

**MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER**

**Fashion Autobiographies:  
A Case Study with Fourteen Subjects**

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I gratefully dedicate this project to my parents, Irma and Gregorio Natale.

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## Abstract

“Fashion Autobiographies: A Case Study with Fourteen Subjects” creates a narrative at the intersection of fashion, affect, and autobiography. Underlying this study is the theoretical assumption that, more than a protective skin for hiding or showcasing the body, clothing is a repository for emotion and memory. It is also a powerful medium for communicating and writing a life. To illustrate fashion’s potential as a medium for life writing, specifically as *fashion autobiography*, this Major Research Paper (MRP) pursues two distinct goals. First, it theorizes the novel concept of the fashion autobiography using theories of fashion, life writing and gender. Second, it includes an arts-based project, “Fashion Autobiographies: A Case Study with Fourteen Subjects,” involving fourteen women and the creation of fourteen fashion autobiographies written on canvas dresses and exhibited at the Design Exchange in Toronto in February 2015. The author designed three template dresses using three iconic silhouettes from the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, which the women were encouraged to manipulate and deconstruct as they wished. Thus, each woman used one of these template dresses to articulate a pivotal experience, illustrating a moment that defined her life. Together, this MRP argues, these fourteen dresses stand as a collection of moments told through fashion life writing, exhibiting deeply personal memories and emotions. They represent the objects of study for this MRP, presented through detailed description and object analysis. This MRP conjoins theory and art to advance our understanding of the form, function, and significance of the fashion autobiography.

## Introduction

“Clothing is imbued with meaning and thought to reveal something of the self, whether we like it or not.”

- Joanne Entwistle, “Fashion, Clothing and Identity” (25)

“The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”

- Bill Brown, “Thing Theory” (140)

What is a fashion autobiography? This research project attempts to answer this question using theories of life writing and fashion, along with an arts-based project involving fourteen women who were asked to use fashion as the medium of expression for a life narrative – an autobiographical telling through clothing. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued that the term *life narrative* has a broader scope than traditional *life writing*.

“In other words, we employ the term *life writing* for written forms of the autobiographical, and *life narrative* to refer to autobiographical acts of any sort” (4).

Their list of mediums for life narratives include diverse media that take “the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital” (4). In Smith’s and Watson’s work, fashion and clothing is not listed among the array of

mediums for expressing life narratives. It is this omission and gap in knowledge that this project addresses.

Fashion is a medium that women are deeply familiar with, because they have been pressured into using fashion as part of their beauty regimen, and have used it to explore forms of femininity, in a way that men have not in quite the same way. This paper does not delve into the reasons assigned to the historical shift that occurred when men chose to use the suit as their major mode of dress, but as Skov and Melchior argue: "In most societies, display is the natural privilege of those in power. So it is a cultural and historical anomaly that in Western societies since the 19th century women have outshone men in terms of appearance" (6). Important too is the feminist notion that gender is socially constructed, as argued by Judith Butler (20), and that the performative aspects of life are also inherent in the act of writing auto/biography. Or, as Evelyn Hinz argues with reference to life writing and life narrative, "the self that emerges in the course of articulation is different from the self that began the project" (202). Thus, the linking of fashion objects to life narratives is key in highlighting that both are implicated in identity formation and transformation. This MRP hypothesizes that fashion autobiographies are able to communicate the struggles and tensions that women experience, articulating and revealing the emotional content that is embedded in the clothes.

Fashion scholar Joanne Entwistle discusses the dialectical interplay between the body and dress: dress works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning; while the body is a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to dress (327). Fashion objects become part of the construction of intimate and unique selves because we feel with our body, particularly through the skin's permeable surface, which suggests that the feelings and

responses are visceral. As a result, this MRP argues that clothes contribute to knowledge because they involve complex feelings and experiences. In his influential book, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), Brian Massumi writes: “Call the coupling of a unit of quasi corporeality with a unit of passion an affect: an ability to affect and a susceptibility to be affected” (61). Although Massumi is not speaking directly about fashion, fashion is important precisely because it goes beyond the surface to create deep affective meaning from our experiences. In his essay “Why We Need Things,” psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi addresses the distinction between “power objects” and “sentimental objects,” which often accompany and refer to a life experience and feeling that these particular objects hold (23-25). More specific to fashion is the recent work of John Styles, who studies the history of objects by their emotional content. For example, Styles’ exhibition *Threads of Feelings* helps us understand the value of fashion objects’ emotional content and explores the question: How do the stories and biographies of fashion objects intersect with auto/biographies of people? I hypothesize that clothes, and by extension fashion objects embody emotions and as such are particularly appropriate for exploring human feelings and emotions.

This MRP explores the ways in which fashion can be used as a medium for women’s life narratives. The study benefits from the work of feminist theorists such as Domna C. Stanton, who has addressed the issue of the erasure of women's life writing in the canon of Western autobiography. Furthermore, Smith has theorized “the linkage of gender and genre in exploring how women engage in autobiographical discourse to renegotiate their cultural marginality” (210). By focusing on the fashion object in the context of women's life narratives, the hope is to gather a scholarly and intimate



perspective of how fashion and clothes are part of women's lives. The goal is to investigate individual and intimate experiences that women have with a particular garment, from which to gather life narratives.

For the purpose of this MRP, “life writing” signifies written forms of the autobiographical; “life narrative” shall be used to reference the stories of self that can be told in a variety of mediums, including fashion; while “fashion autobiography,” more specifically, references the story of self that is told through garments and accessories, in short, through fashion. This approach is novel, as fashion as a medium for life narratives is a relatively unexplored area of study, and the term “fashion autobiography” has only begun to be defined in scholarship.

In what follows, Part One lays the theoretical foundation by identifying the key concepts and unpacking them to contextualize the fashion autobiography case studies. Part Two, in turn, explores the methodology for the fashion autobiography case studies, before introducing the specific case studies generated as part of an exhibition project entitled *Fashioning Life: Wear Your Story* curated by the author in the winter of 2015 at Design Exchange in Toronto. These case studies are an example of the power of fashion to communicate women’s individual life experiences and draw emotion from the viewers. As a collective, the women’s autobiographical tellings communicate some shared themes, while highlighting the individual women’s circumstances. As a fundamental component of this project, fashion is being treated as a domain of knowledge, and a medium for women’s life narratives. The project and exhibition serve to test the assumptions that fashion can be used as a medium for women’s life narratives and that women have a deep connection with the notion of fashion in relation to the self. Ultimately, this project’s

investigation of the emotive capacity of clothes and fashion advances the emerging and intersecting interests in fashion studies and women's life narratives.

**PART ONE**

**FASHION AUTOBIOGRAPHY:**

**LITERATURE REVIEW, THEORY AND KEY CONCEPTS**

**Theorizing Fashion Autobiography**

In *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson advance sophisticated auto/biographical and critical frameworks for reading life writing and life narratives. They also advance new reading strategies for many diverse types of life writing, in particular marginalized forms that were traditionally excluded from the canon of autobiography. Theories of performativity, positionality and relationality encompass the complexity of understanding subjectivity formation in life writing and life narratives. Concepts of memory, experience, identity, space, embodiment, and agency are also key terms in this theoretical discussion.

Some of the most revealing arguments made by Smith and Watson disrupt traditional assumptions and change traditional understandings of autobiographical representations. Underpinning their concept of life writing is that identity is not fixed; that the narrated “I” is negotiated within power dynamics of its context and culture; and that most narratives are as much about the self as they are about the other and the other’s story. More fundamentally, Smith and Watson’s theoretical framework establishes helpful working definitions for autobiographical practices, which the authors ultimately see as forms of “social action.” The subject of fashion as a medium for autobiographical exploration institutes “visual” reading and material literacy alongside written text.

Because the concept of fashion as a medium for auto/biography is underexplored in life writing scholarship, there does not yet exist a body of concepts that can adequately satisfy the intricate intersection of these two disciplines: fashion and auto/biography.

