. David cites a 2011 ECU report which states that the ratio of male to female professors in UK HE was 80.9 per cent to 19.1 per cent. The ECU - Equality Challenge Unit, an independent body concerned with HE in the UK.

⁹ Steve Bearman, Neill Korobov and Avril Thorne, “The Fabric of Internalized Sexism,” *Journal of Integrated Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2009): 11.

me tis pro, **me its pro**, met I pros, rope it ms, pose it mr, **poet I mrs.** poet is
 mr, re I stomp, re mi post, **erst I mop**, rest I mop, set mi pro...

* * *

I have been revisiting Nancy K Miller's 'Getting Personal' about allowing the personal and the academic to co-exist. Studying my annotations of twenty years ago, I am reminded of the pleasure of reading her book for the first time and wonder about the 'identity politics' of it and whether those ideas are all very dated now? Blowing the dust off Naomi Schor's 'Aesthetics and the Feminine' I search the index for 'embroidery' but it is absent. I borrow Rosie Parker's 'The Subversive Stitch' from the library and re-read its introduction and note her refusal to allow Tracey Emin to be considered a feminist. These works themselves do not exactly inform the development of ideas for 'Gown', but rather, in reconnecting with them, they perform the function of touchstones, which I use to ground myself in the feminisms of my youth. From their source I draw strength and encouragement.

* * *

Friday 23 October (Mum's birthday)

The gown is a sort of 'Tarnkappe', a 'cloak of invisibility' which gives me the omnipotence of the invisible¹⁰. At the same time as it pushes me up there, visible, seen as a clever woman.

¹⁰ Peggy Phelan in 'Unmarked' argues that it is the invisible, rather than those made visible and thus vulnerable who hold the power.

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Saturday 7 November

An idea for a performance: I am in a small office in the building where I teach and I am putting on and taking off an academic gown. Putting it on and taking it off, in a cycle that repeats, just like that and nothing else. There is a chair in the room and I am sitting down on it and then standing up, just these simple actions: sitting down and standing up, putting on and taking off. The chair represents a professorship, an ambition. So here I am in this room, sitting down, standing up, sitting down, standing up, putting on the gown and taking it off, putting on and taking off because that is what you do with an academic gown, like all clothes, you put it on and take it off. These actions allow into this whole exercise that most abject and real - as in actually lived - aspect of my experience, the menopausal woman's body with its temperature fluctuations and accompanying rock-bottom feelings of despair¹¹. As I sit here and research and imagine I put on and take off my cardigan, one minute cold to the core, the next hot and bothered. I am blowing hot and cold about this whole topic and I am really not sure at all about telling you any of this. Never mind for publication.

* * *

Three allies and encounters with their works

I invoke the three-legged sturdy support of a tripos of other works of fabric and stitching by female artists ('support' as in the foundational material upon which

¹¹ I am resistant to the pervasive reduction of menopausal symptoms to 'hot flashes' without mention of other symptoms such as feelings of hopelessness, despair and intrusive thoughts of suicide.

the artwork is created i.e. canvas in painting and also to denote allied encouragement, a 'support group' of my own devising). The first (in chronological order of their making) is the hand-embroidered jacket of Agnes Richter.¹² The second is the short text 'The Chest of Drawers' by Marguerite Duras¹³ to which I return frequently for nourishment and encouragement. The third is 'Avid Metamorphosis 1' a work by Rona Lee.¹⁴ The dates of my first encounters with these works take me back to my younger self and it is in this encounter between my present and my younger self that the unpicking of 'Gown' takes place.

Agnes Richter embroidered a woman's jacket with tiny handwriting with the right side of the sewing on the inside of the jacket and the outside of the sleeves. Agnes was an inpatient at the Hubertsburg asylum, case no. 52 with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. I first saw the jacket at the Prinzhorn exhibition at the Hayward gallery and was struck by how compelling it is. The script draws you in, wanting to read, to understand but its over-layering keeps you out. As such it simultaneously speaks and withholds what it is saying. Undoubtedly an object of great beauty in its meticulousness of manufacture, one imagines Agnes working away at it for hours, telling it all to an item of clothing, her thoughts and feelings worn on the sleeve as it were. Looking at it now I feel a sense of constriction, the holding in of women's

¹² *Beyond Reason*, (London: Hayward Gallery, 1996), 163.

