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Swindells, S, Almond, K orcid.org/0000-0002-0311-106X and Powell, A (Accepted: 2015) *Preparation and Process: Power, Self and the Ritual of Dress[ing]*. In: The Joanne B. Eicher Symposium II: Fashion, Sex, & Power, 11-12 Sep 2015, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA. (Unpublished)

This abstract is an author produced version of a conference paper originally presented at the Joanne B. Eicher Symposium II - Fashion, Sex & Power, Minneapolis, MN, USA, September 11-12, 2015.

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Title: Preparation and Process: Power, Self and the Ritual of Dress[ing]

Word count: 6,180

Abstract

The wearing of elaborate clothing is necessarily preceded by some degree of complexity in the process of dressing. The 16th century saw the ritual of levée; the ceremonial viewing of the monarch's arduous routine of constructing their outward persona through the selection and adornment of their daily attire. Today, alongside plights for the easy and comfortable 'normcore' approach to fashion, there exist a variety of trends which embrace a time-consuming, elaborate manner of dressing, driven by the interrelationships between ritualistic process, perceptions of cultural and social elite, and masquerade-like results.

From the Japanese 'Harajuku' girls, whose eclectic and verbose styles pepper the streets of Tokyo, to the ubiquitous night-clubbers whose stylistic reinventions of self-demarcate them as 'fuckable, approachable [and] desirable', the activity of 'dressing up' – as opposed to merely dressing – seems never to have lost its appeal. In this respect dressing is a way that social identities are performed towards social interactions as a form of 'social skin' (2), whereby gestures and attitudes facilitates integration into larger groups and related hierarchies. Is it the haptic nature of layering clothes, make-up and accessories which continues to entice people to pursue intricate and protracted dressing habits? Or is it, in fact, that the infinite possibilities of recreating one's identity enables an alluring sense of power and control which outweighs any laboriousness in achieving the desired look? Is preparation and process in the act of dressing merely performing freedom of expression in neo-liberal society or more inwardly reenacting a form of emotional labour? And what of the process of undressing (traditionally termed 'coucher', denoting the 16th century monarch's nightly retiring ceremony). Does the stripping away of such elaborate 'costumes' leave the wearer bereft of their carefully curated persona, or does it simply provide the opportunity to create it anew once again?

Seemingly poised between an expression of desire and aspiration within the unstable interactions between the body and a personalized social contract this paper explores the performance of dressing-up and the look of dressing down with respect to fashion, sex and power: critiquing why people think, feel, and act the way that they do as shaped by the actual, implied, or imaged presence of others.