Although there are academic texts that discuss fashion and dress as a way into discussing the self and its construction, there is little consensus on the language that might best define the role of fashion as the medium for life narratives. For example, in their volume *Dress Stories: Not Just Any Dress: Narratives of Memory, Body and Identity* (2004), Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell aim to show how dress can be an entry point for personal and private autobiography, a springboard for the narration of personal memories (3-10). However, within the context of the art world, where fashion is readily used as a medium of self-expression, the term “fashion autobiography” is being used to more clearly define the use of fashion objects in the act of expressing life experiences. In his doctoral dissertation “Embedding the Personal: the construction of a ‘fashion autobiography’ as a museum exhibition, informed by innovative practice at Mode Museum, Antwerp” (2012), Jeffrey Horsley uses fashion as the medium for his fashion autobiography in a proposal for a hypothetical fashion exhibition. More recently, in his essay “Autobiography as a Proposed Approach to a Fashion Exhibition,” Horsley discusses autobiography as a method for a fashion exhibition; he writes: “I describe this project as a ‘fashion autobiography’: a work in which an individual relates their life-history through clothing associated narratives” (186). Horsley elaborates on the lack of fashion exhibitions that focus on the idea of fashion autobiographies: “As I will demonstrate..., such fashion narratives while frequently published online, and occasionally in literary and television form are never, in my experience, realized in

exhibitions” (186). The definition for *fashion autobiography* includes the notion of “worn stories,” whereby an existing garment is used to relate a person’s life narrative. Although Emily Spivack’s book *Worn Stories* (2014) discusses the experiences and related feelings of wearers of the garments, the term *fashion auto/biography* does not appear as part of the text; instead she uses the words *sartorial memoirs* to describe the fashion-related life stories.<sup>1</sup> The term *fashion autobiography* also applies to the concept of fashion as art, whereby artists/autobiographers “design” fashion objects specifically intended to be the medium for an autobiographical telling. Any fashion object, whether it has been worn or created for the purpose of telling a life story, either about the self or other, can be referred to as a *fashion auto/biography*. Fashion is accessible to most people and is therefore under-explored as a medium for communication, particularly in reference to autobiographical tellings. Among other possibilities, the purposes of a *fashion autobiography* are to illustrate life narrative, to communicate the feelings and emotions that are experienced as a result of living a life, and to explore what it means to be human.

### **Theorizing Objects and Emotions: Fashion and Affect**

John Styles’ keynote lecture, “Objects and Emotions: The London Foundling Hospital Tokens, 1741-1760”, is about the relationship between objects and emotions, wherein he argues that objects have a material language. Styles states the following about what objects tell us about the history of the emotions: “The records of London’s Foundling

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<sup>1</sup>She writes: “The clothes that protect us, that make us laugh, that serve as a uniform, that help us assert our identity or aspirations, that we wear to remember someone – in all of these are encoded with the stories of our lives. We all have a memoir in miniature living in a garment we’ve worn” (7).

Hospital, the first English orphanage for abandoned infants, in the middle decades of the eighteenth century provide a unmatched opportunity to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of studying the history of emotions through objects” (September, 2013). Styles argues that the symbols and messages about emotions have different meanings over time and change according to place and context: “The object of that scholarship has been not so much the history of feelings, but more the history of how people wrote about feelings” (2013). The objects that Styles has researched deal with the experiences of separation and loss, specifically the rupture of the emotional bond between mother and baby.

Small objects left with abandoned babies at the Foundling Hospital in London are the basis of Styles’ research, as he notes: “The overwhelming majority of the non-paper objects attached to the billets are swatches of textiles (2013).” Although the tokens served as the only means of identification, items such as colorful ribbons and heart-shaped stitching were among the most popular items. In some cases, commercially printed fabrics were left behind as the identification that connected the baby to the mother; motifs such as acorns and rose buds became the symbols of emotion. Some of the objects from the Foundling Hospital were displayed in *Threads of Feeling* (2011), an exhibition curated by Styles. *Threads of Feelings* received positive reviews from the critics, who described how the swatches at the Foundling Hospital from the 18<sup>th</sup> century continue to hold emotions and symbolic tenderness. For example, in *The Guardian* (October 9, 2010), journalist Kathryn Hughes gives the following examples of the emotional symbols presented at the *Threads of Feelings* exhibitions:

Other mothers, meanwhile, employed a language of colour and symbol to express their complicated feelings about what they were doing when they handed over

their child. They tracked down fabric printed with images of buds, flowers, acorns, birds and butterflies and carefully snipped out the one that spoke to them most. A bud suggested a potentially beautiful life still to come, an acorn hinted at a future harvest. Birds and butterflies implied the baby was being deposited at the hospital as a way of enabling it to fly free from its present grim circumstances. And then there were the heart motifs, which come in every form imaginable. Mothers left hearts drawn on paper, metal hearts, embroidered hearts, hearts cut out in fabric. (Hughes n.p.)

Such symbols continue to reference notions of love and hope, and in Styles' exhibition their meaning is derived from visual reading and material literacy; notably from the object itself rather than from text alone. As a way to further illustrate a particular sensation and feeling emanating from garments and fashion, fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson has noted the *eeriness* of the encounter with clothing without bodies, in a museum:

The living observer moves with a sense of mounting panic, through a world of the dead... We experience a sense of the uncanny when we gaze at garments that had an intimate relationship with human beings long since gone to their graves. For clothes are so much part of our living, moving selves that, frozen on display in the mausoleums of culture, they hint at something only half understood, sinister, threatening, the atrophy of the body, and the evanescence of life. (1)

Clothes can be particularly haunting because they suggest more than their materiality to include life references about the people who once wore the garments, or perhaps may have made them. As such, the small swatches of fabric from the Foundling Hospital

represent object biographies that reveal something about the history of the object. Igor Kopytoff argues that the “Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure” (67). However, not all objects have emotional power or sentimental value.

Csikszentmihalyi is concerned with the proliferation of artifacts and their impact on the ecosystem. The essay is predominately about the relationship people have with objects. As cultural beings, Csikszentmihalyi argues, “without external props[,] even our personal identity fades and goes out of focus: the self is a fragile construction of the mind” (22). Csikszentmihalyi surveys men and women of various age groups to derive an understanding of what motivates them to own things and what sorts of objects they treasure most. His findings indicate that there is a difference between power objects and sentimental objects, which are often not the content of expensive rare collections. Also, gender and age have a bearing on the types of items that are considered important or valuable; this is relevant to power objects that refer to social standing and have monetary value, as well as for sentimental objects.

Csikszentmihalyi provides the following example to highlight the affinity humans have for the sentimental objects: an attorney with a rare art collection chose an old trombone from his basement as his favorite object (25). Humans buy objects that are believed to grant them approval from others in order to feel good about themselves (25). Valued objects refer to past, present or future – evoking moments and memories of events and time. Csikszentmihalyi’s insights, along with those of other material culture theorists, such as Jules David Prown, Bill Brown and Igor Kopytoff, are important for fashion studies because this theoretical work contextualizes fashion as an important way



of knowing about culture and people.

Clothes and fashion objects are unique because they are actively involved with the body. Of all objects and mediums, fashion is most connected to the body and is, in fact, an extension of the body. For example, the well-known modernist dancer Isadora Duncan used long scarves to perform with and used them as an extension of her body, to the extent that her limbs and scarves moved simultaneously as a form of expression. Wilson argues that the body is not simply a vessel for clothes and fashion; she writes: “Clothes are among the most fraught objects in the material world of things since they are so closely involved with the human body and the human life cycle” (1). It is fashion’s connection to the body and the sense of embodiment that makes fashion objects a medium to communicate feelings and emotions that are derived from life experiences.

In “Introduction: Thinking Through the Body,” sociologist Lisa Blackwell shifts the focus from what the body is to what the body can *do* and *become*. “...the focus shifts to what bodies can *do*, what bodies could *become*, what practices enable and coordinate the doing of particular kinds of bodies, and what this makes possible in terms of our approach to questions about life, humanness, culture, power, technology and subjectivity” (Blackwell 1). She refers to the Dutch anthropologist Anne Marie Mol, who argues “that ‘a’ body is *not* singular, bounded entity or substance but rather as what Mol terms the ‘multiple body’ .... The body is not bounded by the skin, where we understand the skin to be a kind of container for the self, but rather our bodies always extend and connect to other bodies, human and non-human, to practices, techniques, technologies and objects” (1). In this way the body is viewed as active rather than passive; thus the body reveals knowledge.

Fashion is important precisely because it goes beyond the surface to encode a deep affective meaning about the wearer's experiences. For example, the skin's surface, because of its contact with the external world, is not only a barrier to protect the body: it is a site of intense response for the clothes and fashions worn. "Tactility is the sensibility of the skin as surface of contact between the perceiving subject and the perceived object," as Massumi puts it (58). He continues: "The dimension of proprioception lies midway between stimulus and response, in a region where infolded tactile encounter meets externalizing response to the qualities gathered by all five senses" (60).<sup>2</sup> Massumi argues that body reaction occurs to mediate new understandings of culture's structuring capacity (2). In other words, the relationship between the body and culture is one of resistance, and the visceral responses that take place as a result of the tension between subject and object set the conditions for opportunity, for transformation, and for action to occur.