¹³ Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities* (London: HarperCollins, 1990), 121-122.

¹⁴ Performed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1995.

clothing of the time, yet simultaneously of release, in her getting the words out. So the jacket has a ‘push-me pull-you’ quality, speaking and withholding, drawing in and letting go. The accompanying text on the Prinzhorn website speculates on processes of writing within a psychiatric institution as ways of creating and affirming the self in an environment which is dehumanizing and which invades and colonizes the intimate space of the human lives existing within it.¹⁵ This customized garment gives up subjective experience as outerwear and makes private the social being.

If Agnes Richter’s jacket provides a point of reference for identity created and maintained by inscribing the self into clothing in the face of institutional incarceration then Marguerite Duras’s short text ‘The Chest of Drawers’ represents another life history reimagined into existence. It is an anecdote about Duras finding a woman’s underblouse scrunched up in a seventeenth century chest of drawers she had bought as an antique. Somehow the garment had got gathered up by the drawer above, pushed to the back and forgotten about for a couple of centuries until Duras reencounters it. With no information about its owner and giving only scant details about the blouse - it is made of lawn, it bears some light menstrual blood stains and it has been repeatedly darned - Duras creates a connection across time between herself and the unknown woman taking us right into her mind so that the passage ends with her imagining how the owner must have searched for it for days and days, not knowing where it could possibly have gone. A chance find is transformed into a calling up of someone else, of another woman in another time in this conflation of the imagined woman’s response and Duras’ evocation of her thoughts. “It was covered with months and years of darns

¹⁵ Viola Michely, “Agnes Richter,” Sammlung Prinzhorn, accessed November 11, 2015. <http://prinzhorn.ukl-hd.de/index.php?id=63&L=3>.

– with darns which had been darned themselves, as beautiful as embroidery.”¹⁶ The undergarment is elevated out of its mundanity by the carefulness of the repairs which the text recreates as an image in the reader’s mind.

Perpetually fascinated by it I return to this text regularly, revisiting it for what it offers. I am drawn in by Duras’s writing of it as an everyday event, the tidying of a drawer, which leads to an extraordinary discovery. It is as if the search for her blouse the woman began in the 1720s continued beyond her death and across two centuries to be taken up by Duras, unwittingly, and the search has been transferred to me so that I return to the book and flick to those pages to look again for something - even though I do not know what exactly I am searching for. The underblouse is a ‘timeshare’ garment, that does not really belong to anyone and transcends time, place and context, very like ‘Gown’ itself. The academic gown I once possessed and wore and the archetypal gown worn by graduating students to this day, are connected by the imaginary embroidered gown I intend to make as an artwork and which I am evoking through this text. Making manifest the significance of the garment, real and imagined, enables me to take my power on my terms in my own way.

Demonstrating a taking-apart of male power, Rona Lee’s performance ‘Avid Metamorphosis 1’, consists of the artist patiently unpicking a man’s suit. Wearing a mask of a bird’s beak she stands impassively and cuts every stitch that has held the suit together up to that time. She lays each loosened piece of fabric on the floor beyond the outer edge of the suit and the action of unpicking. The work enacts an undoing of patriarchy, a deconstructive act demanding time and care. It marks a moment of clarity of visualization of the task of dismantling patriarchy; a tough job to

¹⁶ Duras, “Practicalities,” 122.

take apart an institution which has been so firmly stitched together but bit by bit, the task can be attempted without losing courage or faith that one day it will be entirely undone.

The three garments: woman's jacket, underblouse and man's suit, the three artists: Richter, Duras, Lee, the three activities: embroidering, darning, unpicking. Language worn on the body. Three institutions: psychiatry, domesticity and patriarchy. These activities have meticulousness, dexterity and care in common. In each case there is a lot left unknown: the character of Agnes Richter, the majority of the meaning of her embroidered writings, the identity of the owner of the underblouse, the owner of the man's suit. They are partial evocations of experience just as 'Gown' is only part-formed; I do not know everything about it, it has not yet revealed its full face to me, the specifics of what its motif says or shows, the story has not ended yet, it remains open-ended - perhaps this is the point?

