

RAEWYN CONNELL

THE OUTWARD AND VISIBLE SIGN

I am looking at a clean blue-grey FinnAir interior, currently moving at 850 km/hr to the northwest somewhere over clouded Beijing, or perhaps already Mongolia. We are en route from Shanghai to Helsinki. The polite and sensible hosties are dressed in uniforms apparently meant to evoke Greta Garbo playing Queen Christina, who was neither polite nor sensible (nor even Finnish). I bet their dry-cleaning bills are terrible. And in these neoliberal days, the airline probably does not pay for dry cleaning.

For my part, I am dressed in polite skirt and sensible shoes, an upper-middle-class, upper-middle-age uniform in black and grey with a touch of colour in a scarf. Unobtrusive, I hope. The carry-on bag is up in the overhead locker with three unobtrusive changes, all non-iron for quick overnight washing and drying in hotel bathrooms.

This is a travel-clothes routine I learnt while going overseas to academic conferences and lectures. And then re-learnt, since starting transition ten years ago. Adult learning. We are supposed to get worse at new learning as we grow older, stiff in our mental ways as we get in our joints. But it has to be done. The re-learning is part of the work we have to do. The “we” in this case being the people who are supposed to be changing sex.

Actually we are not trying to change sex, and are certainly not revealing the fluidity of our gender identity. It is almost the opposite. Transsexual women undertake a transition because gender is *so* intransigent, *so* difficult to change. A massive contradiction has existed in our lives because of the gender we *know* we are already.

Creating a new pattern of life, re-shaping relationships and perceptions – that can mean heartbreak, it can mean losing a job, it can mean contempt and violence. It always means a lot of work. Re-learning clothes is part of that work – since we have to help other people to recognize the “new” (actually old) gender.

European clothing styles, now global styles, are strongly gendered. The manufacturers have not gone unisex. Yes, jeans and T-shirts are less gendered than crinolines and frock-coats. But look at the bulk of what is marketed and worn today, the “dumb fashion” as well as the high fashion. When the gender difference is not obvious, manufacturers make sure it is present in the detail. For what other reason do they put the shirt buttons on different sides?

So, transsexual women are likely to wear skirts rather than slacks, court shoes rather than lace-ups, scarves rather than ties. It is elementary, my dear Watson.

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Some go overboard and the result can be an unholy mess of stilettos, frills and scarlet lippie. That will pass; most find a better way early on.

The job involves more than individual items, it means acquiring a style and building a wardrobe. This is slow work for someone with an awkward shape and no dressmaking skills. The shops that have larger sizes are usually catering for wider women rather than longer women. And forget about walking in off the street and finding shoes!

Still, we live in a consumer culture so there are choices. Mostly I have tried to find clear plain styles that I can live with. And other people can live with, of course. Fashion is not the point. Of department stores the most useful are those with a “Classics” section.

I am doubtless channelling my mother, who dressed the family in hard-wearing conventional clothes, wore lipstick only to go to church, and had no respect for mutton-dressed-as-lamb. The result, I am sure, is a bit retro. My daughter is trying to bring me forward into the 21st century but I am not there yet.

Friends have helped a lot. A friend in Denmark took me to her favourite shoe-shop and the result is my favourite pair of summer-weight flatties, well-made and a splendid red. I went with another friend to a posh boutique and the result is my only piece of designer gear, a party skirt that rejoices my heart – but which I am afraid to wear. It feels like wearing a Stradivarius.

Travel has helped. On one fortunate trip I found a shop in Manhattan called “Tall Girl.” Despite its name it had quality stuff for the middle-aged. I still have a navy woollen suit I found there, as sober as they come. I also bought from them a not quite sober black-and-white geometric blouse that has seen me through many weary seminars. And a couple of beautifully warm and well-designed night-gowns, made in Canada. (Why is night-gear so badly made, usually? We have to wake up to ourselves in it!)

Unfortunately Tall Girl went broke during the Global Financial Crisis. There was quite a wake for it online; other women had found it good value. The firm was sold to a multinational with a silly name that sources cheap and nasty stuff from God knows where, probably Rana Plaza. I do buy from them at times, there are not many alternatives. But they are not as good. Heavens, am I nostalgic for 2007 already?

Apart from the pleasures of clothing that other women know, there is an extra lift in being able to find gear that simply feels right, rather than always feeling wrong. I have good memories of clothes, but equally I am happy to *forget* what I must have been wearing much of my life.

When I was a second soprano in the choir of St John’s Church of England, Dee Why,¹ I sat, stood and kneeled through many Sunday-morning services and came to know the *Book of Common Prayer* almost by heart. It is wonderful prose, from the age of Milton and Shakespeare, and has something of their way with resounding words.

In the Catechism, written when the Church of England was trying to distinguish its own true doctrine from the idolatry of the Scarlet Woman of Rome on the one side, and the icy heresies of the Calvinists on the other, there is a passage that has

THE OUTWARD AND VISIBLE SIGN

really stuck in memory. What a sacrament is, the church declares, is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

Well, it is an ambition. I would like my outward and visible existence to have at least a friendly relation with the inward existence, not the old exhausting conflict. Spiritual grace? Despite the years of struggle, I do feel blessed as a woman. In Old Testament words that we sang at St John's towards the end of each year (because they are in Handel's *Messiah*), "Every valley/ Shall be exalted." That is what feminism says too. And I see no reason why a black skirt and a grey jumper and a touch of colour in a scarf cannot be part of the exaltation.

NOTE

ⁱ Dee Why is a beachside suburb on the northshore of Sydney.