Hinz references Jean-Paul Sartre's famous quote "To speak is to act" as a way of introducing her essay's central thesis. Autobiography gives "voice" to the subject, allowing the subject to make public claims about the self. Exploring the analogy between life writing and theater, Hinz argues further toward a performative theory of self through autobiography. She asserts that "autobiographical documents have three basic features in common: an element of conflict and dialogue, a sense of performance and/or spectatorship, and a mimetic or referential quality. These are also the major characteristics of drama" (198). Judith Butler also speaks to the performative aspects of

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<sup>2</sup> Massumi explains proprioception as follows: "The spatiality of the body without an image can be understood even more immediately as an effect of proprioception, defined as the sensibility proper to the muscles and ligaments as opposed to tactile sensibility (which is 'exteroceptive') and visceral sensibility (which is 'introceptive')" (Massumi 12).

life writing and argues that gender is socially constructed. For Butler, performativity “must be understood not as [a] singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects of its names” (20).

Although this implies that mimesis is in part responsible for determining the relationship between the body, gender, and “sex,” it is more about the programmed discourse that perpetuates what is or is not appropriate.

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes explores stereotypical gender roles as represented in literature to reveal the various references (signs and symbols) of language, and even myths, created by the various cultures that can be misread and create confusion. Barthes divides the text into *lexias* – “units of reading” (fragments) (13), arguing that there are a series of meanings and connotations embedded in what we see. He uses the sculptor Sarrasine, the main character in Honoré de Balzac’s eponymous story *Sarrasine*, as an example. Sarrasine, is ignorant of the operatic codes and conventions in Rome. He falls in love with an opera singer, the castrato La Zimbinella, whom he believes to be a woman. Sarrasine reads La Zimbanella (the castrato/man) as a *beautiful* woman and uses “her” (the castrato) as a model from which to create a sculpture (of a woman). To defend his understanding of female beauty, which is founded on stereotypical female characteristics, Sarrasine uses the sculpture of La Zimbanella as his own evidence to convince himself that the castrato is not a man. Furthermore, La Zimbanella, as an opera singer, is accustomed to being placed in female roles on the Roman stage because women are not permitted to perform as actors. In contrast, in a sculptor’s world women do perform as models. Thus, Barthes suggests that the “reading” of visual language is complex and multilayered because it changes depending on the context – geographical

location, as well as between and among disciplines. Context provides meaning, particularly when it comes to gender roles.

Similarly concerned with issues of gender, British psychologist and early fashion theorist John Carl Flügel coined the term “the great male renunciation” for the time, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when men relinquished their interest and focus on fashion. As Lise Skov and Marie Riegels Melchior write about Flügel, “he argued that major changes in clothes fashion are symptomatic of the psychological dynamics between men and women” (7). This is not to say that women previously dressed to their own accord and free will without considering the male viewer, who was often the provider. Georg Simmel has argued that “in a certain sense fashion gives woman a compensation for her lack of position in a class based on a calling or profession” (551). In her book *Fashion and Age* (2013), Julia Twigg discusses the change she has observed in women’s attitudes about dress and fashion from one wherein fashion serves to subordinate women towards “the willingness to acknowledge the role of areas like dress in self-fashioning, recognizing the aesthetic pleasure that such cultural spheres offer women”(4). Although Twigg’s focus is to explore dress, the body and age from the specific perspective that “ageing is experienced by most women as a form of cultural exile from femininity” (5), the author is clear that “Women’s lives at all stages are more closely policed with regard to appearances than is the case with men” (5). It is for these reasons that fashion can be a tool of communication for women: because of the built-in and programmed message that fashion connotes notions of being female/women; and because of the vested interest and pleasure women take in the aesthetics of appearance. When dealing with fashion as a medium for life narratives, the “medium is the message,” as we shall see now in Part Two

by exploring the specific fashion autobiographies that form the corpus of this MRP with an art-based project.

**PART TWO**

**FASHION AUTO/BIOGRAPHIES:**

**CASE STUDIES AND OBJECT ANALYSIS**

**Methodology**

In the *Handbook of Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*, Susan Finley describes the “salient features” of arts-based research that also underlie this MRP. She lists four distinctive features, writing that arts-based research

- (1) makes use of emotive, affective experiences, senses, and bodies, and imagination and emotion as well as intellect, as ways of knowing and responding to the world;
- (2) gives interpretive license to the researcher to create meaning from experience;
- (3) attends to the role of form in shaping meaning by representing research in many different arrangements appropriated from the arts; and
- (4) exists in the tensions of blurred boundaries.

Art-based research has the ability to be a project that includes communities of people who may otherwise be excluded from specific bodies of knowledge. The process of making and the resulting objects created offer other ways of knowing, which from an intellectual perspective are often trivialized and given the label of technical skills or not given validity as art if they have commercial application. For example, sartorial activity and fashion in general have been relegated as commercial activities to the extent that the act of making only has meaning as an industrial process. Maarit Mäkelä makes a case for practice-led research, which is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new

knowledge that has operational significance for that practice, which is different from practice-based research where the finished product is the object of research. Mäkelä's premise is that "Artistic activity is not just a medium for gathering and producing knowledge, but also a method for analyzing and commenting on the information thus produced (163). In art there is value in both the process of creating and the resulting artifact; for some creative projects the emphasis may be placed on either aspect.

For the project "Fashion Autobiographies: A Case Study with Fourteen Subjects", originally fifteen women were recruited who were interested in creating a fashion autobiography for a fashion/art exhibition. In order to collect a meaningful sample of data, a minimum of twelve participants is necessary for the "saturation" of data to occur, as suggested by the *Field Methods Journal*, "based on the data set, [Greg Guest and Eleanor McLellan] found that saturation occurred within the first twelve interviews, although basic elements for meta-themes were present as early as six interviews" (59-82). In keeping with these findings, while also taking into consideration attrition in the course of the project, fifteen participants were recruited with the goal for each participant to create a fashion autobiography, a story of self, rendered through a garment. In the selection of participants, this project followed the rigorous ethics principles approved by the Ryerson University Ethics Board. Approved participant recruitment posters (see Appendix A) were displayed in relevant locations at Ryerson. Since this project rests in the area of women's auto/biography and expressions of femininity, self-identifying female participants were included. This focus allowed an examination of the linkages of gender and genre, ultimately to pursue the goal identified by life writing scholar Sidonie

Smith, “[to explore] how women engage in autobiographical discourse to renegotiate their cultural marginality” (Smith 210).

Participants were recruited through the Ryerson University School of Fashion MA program, as well as through the Modern Literature and Culture Research Centre, where many students research issues of gender, with a particular focus also on women and fashion. Some participants were not from Ryerson University; they had learned about the project from the author, or from students and faculty who had forwarded the recruitment literature. Thus the project included artists and non-artists, students and non-students, as well as a wide age spectrum from young to middle-aged to older women. Selected participants were given Ethics-approved instructions as shown in Appendix A.

More concretely, participants were invited to choose from among three template dresses designed and made available by the author (see Appendix B). They were invited to transform or deconstruct their template garment in any way they saw fit to render their story. All in all, this MRP was approached as an artist-research project, which also included the author of the project as a participant so that she could experience the process of creating a fashion autobiography and relate to the other participants. Using generic garments, the participants designed or articulated a life narrative – a fashion autobiography. The canvas dresses were the medium to demonstrate how women could use fashion to illustrate life stories, including expression of emotions. Fourteen of the fifteen women completed the project, which culminated in an exhibition at Design Exchange entitled *Fashioning Life: Wear Your Story*.

In the following section, these fourteen fashion autobiographies, photographed during the exhibition and each accompanied by a brief textual autobiographical



description by the author, will now serve as the corpus to be described and analyzed. The methods of object analysis will be used to explore the dresses, which were also included in the exhibition catalogue that accompanied the exhibition. The methodological goal of the *object analysis* for the *fashion autobiographies* is to discern themes and patterns of articulation, and to reveal the technical components that form each narrative as well as the entire collection. A second goal is to make room for interpretation of the narrative and emotive content, which sits alongside the image of the work. The notion of including emotive content as part of the formal documentation for objects, including fashion objects, is not standard practice for object analysis, but is borne out by affect theory as pioneered by Styles and Massumi, as introduced earlier in this MRP.