* * *

Sunday 22 November

A memory from Camford days

I had to give a paper at a postgrad seminar about the Romantic poet I was researching towards a PhD. The forum was a showing off place of one-upmanship amongst the fellows and my twenty-three year old self experienced it as wholly intimidating. I used to come home from those meetings and weep, distressed by how knowledge was abused by them as a self-aggrandizing tool. All my academic career, it felt like, I yearned for a place where knowledge was shared, where people wanted to talk to each other in order to allow what they knew to complement and expand thinking rather than using the sum of their knowledge to prove how little the next

fellow had. The days leading up to giving my paper I grew increasingly ill with worry, could not sleep and this made my anxiety greater. I took myself off to the doctor. It was relief to speak openly to someone about how terrified I was to open my mouth and talk about my subject of research, a female poet, in front of all those men and one other woman, who on the whole was keen to dissociate herself from feminist ideas. I managed to give my paper without resorting to any calming medication. To my surprise, it went down well amongst some of the forum. One of the academics I was most keen to impress because of his radical, forward-thinking approach was quite complimentary, praising my work to me in front of the others without his words being in any way condescending. I was caught in the middle of a web of power dynamics as a female postgrad. One fellow was fond of telling me how the female poet and subject of my dissertation, was second-rate. He made that remark to me on more than one occasion, usually when I had refused to let him fuck me. The power dynamics of which I speak I cannot spell out because those involved are still alive, are still exerting power, might recognize themselves. Also, I was complicit in my caughtness in that web of power. The more I struggled against it the more it stuck to me like glue and kept me tethered.

* * *

Friday 20 November 2015

Invoke: the word which came to mind on my run today. Also, avoid self-pity and self-indulgence above all else. This is my mantra and I learn, in reading about autoethnography what I have always suspected, that concern with the personal extends beyond the limits of the self:

“Subjectivism should not be confused with solipsism or self-indulgence. The subjectivist stance in autoethnography is predicated on quite the opposite: that culture flows through self and vice versa (Ellis and Bochner, 1996), and that people are inscribed within dialogic, socially shared, linguistic and representational practices (Bakhtin, 1984; Frank, 2005) and through their daily occupations. The self is therefore understood as a social and relational rather than an autonomous phenomenon (Church, 1995)”¹⁷

I have got to do it, I have got to write it down because to do so will be to plant a signpost for others who come along this same or a similar path to assist them in their own self-interrogations and provide all-important companionship in their questioning. Apart from anything else I need to plant a waymarker for myself, to acknowledge that this interrelationship of feelings and reality exists.

* * *

My niece is moving out of the family home to share a flat with her boyfriend. She has told me the color scheme of the flat is grey so I have gathered together a few oddments of wool and am knitting them into a piece as a cushion for her new place. I like knitting like this: rows, back and forth, making up patterns as I go, intuitively. I have done some diamond shapes knitted into the texture, which turned out well. I think of her, my first niece, of her life, its present and its future, of how she will fare with this young man of hers, how they will get on, how it will be, how they will

¹⁷ Alec Grant, Nigel P. Short and Lydia Turner, introduction to *Contemporary British Autoethnography*, eds Alec Grant, Nigel P. Short and Lydia Turner (Rotterdam : Sense Publishers, 2013), 4-5.

organize their domestic surroundings. I imagine her laying her head on the pillow, letting her thoughts, her imagination wander: a place to rest her head and dream and wake up with the pattern of the stitches imprinted on the skin of her cheek where her head has grown heavy. I am writing this like knitting, I realize, with little rhyme but with a reason, an evolving process, which makes some sense. In bringing her in I am creating a connection with a younger female of my family, acknowledging how important I want her to be to herself. I can see how she is already socialized and I want her to know her freedom, to explore and expand it as much as she can beyond the limits of what life's social roles offer.

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