Thus this project has a novel approach that helps us to investigate the emotive capacity of clothes and fashion. Clothes and by extension fashion objects, it is hypothesized, embody emotions and as such are particularly appropriate for exploring human feelings and emotions connected with these items. The following fourteen case studies help illuminate and support this hypothesis.

## Fourteen Fashion Autobiographies as Case Studies

### 1. *Here and Now, There and Here* by Catherine Vamvakas Lay



Figure 1: Catherine Vamvakas Lay, *Here and Now, There and Here* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*I was 16 when I arrived in Montreal with my family late at night. It was December and I had never experienced snow before. The next morning was blindingly bright, not one cloud in the sky. I looked with amazement out my window at the pure white and reflective snow and ran outside wearing only a T-shirt. The extreme cold hit me like a shock. It did not make sense to me. The sun was out and yet it was so cold! Things were so different in this country, so unlike everything I had known before. I ran back inside, confused and sad.* | Catherine is a visual artist who lives and works in Toronto. She is originally from Crete, Greece.

**Dress Description and Object Analysis:** The dress incorporates an array of iconic Greek images that have been ironed onto the fabric. There are also a variety of charm-like elements and small religious artifacts attached to the dress, such as a glass heart, a contemporary protective eye, a Hamsa evil eye charm and a metal-embossed little girl image. The design for the border of the dress is hand painted and copied from an image of the Agia Triada sarcophagus. The back of the dress is inspired by Catherine's Cretan origins, while the front represents her present reality in Canada.

The spiritual references, which include symbols of Christianity and Buddhism, along with the divided nature of Catherine's dress, wherein the back and the front necklines are treated with different trims, are unified by the border design copied from the image of a sarcophagus on the bottom of the dress. Although this fashion autobiography references the life narrative in a broader sense and not a specific event, there are many symbols to reference life and death in this garment, as part of the search

for spiritual fulfillment. The autobiographer's commitment to art and religion are evident while her written text and autobiographical inspiration includes a narrative of displacement as a new immigrant. A sense of loss and longing can be detected in this fashion autobiography. There is also a temporal tension between the written and sartorial text, in that the written text is sense based (visual image of the blinding snow, or the haptic sense of the cold experienced as a shock), taking the reader back to when Catherine was a teenager first arriving in Canada, whereas the garment is more retrospective and nostalgic in incorporating the memory of the country left behind.

2. *Grief, Inch By Inch* by Colleen Schindler-Lynch



Figure 2: Colleen Schindler-Lynch, *Grief, Inch By Inch* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*Inch by inch, grief grew with me. Outwardly, I continued my “normal” life, but inwardly, I was consumed by sadness. Emotional wounds would seem to heal temporarily, only to be roughly ripped open again. For ten years, I bore the weight of incremental grief – a burden I didn’t even know I was carrying.* | Colleen is an illustration professor in Toronto; she is also a wife, a daughter, a sister, and a friend.

**Dress Description and Object Analysis:** Colleen’s dress features row upon row of text.

The artist has used a soy wax resist process and painted the letters onto a black cotton fabric. The fabric was bleached to discharge the black dye from around the type, and the wax removed, resulting in a rusty red background colour with black text. The fabric was then shredded into strips and applied to the canvas dress. In some places, the shredding of the fabric has created interruptions in the text and has left frayed edges.

The outstanding feature of this fashion autobiography begins with the decision to use the soy wax resist technique as part of the methodology for creating the life narrative, which involves multiple stages before the text can be revealed: applying rows of text with the wax onto the light-weight cotton fabric; saturating the black fabric in bleach to remove the color around the type; immersing the fabric in extremely hot water to remove the wax residue; shredding the fabric into strips which then disrupts the text’s original message; and, then stitching the strips of fabric over the canvas dress, which further fractures the text and covers the canvas dress entirely. The result is an incoherent ramble of text and the occasional legible word, none of which add up to a specific event or series of events. To use this technique as an analogy for the content of the life narrative makes

the viewer wonder about what's happening beneath the layers of text and frayed fabric strips. The over-all bold black text surrounded by the bleached and burnished brown background raises questions about how grief alters lives; it also suggests something of the difficulty of communicating grief in words, whereby grief is staged as a tension between what can and cannot be spoken.

3. *The Fabric of My Life* by Marianne Urvari



Figure 3: Marianne Urvari, *The Fabric of My Life* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.



**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*The loss of my beloved mother to cancer in 2007 reinforced the importance of keeping family traditions, stories and history alive. How I wish I had asked my mother more questions... I am left with many unanswered questions and missing parts of our family narrative.*

*Her passing has cemented my position in the family as the “keeper of the past.” It is my responsibility to keep our stories alive for the next generation and to pass on whatever wisdom I have learned. Thankfully I still have my father with me; my thirst for knowledge about our family history has never been greater. When one is young the past has little relevance, but as life evolves and we experience loss, our links to the past take on new meaning.* | Marianne is a real estate agent in Toronto, whose family is from Hungary.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** Marianne’s dress is embellished with a collection of memorabilia from her childhood and items that belonged to her mother and grandmother. For example, there are photos of her family that date back to the 1830s and heirlooms that have been placed around the neckline and arranged on the surface of the dress. There is a triangular piece of fabric situated on the pelvis area at the front of the dress that is a fragment of a Hungarian textile. Scarves that belonged to Marianne’s mother create an underskirt and are a vivid element that alters the silhouette of the dress into an ankle-length garment.

Marianne has used fashion objects that have been worn by three generations of women in her family. In this way the importance of the past and the sense of continuity

are communicated in *The Fabric of My Life*. The many objects and the layers of scarves reference, through colour, texture and shape, the memories and enable the telling of a multitude of narratives, including the tragedy and displacement of war and the embracing of new beginnings in another country. Other accessories have implications and connections to the narrative and to fashion autobiography in that they define the relationship between fashion objects, women and the body. For example, the empty *Chanel #5* perfume bottle, as a fashion object and thus an extension of the body, connotes that scent and olfaction also play a role in fashion autobiography. *The Fabric of My Life* is an example of how worn objects are used as the medium for fashion autobiography.

4. *Paris – Toronto* by Aline Emsallem



Figure 4: Aline Emsallem, *Paris – Toronto* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*My life has always been influenced by spirituality, but this took on a new meaning when, at the age of 35, I lost my husband while living in Paris, France. I moved to Toronto in 1997 with my children, who were seven, six and two years old at the time. For the past 20 years, I have raised them on my own with the support of my very close family. Despite this life-changing experience, my goal has been to keep the joie-de-vivre in our home and to make the best of what we have.* | Aline works as a real estate agent in Toronto. She is also a mother of three children, a massage therapist and an osteopath.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** Using off-white, orange and black, Aline's dress features a hand-drawn sun centered on the back. Scarves attached to the waistline are decorated with hand-drawn musical elements such as a piano keyboard, hearts and text, including "je suis Charlie," as well as the Eiffel Tower and the CN Tower. Each scarf is attached as a rosette to the waistline, at the center of which is placed a silver charm – a tree of life, a dove, a cupid, a shoe and hearts. The largest silver charm is a pair of angel wings that have been strategically placed on the shoulder and held in place with a pin, which alludes to a guardian angel, expressing spirituality and a continued sense of connection to her husband, who died twenty years ago. The hand-made scarves attached at the waistline have altered the overall silhouette of the dress, which also adds a sense of fullness and depth to the narrative. Each scarf has drawings that reference the different parts of her life with minimalist evocations, as compartments each defining a part of the multiple self as articulated by Ann Marie Mol through fashion.

5. *Why Black?* By Sara Nicholson



Figure 5: Sara Nicholson, *Why Black?* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolate/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*There is a stereotype of the curator all dressed in black, and in my case, the stereotype holds true. This tendency toward dark clothing came long before my job title. I've also been the art student dressed all in black, the bartender dressed all in black, the daughter dressed all in black, the designer dressed all in black, the friend dressed all in black.*

*Why black? It just feels honest, I suppose. I don't really like to be the center of attention. Black is both minimalist and complex, and I like to believe that it places the focus on what I say and who I am, rather than on what I'm wearing.* | Sara is a curator who lives in Toronto.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** Sara's black dress is assembled from clothes that she once used. The various textured fragments from the deconstructed garments are draped into a "baby doll" silhouette. There are small tears in the fabrics; brand labels and yarn from old sweaters are used as part of the new dress. Straps across the chest area and over the shoulders are also recycled from other garments. The only non-black elements are the two white, thinly twisted straps on the back of the dress, which were part of the original canvas dress provided for this project. As a methodology, the act of recycling her clothes to create a fashion autobiography is a bold way of reclaiming the past histories and stories that were embedded in her previous wardrobe to selectively create the now. With its bold style and assured aesthetic, this fashion autobiography takes the shape of a trend-setting garment for 2015.

6. *Loss* by Léonie Daignault-Leclerc



Figure 6: Léonie Daignault-Leclerc, *Loss* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*My father died the night of May 23, 2000. I was eight years old. My mother died on September 24, 2006, in the late afternoon. I was fourteen. I had spent the entire weekend at the hospital, surrounded by all my family and friends, and my boyfriend at the time.*

*I could not accept that she was leaving me. Not only was she my only parent, she was my best friend. We shared everything. The pain was so vivid that it was actually physical, a sharp pain in my stomach.*

*I wanted to scream to the world against this injustice. I felt that I would die without her, and I wanted to run away to escape this nightmare. I felt like I was in a bad dream that would be ending soon. It took me a long time to realize she was actually gone.*

| Léonie is a graduate student in Ontario and fashion designer from Québec.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** The colourful images on Léonie's dress were drawn by hand using markers. The large drawing on the front is a self-portrait; a red and pink swirled design surrounds the figure of the girl, while the back of the dress shows a black outline of a family of four, with small red hearts lined up one above the other. The teardrop on the face of the portrait of the young woman emotionally communicates Léonie's loss of her parents.

The drawn hand firmly positioned over the image of a "flaming heart" also signals a burning loss. Two small black angels are positioned over each shoulder, one male and one female, finding a place in her fashion narrative for her parents.



7. *I Turned 50* by Valerie Aquino



Figure 7: Valerie Aquino, *I Turned 50* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*When I turned 50, I began to accept myself, and to accept the world around me for what it is. I can honestly say there has not been one defining moment in my life that has altered my path, but a series of events: the joy and anguish of family, betrayals of partnerships, and the loss of much-loved people.* | Valerie is a poet and has dedicated herself to her family.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** Valerie's dress is embellished using felt, safety pins and markers. On the left front panel of the dress are two hearts and a star-like shape made from felt and safety-pinned in place. On the right side of the dress are dark clouds and thunderbolt shapes, also made of felt and pinned. The words "Love" and "Dread" have been written in black marker onto the dress as opposing terms. At the center front is verse from William Wordsworth's poem "Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." Colourful pompoms trim the neckline and hemline of the dress.

The use of the safety pins in *I Turned 50* as a medium of self-expression alludes to the notion of piercing and pain, while also suggesting an instrument of utility and a gesture of repairing, of safety-pinning painful experiences. Valerie uses the safety pins as a way to hold together both the "dark" and "light" elements of her dress, such as the black clouds and the yellow sun-like shapes. The safety-pins are also used as a decorative element down the center front of the garment as though providing a structure for holding the good and bad parts of life together.

8. *The Dress Doesn't Fit* by Maria R. Dal Cin



Figure 8: Maria R. Dal Cin, *The Dress Doesn't Fit* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*There was never one defining moment or event, just a continuous experience of opposition. As my experience grew, the defiance and sabotage became more intense. My requests made using “masculine” approaches were met with resistance, and yet “feminine” behavior seemed to reduce my credibility.*

*As the battle of working in a man’s world became increasingly difficult, I gave up fighting. I did so knowing that I can be effective while still remaining true to myself. |*

Maria is a designer and a graduate student in Toronto.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** Maria deconstructed her dress and made a garment that can be transformed from a masculine tailored jacket to a feminine ensemble. The wool jacket is constructed with multiple zippers that allow for the reconfiguration of shapes and modes of wearing the garment. The feminine under-blouse is made of a flesh-coloured chiffon fabric, which can also be worn in several different styles or independently.

The contrast between the materials as well as the structural designs of the two distinct garments that are part of Maria’s fashion autobiography include both masculine and feminine visual markers to demarcate the notion of gender. The incomplete nature of *The Dress Doesn’t Fit* is an analogy for a life in transition with multiple possibilities or identities, which is further developed by features such as the zippers that can open and close and can convert the tailored jacket into various configurations.

9. *Temporal Blooms* by Kimberly Wahl



Figure 9: Kimberly Wahl, *Temporal Blooms* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*My dress presents an abstracted interpretation of personal, recurrent and painful events. It is the antithesis of a story. Instead, its narrative form remains unresolved, without even a moment of clarity. It is a tale that ceaselessly turns back on itself. The repetitive forms and their blooms reveal cycles of intense planning, hope, disappointment, loss and longing that characterize my experience of undergoing treatment for infertility over a seven-year period.* | Kimberly is an art history professor and an author.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** Kimberly's dress was created in an abstract expressionist manner, with green and black paint thrown across the surface in a random way. The resulting pattern contrasts with the hand-painted flowers. The flowers are in shades of purple and red and show various stages of bloom.

*Temporal Blooms* illustrates the tension between the mixed emotions of hope and loss by way of contrasting painting techniques; whereby the stylized blooms indicate a powerful sense of hope, even joy – given their relative scale and bold colours. In contrast, the abstract expressionist “action painting” results in what appears to be a chaotic sense of rhythm – diluting the presence of the blooms. How are floral blooms symbolic in their meaning for women's autobiography?

10. *My First Trip* by Karen Chowansky Natale



Figure 10: Karen Chowansky Natale, *My First Trip* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*Florence, Italy. I stand alone and close my eyes to try to burn this image into my mind forever. I can't believe how hot the August day is or how rich the smell of food is all around me. This trip has changed me forever. I have dreamed of travelling all my life. I just celebrated my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and this is my first trip.* | Karen is a craft artist and entrepreneur. She lives in New Jersey with her husband and her four children.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** Karen's dress is embellished with colourful embroidered leaves made of silk. The neckline and arm openings are trimmed with a dense linear pattern. An image of the Duomo has been softly painted on a silk fabric and then applied to the center front of the dress. There is embroidered text throughout the dress creating words and phrases such as "dreams come true" and "adventurous."

The embroidered and colourful leaves are tacked onto the garment as three-dimensional forms to give a sense of nature and textured leaves – suggestive of the fall season and a mature stage of life.



11. *My Three Sons* by Heather Grande



Figure 11: Heather Grande, *My Three Sons* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*The moment my firstborn was here I was a mom. That's my identity in this stage of my life and I love it.*

*I have three beautiful boys! They have skinned knees and they jump on couches. They scream, wrestle and yell. They spill milk and they draw on my floors. They tell me I am their best friend. They kiss me a million times a day. They snuggle and they take good care of each other. They are so smart and I love watching them learn. They have their daddy's smiles and my nose.* | Heather lives in New Jersey. She is a stay-at-home mother raising her three sons.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis: Observation:** Heather's dress has hand-drawn images of children's paraphernalia and alphabets distributed on all sides. The binding along the dress's edges has been coloured and acts as a trim, with a repeated pattern of colours accentuating the neckline. The overall playfulness of the dress is best illustrated by the colorful arrangement of childhood games and puzzle pieces that make this fashion autobiography joyful. Although child play is the theme of this fashion autobiography and Heather uses a crayon-like medium to draw with, the garment is given a sense of maturity in the way in which the "games" and pieces are arranged and the precision with which the numbers and puzzle pieces have been outlined with black in a stencil-like process.

12. *Turning 40* by Florence Bortoluzzi



Figure 12: Florence Bortoluzzi, *Turning 40* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

### **Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*It was the summer of 2000, two days before my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. I had lost about 30 pounds in the past year; I was feeling good and my business was flourishing.*

*I was completely taken by surprise when a client invited me to dinner. Naturally I was flattered that a near-stranger, and a very sexy one at that, would find me desirable. To this day I don't know why I asked that he call me back the following week – it was so uncharacteristic of me.*

*My 40<sup>th</sup> birthday was a celebration of friendship and love; I was overjoyed. At four p.m., my husband of 16 years finally called to wish me a happy birthday. When I asked where we were going for supper, he said, “Nowhere, let's just have some sandwiches at home.”*

*That was a defining moment. I remember thinking “What am I doing? In 20 years I do not want to look back and wish I had done something.” I decided I was going to make changes to my life!*

*The following week I accepted the invitation to dinner from Rob and my life has been forever changed. I have wind beneath my wings! | A wife, mother and grandmother, Florence has an Honours Business degree and has specialized in real estate. Originally from Ontario, she has spent the last four years living in Kelowna, B.C., where she works as a business and life coach.*

**Interpretation and Object Analysis: Observation:** Florence's dress is covered with images of a fernlike leaf, a Maori Koru, hand-painted on the surface of the dress. She has added a sky-blue lining covered with beaded dragonflies and embroidered text. The front

edges of the dress and the decorative shapes on the front are trimmed in green. Because of the amount of attention given to the inside of the dress, by including a lively sky-blue lining with glittery dragon fly motifs and text, the suggestion is that Florence's fashion autobiography was approached with the idea that change occurs from the inside as well as the outside.

13. *La Viajera (Mapping My Life)* by Isabel Fernandez



Figure 13: Isabel Fernandez, *La Viajera (Mapping My Life)* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*On February 2nd, 1999, Hugo Chavez won the Venezuelan election. This event, which permanently altered the political path of my country, forced my family to leave Venezuela in search of safety and better opportunities.*

*This election also had an impact on my parents' marriage, which ended in divorce. Many of my relationships have also broken down, partly due to the great distance dividing us. I have been left with a sense of helplessness. All the things that were familiar to me from the past are gone.* | Isabel is a graphic designer and a graduate student who has lived in several countries. She lives in Toronto, but is in the process of moving to Australia.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis:** Isabel's dress is a customized polyester/cotton textile wrap dress that has been digitally printed with a graphic design. The image that encompasses the entire dress is a violet-blue colour and includes the continents, like a world map. She has added a cap to her dress display, which is a fashion object used to show support for the Venezuelan people during street protests against their government. The balloons beneath the dress make the dress buoyant and the "floating" skirt includes an image of an airplane and a series of clear plastic pockets that hold images of friends and family members. On the right side of the bodice is a functioning window shutter with an image of Australia. This area is also a pocket, which holds a plane ticket. The narrative illustrated in *La Viajera* is one of blue skies and water, which is the dominant theme in Isabel's fashion autobiography, and which "reads" like a travel journal. The political motivation for her travels can be noted by the image of Caracas, Venezuela at

the base of the dress, which grounds the garment over a bouquet of blue balloons, along with the official cap used as a symbol of support for her home country displayed at the very top of the dress display.



14. *Marriage at 18* by Filomena Natale Gasparro



Figure 14: Filomena Natale Gasparro, *Marriage at 18* (2015). Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Extrapolation/Autobiographical Inspiration:**

*I wake up one morning during the summer of 1977. I'm in a strange bed, far away from home. Things smell different. It's hot and I'm not alone. A man is sleeping next to me and I have no clothes on... my wrap dress is on the floor.*

*In 2014, I collapse my wrap dress in half and place it on the ground behind me to create an embroidered train, instead of the apron it might have become. My new dress is tight-laced to my pleasure, leaving the seams open, with strings long enough to play with the space between the lines.* | Filomena is a visual artist in Toronto. She is also a graduate student, a mother, and a grandmother.

**Interpretation and Object Analysis: Observation:** There are two distinct parts to this dress, which are attached together using a grommet lacing system. The upper part of the dress is made of silk with silver embroidery, while the part trailing behind is the original cotton dress, also embroidered. The silk dress has an empire waistline and a princess cut. The cotton dress component has been folded down and permanently stitched to take its current place on the ground.

In *Marriage at 18* the notion of moving forward by redefining the self with a new garment – a new silhouette that uses silk instead of cotton – is analogous to indicate change and transformation. To further engage with the concept of change, this fashion autobiography has used grommet tape and lacing to connote the ideas of expansion and flexibility, while the use of the lacing and the embroidery on both dresses, although different in design, create the continuity between the past and present.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The object analysis for the fashion autobiographies allows us to discern similarities and differences with respect to narrative themes and the techniques employed to illustrate women's life stories. Most centrally, in all of these stories, the women take agency in defining themselves, in laying claim to their stories through the use of fashion. Most narratives are filled with themes that include emotions of joy or grief, hope and disappointment, shock and contentment. The narratives thematize a spectrum of experiences such as travel and immigrant displacement, love and loss of loved ones, motherhood and infertility, gender, sexuality and marriage, as well as the women's professional lives. All of the stories are stories of identity constructed in multiplicity and revealing the self to be constructed through personal experiences as well as relationships and communities, with a frequent referencing of family and personal legacy. The focus is on personal transformation, and the narratives of the fashion autobiographies are journeys in a metamorphosis of self. These narratives are illustrated using various techniques that are specific to each woman's way of telling her story. Often this telling depends on the women's skill sets that inform their particular artistic and creative presentation for their fashion autobiographies. For example, some women can sew, while others are visual artists or use written language as their expressive form. Most fashion autobiographies include images, objects and text, in some cases combined or singularly as part of the technique to communicate the self-narratives. Others use a sculptural approach to describe the narrative references to change and transformation, to develop the narrative for their fashion autobiography. Some of the fashion autobiographies are specific about a particular life experience while others express their situation by layering events and

narratives to ultimately define their understanding of what has taken place. Based on the garments created and the texts supplied, it is possible to discern several themes and subgenres with underlying transformative narratives.

Loss, longing and love dominate as the themes for the fourteen women who represent the case study for this project – whether the women were in the midst of such experiences or have overcome and conquered their particular life scenario. In some fashion autobiographies the loss of a loved one is expressed, either as the main narrative theme or as an underlying life experience. For example, in *Loss* (Figure 2), Léonie draws an image of a young woman on the front of the dress so that the head of the figure is situated on the chest area of the dress. A clearly defined teardrop rests on the cheek of the image of the young woman's face. The back of her dress provides information about the source of her pain. On the back of the full skirt, there is a hollow outline of two adults, one female and one male, and two little girls all holding hands. This hollow outline of a family, combined with the teardrop on the face of the young girl in the front image, suggest the references to a family that is no longer present. It is a painful experience to realize that Léonie's fashion autobiography is a self-representation and a self-portrait that expresses the emotions of the loss of both her parents, which she describes in the text of her autobiographical inspiration. Narrative themes of loss are also evident in other fashion autobiographies; however, there is a sense of homage to the loved one rather than the direct message of tears and pain. Such is the case in *The Fabric of My Life* (Figure 3) wherein Marianne uses fashion objects that belonged to her mother and grandmother, including brooches, scarves and fabric that were remnants from Hungry (her mother's native country), to design a fashion narrative about her mother. Marianne intensifies the

homage to her mother by introducing ironed-on images and actual photographs of her mother and family onto the back of the dress. It is, however, the way in which Marianne creates a skirt from all the scarves and scraps of fabric that brings out the colourful textures of a life lived – her mother’s life, which she contextualizes with her own life and childhood memories using objects that belonged to Marianne, such as a little girl’s plastic watch. Marianne’s fashion autobiography introduced worn garments and objects together with the canvas dress that the participants were all given to begin this project. Both worn objects and fashion created for autobiographical narratives are equally applied in fashion autobiography. Another example, *Grief, Inch by Inch* uses bold black text as a methodical technique to illustrate the process of mourning. Colleen’s dress features row upon row of text that has been created and then shredded into strips. Colleen has gone to great lengths to make the text visible, and then has subsequently rendered the textual message illegible, rendering grief as unspeakable.

Narrative themes of motherhood and infertility are found in four of the fourteen fashion autobiographies and illustrate life experiences that affect women specifically. *My Three Sons* (Figure 11) is about Heather’s joy in becoming a mother. Although child play is the theme of this fashion autobiography and Heather uses a crayon-like medium to draw with, the images of the “games” and puzzle pieces have been outlined with black in a stencil-like process as an element of cohesion, as though to highlight and frame the narrative from a mother’s point of view. When contrasted with this transformative, exuberant view of motherhood, the struggle with infertility portrayed in *Temporal Blooms* (Figure 9) is heightened all the more as a difficult subject to embrace, revealing the fashion autobiographer’s honesty and courage in struggling to find meaning. Here, the

fashion autobiography is a way of working through an exceedingly difficult experience. For example, the abstract painting techniques that have been applied in *Temporal Blooms* both contrast and complement the lyrical realism of the narrative, while the gigantic flowers of hope double as ambivalent flowers of mourning.

Eight of the fourteen fashion autobiographies include some form of text in the garment itself to illustrate the narrative; however, only in *Grief, Inch by Inch* is the text central to the discourse but not the narrative itself. Interestingly, the text in *Grief, Inch by Inch* puts into play the game of the unspoken, what is not said. To directly place text on the fashion autobiographies is another way to use text as way to elaborate on the visual and three-dimensionality of fashion objects that are used as the medium for life narratives.

Another narrative theme suggestive of personal transformation is travel to foreign places, which occurs in four of the autobiographies. In Karen's *My First Trip* (Figure 10), the placement of the image as the central narrative theme for the fashion autobiography speaks to the notion of a special foreign place, from a North American perspective since Karen is from New Jersey, U.S.A. The leaf as a choice of reference in *My First Trip* is a symbol of life and can be related to the notion of the seasons of life and the human timeline, where the fall season is associated with the second half of life. A more political dimension of travelling is found in Isabel's *La Viajera (The Mapping of My Life)* (Figure 13), which references travel in the title and playfully grounds the garment over a bouquet of blue balloons. The political motivation for her travels can be noted by the image of Caracas, Venezuela, at the base of the dress, which is Isabel's home country and has been in the midst of political hardship since 1999. The cap placed at the very top of the dress

signals political support for the Venezuelan governmental opposition, and gives the issue precedence. Isabel uses diverse objects and images to indicate the places she has traveled and lived, including an airline ticket to Australia, which is where she plans to live next. Like Isabel's ultimately buoyant tone, the travel narrative in *Paris – Toronto* (Figure 4) begins with loss but focuses on movement of travel as suggested by the title. *Paris – Toronto* has multiple narratives that move forward with family and spirituality as core motivations, resulting in a life of travel between Paris and Toronto. Wings to represent angels or flight reoccur in the fashion autobiographies as was witnessed in Léonie's work (Figure 6) to reference her deceased parents.

The thematic of age and development is found in several of the fashion autobiographies either explicitly or implicitly. *I Turned 40* (Figure 12) illustrates a fashion autobiography about finding love and the personal transformation that takes place when there is deep introspection at the mid-point of life's journey. Florence's dress is covered with images of a fernlike leaf, a Maori Koru, hand-painted on the surface of the dress, suggestive of the idea that change occurs from the inside as well as the outside. Love is indicated by the two heart-like shapes on the inside of the dress' lining, one with the name "Sofia" in pink embroidery, and the other in blue with the name "Robert" – the two loves of her life. Conversely, in *Marriage at 18*, the fashion autobiography emphasizes the youth of an early life-changing experience, marriage, inviting the viewer's and reader's contemplation that it may have come too early. Here the tension consists in the temporal distance with a self-identified mother, grandmother and artist looking back to identify a poignant watershed moment of her personal life, exploring also the tension of freedom and constraint, marriage and life beyond marriage.

The last two types of narrative themes relate to the notion of gender and femininity, with a focus on the women's professional lives as ways of exploring, staging and proclaiming identity. In *The Dress Doesn't Fit* (Figure 8) Maria deconstructs her dress to create a garment that is in transition, morphing from a masculine tailored jacket to a feminine ensemble. The feminine under-blouse is made of a flesh-coloured chiffon fabric, which can also be worn in several different styles or independently. The contrasts between the materials as well as the structural designs of the two distinct garments that are part of Maria's fashion autobiography include both masculine and feminine visual markers to demarcate notions of gender. Furthermore, the incomplete nature of *The Dress Doesn't Fit* alludes to the dichotomy that women face in the context of a "man's world." Features such as the zippers can convert the tailored jacket into various gender configurations and deconstruct the male suit so as to become less traditional while revealing the feminine sheer garment beneath.

There is a consistent focus on movement and metamorphosis to which the women lay claim in their narratives. Of course, quest has long been associated with male autobiographies, starting with *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, wherein the writer stages a conversion of thought and understanding about life. Some of the case studies explored herein engage with this notion of a spiritual quest explicitly, and yet there are substantial differences between these fashion autobiographies and the traditional male autobiographies whose goal is the staging of a coherent teleological self. For example, *Here and Now, Then and There* (Figure 1) features a blend of iconic Christian and Buddhist symbols as distributed on the front and back of the dress: religious images of the Virgin Mary and a Buddhist monk are used interchangeably as way to express that



there is no particular commitment to one specific belief system. The focus here is not on teleological cohesion or the staging of an essentialist self, but rather the opposite: on multiplicity. The divided nature of Catherine's dress is front and center, as her fashion autobiography makes a clear distinction at the neckline by using two different lace trims for the back and front, further serving to connote that divided nature of her experiences. Catherine's autobiographical inspiration is a discussion about her displacement as a young girl moving from the island of Crete, Greece to Canada, where nothing was familiar to her, suggesting the sense of longing for what was and her homeland of origin. Multiplicities, and multiple selves, consistently emerge in the fourteen case studies that have been the focus of this MRP.

In her volume of essays *Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media*, Irene Gammel theorizes women's life writing as a way for women to claim and proclaim intimate experiences in public, thus becoming agents of their life narratives. She also describes that women carefully navigate the politics of disclosure, often refusing to reveal too much about themselves, using aesthetics as a way of composing and controlling their narratives and selves (1-10). These insights are evident in the fourteen case studies at hand, which reveal that the women take agency of their life narratives, yet are careful to avoid falling into the "confessional trap." The courage of the claiming of experiences must be noted. At the same time, these fashion autobiographies must not be read as unmediated or "authentic" renderings of essential selves but rather as carefully constructed narratives of self that require the methodologies of life writing to decode, as demonstrated in this essay.

As this MRP has shown, to use the visual language of clothing for the medium of life narratives allows for the specific ways in which women communicate; sometimes only small details implicitly suggest parts of a narrative, while in other fashion autobiographies the story is more directly and explicitly expressed. As in the lived experience, many of the women's fashion autobiographies resist the "tell all" modality, whether for reasons of privacy, shame or as a way to highlight the unresolved tension in their narratives. Irrespective, fashion autobiographies are complex narratives that require decoding through the lens of visual culture and the lens of autobiographical and fashion studies. The women's narratives in the form of fashion autobiographies collectively are evidence that women identify with fashion as a medium to visualize and "voice" their life experiences. While these fashion autobiographies touch upon some common themes and some difficult life experiences that women often face, there is a sense of empowerment in the way they come to terms with fashion as their medium for life narratives. Used in this way, fashion for women is not superficial and provides the emotional connection required to communicate their specific and unique life narratives. Finally, because many of the women participants are not professional artists or designers (though some of them are), what they use as their communicative symbols are sometimes predictable or even stereotypical symbols (such as the heart as a symbol for love, the angel as the guardian angel); also, occasionally, there is an overload of references in texturing the narrative; and yet all fourteen fashion autobiographies reveal a genuine wrestling with articulating emotions and stories through fashion, ultimately birthing the multiple selves and diverse histories through clothing.

## APPENDIX A

### A) RECRUITMENT POSTER



#### **Recruitment for a fashion study**

Inviting women to participate in research for fashion studies. Seeking women over the age of 18 to participate in an art exhibition “Fashioning Life: ‘Wear’ Your Story.” Candidates must be interested in creating a visual narrative about their lives to fit the theme of the exhibition. Participants will be provided with a canvas dress, on which they will illustrate a story from their own lives, using any art or craft technique of their choosing. Artists and non-artists are welcome to participate.

#### **Purpose of research**

This research is for an MA Fashion thesis at Ryerson University. The objective of the study is to use fashion as a medium for life narratives. I am exploring the emotional content of clothes and how women might use fashion to express feelings about something specific that they have experienced.

#### **Requirements and procedure**

- Participants must be female and over the age of 18
- Participants are required to complete the dress on their own premises and with their own additional materials. There is no monetary compensation for the expenses incurred for completing the dress.
- Participants will have 8-10 weeks to complete the garment, and it must be finished by mid-January 2015.
- Canvas dresses will be delivered to the participants and will be picked up upon completion for the purpose of the exhibition.
- The dresses are the property of the participant and will be returned by the end of February 2015.
- Participants must be willing to exhibit their garment in a public venue: the Design Exchange in Toronto. In the event of damage or loss there is no compensation for the dresses.
- Participants are not required to attend the exhibition.
- Participants may choose to remain anonymous.
- Garments will be photographed and documented for the purpose of the MA Fashion thesis at Ryerson University and for the exhibition catalogue.
- Participants must sign consent forms agreeing to volunteer and acknowledging the specifics of their participation and the purpose of this research.

For further information please using the following email address:

Principal Investigator/Filomena Gasparro: [filomena.gasparro@ryerson.ca](mailto:filomena.gasparro@ryerson.ca) ,

Supervisor/Dr. Irene Gammel: [gammel@ryerson.ca](mailto:gammel@ryerson.ca)

Research Ethics Board: [rebchair@ryerson.ca](mailto:rebchair@ryerson.ca)

## B) RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

October 4, 2014

### **Recruitment Script for the exhibition “Fashioning Life: ‘Wear’ Your Story”**

Investigator: Filomena Gasparro

I am an MA student conducting research for my thesis at Ryerson University’s School of Fashion. My project focuses on women’s life narratives and how women use fashion as a medium to express their emotions. I am inviting women over the age of 18 to contribute to an exhibition at the Design Exchange (DX) entitled, “Fashioning Life: ‘Wear’ Your Story”, to take place in February 2015. For this exhibition, each participant will create a visual narrative about her life on a plain canvas dress (to be provided), which will be exhibited at the DX and will supply data for my research.

Participants may apply any art or craft technique to the canvas dress, and any materials used or costs incurred will be at the participant’s own expense. In addition, the time and location of the art-making are at the participant’s discretion. The participant’s work must be given a title so that it can more readily be referenced in the text of the thesis. However, participants may remain anonymous if they wish; in that case, their names will be used in neither the exhibition nor the thesis. Participants are also invited to include a paragraph with their piece describing either the techniques they used to complete the garment or the life narrative they have chosen to illustrate. This text will be placed alongside the garment at the exhibition and in the catalogue. The garments will be documented using photography and text for the exhibition and for the Master’s thesis.

Participants will have 8-10 weeks to complete the garment, which must be finished by mid-January 2015. However, it is up to the participants how much time they devote to the project. The canvas dresses will be delivered to the participants and will be picked up upon notification of completion by the participant. The garment is the property of the participant and will be returned to the participant by the end of February 2015, after the exhibition is closed.

There is no insurance available for damage or loss of the garments. However, every precaution will be taken to care for them. The garments will be transported on wooden hangers or in boxes (depending on the art techniques used and the fragility of individual garments). In all cases the garments will be stored and transported in protective bags and cotton fabric covering. During the curatorial process, garments will be handled with white cotton gloves. I will curate the show and be in charge of handling the garments. The exhibition “Fashioning Life: ‘Wear’ Your Story” will take place from February 9 – 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015; the DX is located at 234 Bay Street in Toronto. Participants are encouraged to attend the exhibition, however, they are not required to be present at any point throughout this process. Their sole obligation is to submit their completed canvas dresses for the exhibition and documentation.

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If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to ask.

Principal Investigator: Filomena Gasparro

Email: [filomena.gasparro@ryerson.ca](mailto:filomena.gasparro@ryerson.ca)

Phone: 416 979 5000 ext. 6588

Supervisor: Dr. Irene Gammel at Ryerson University's English Department

Email: [gammel@ryerson.ca](mailto:gammel@ryerson.ca)

Phone: 416 979 5000 ext. 6588

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information

Research Ethics Board

c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation

Ryerson University

350 Victoria Street

Toronto, ON M5B 2K3

Email: [rebchair@ryerson.ca](mailto:rebchair@ryerson.ca)

Phone: 416 979 5042

Thank you for your interest in this research project.

## C) INVITATION LETTER TO PARTICIPATE



### Ryerson University Consent Agreement

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Please read this consent form so that you understand what your participation will involve. Before you consent to participate, please ask any questions to be sure you understand what your participation will involve.

#### **Fashioning Life: 'Wear' Your Story**

**INVESTIGATORS:** This research study is being conducted by Filomena Gasparro, a fashion MA student. Dr. Irene Gammel is the Supervisor. This project is part of the MA Fashion program at Ryerson University.

There is no possibility of commercialization of the research findings. There is no real or perceived conflict of interest on the part of the researchers, institutions or sponsors. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact any of the following:

- The primary investigator Filomena Gasparro at [filomena.gasparro@ryerson.ca](mailto:filomena.gasparro@ryerson.ca)
- The Supervisor Dr. Irene Gammel at [gammel@english.ryerson.ca](mailto:gammel@english.ryerson.ca)

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** I propose to pursue arts based research that will be in the form of an art exhibition entitled *Fashioning Life: 'Wear' Your Story*, which involves a community of women who will be “the designers” of their own life narrative. The purpose of this study is to explore the emotional content of clothing and fashion. The study will involve 13 women who are interested in expressing a life narrative in the form of fashion as art. This research is part of a Master’s thesis.

The exhibition and the artwork will be part of a research document that specifically address the notion that fashion can be used as a medium and document for life narratives.

**What you Will Be Asked to Do:** If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- You would be creating art for an exhibition.
- You would be provided with a canvas dress that you are required to use as the base for your artwork.
- The theme of the exhibition is to use fashion as a way to describe a life experience, to tell a story about you.
- You can apply any material or techniques to the dress to describe your story.
- There are no limits or conditions for your artwork. The only requirement is that you are

referencing a memorable experience through the art.

- The materials and work takes place at your own discretion and on your own premises. The only item given to you will be the canvas dress on to which you will apply your art making.
- In addition to the artwork, you may also choose to supplement the artwork with a small description of the process used and how it might relate to your story; however, this is not mandatory.
- You may choose to take photographs or document your process of making the art, which may later be referred to in the exhibition or resulting thesis.
- You will receive the canvas dress in November.
- The deadline for completion of the garment/art is January 12, 2015.
- Upon completion of your artwork notify me and I will make arrangements to pick it up.
- The exhibition will take place at the Design Exchange in Toronto through February 9-20, 2015.
- At the end of the exhibition, I will make similar arrangements to have your artwork returned.
- The artwork is yours to keep and will only be used for the exhibition scheduled for February 2015.
- Your contribution to the project will be significant as there are only 13 women participating in this art based research project. The age limitation is that all participants are 18 years of age or older. I am interested in women's lives specifically.
- The exhibition and the artwork will be part of a research document that specifically address the notion that fashion can be used as a medium and document for life narratives.
- The exhibition catalogue will be available during the exhibition, which will contain images and descriptions of the artwork produced by the participants as a collective.

#### **Potential Benefits**

There is the benefit of sharing your art in an exhibition setting. You will also be contributing to research that looks for emotional content in fashion, which is an area of study that has had little attention. I cannot guarantee, however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study.

#### **What are the Potential Risks to you as a Participant:**

It is minimal risk because you have requested to take part in the project and are free to also stop at any point. You can manage what you want to communicate in your garment, so have control of self narrative you choose to tell. You can also manage the social or psychological risk by making your art on your own premises in privacy. You will also have some financial risk and costs that will not be refunded. However, it is entirely up to you how much time and

referencing a memorable experience through the art.

- The materials and work takes place at your own discretion and on your own premises. The only item given to you will be the canvas dress on to which you will apply your art making.
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**Fashioning Life: 'Wear' Your Story**

**CONFIRMATION OF AGREEMENT:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to participate in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement. You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Name of Participant (please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

Name (or your pseudonym if you want to maintain confidentiality) as it will appear in the exhibition and exhibition catalogue: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree that my artwork will be photographed for the purposes of this study. I understand that these images will be used for the exhibition catalogues and the Master's thesis project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

## APPENDIX B

Using three distinct twentieth-century silhouettes, the following canvas dresses were designed by the author as the templates to be transformed and deconstructed by the participants in the fashion autobiographies art project underlying this MRP.



Filomena Gasparro, *Canvas dresses, three silhouettes*, Design Exchange, February 2015.

Photograph Shayne Gray.

**Canvas Dresses Design Inspiration:** The 1950s-inspired canvas dress is reminiscent of the “Dior Look,” which is cinched at the waistline and includes a full skirt (figure 1). The historical and feminist references of the Dior Look include the notion of the post-war return to femininity and domesticity for women, who had been fulfilling male roles in the work force and at home during the war years.

The 1960s dress silhouette (figure 3) was influenced by Christóbal Balenciaga’s “sack dress.” The sack dress abandoned the female form and waistline, skimming the hipline and tapering to a narrow hem that reached just below the knee. It was the forerunner of the infamous mini skirt, which brought the hemline to its highest point in the history of women’s fashion. Coinciding with the introduction of the birth-control pill, these styles reflect a sense of emancipation and sexual liberation for women.

The 1970s-inspired canvas dress (figure 5) references the “wrap dress” made popular by Diane von Furstenberg. Facilitated by the development of stretchable jersey knit fabric, the wrap dress came to represent freedom and ease in movement, with sexual connotations. The design of the dress – free of buttons, snaps, clips or zippers and held together only by a string at the waistline – had a seductive implication, as did the concurrent trend towards a natural look for women’s breasts.

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